

RE-EVALUATING (RE-THINKING/RE-SHAPING) SCOTLAND

August 2021 - Iain MacPherson, Kevin Murray Associates

Over the last year we have all had to re-consider how we live our lives. In spending more time in our local environments we have come to better appreciate the opportunities close to home and how we can make the best use of what already exists.

Out of necessity we have been forced to re-evaluate our everyday space and place and understand how it impacts on our health and wellbeing, and how our behaviours impact on climate change and biodiversity.

Such a fundamental re-appraisal of our local circumstances has come at a time when we are looking to the future to consider what Scotland's national spatial plan should be.

The need for climate action and fairer, low carbon economies within more resilient places at different scales, is driving a reconsideration of the National Planning Framework (NPF4) that looks forward to 2045 and beyond.

We at KMA have been supporting the Scottish Government's NPF4 team as they have collaborated with a range of partners and wider stakeholder interests to develop thinking across regional and national spatial scales. Doing this work in advance of the new Duty to produce Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS) has meant that the work has been exploratory and collaborative in nature, allowing open and early thinking.

Given the constraints and limitations of Covid and lockdown, we have sought to work creatively and openly together in new ways that meet the plan-making challenge with appropriate innovation and flexibility.

Coming together

To help formulate a new plan with different people from diverse backgrounds and geographies, we used a creative on-line series of 'charrette-style events' which has enabled wider geographic participation across a focused and intensive period.

Over the course of a week, participants from across the country, from Shetland to Dumfries and Galloway, came together to participate in workshops on aspects of NPF4. Their purpose was to review and further develop early regional thinking set out in indicative Regional Spatial Strategies (iRSS – which have been prepared in advance of the Duty to produce RSS) in an intensive burst of cross sectoral input. And to do it all through the medium of Microsoft teams!

Working on a broad theme each day (e.g.: climate, work, people, place), we came together to hear some excellent briefing presentations to prompt our thinking, and to see some of the relevant data on the topic from the SG digital team. Informed and stimulated in this way, we split into virtual groupings of broad overlapping geographies to explore what this might mean for different spatial areas. Through discussion and use of sketch maps (albeit crudely captured at times via mouse trackpads) we were able to explore and feedback the contributions of these geographies to the national goals and outcomes.

Shifting through the 'scalar gears' from local to regional and national can be challenging but at the end of each session we had a wealth of material to process. A bulletin was produced by the team to capture the output of each session and to make available a summary to inform the next day's work.

Whilst recognising limitations to collaborative working using online platforms, there is also a huge benefit. The cross sectoral representation from across Scotland was better than might have been expected from an in-person event. This meant we had the opportunity to better consider and question ideas as they emerged (e.g. how might the 20-minute neighbourhood concept be applied in remote and rural locations?), and also to recognise and capture synergies that exist between Scotland's regional areas; the central belt needs areas to the north and south, just as much as there is co-dependency in the other direction. Looking to a plan for Scotland's future this spatial interdependence has implications for infrastructure, energy, climate and biodiversity and many other considerations.

Looking into the future, not just amalgamating the present

With this unique nation-wide collaborative exercise, we were continually challenged to consider the future issues and strategic opportunities. We appreciate that action has to be scaled up to impact at inter/national scale, and we know that Scotland has many opportunities to get this right. This all means that we had to be forward thinking - to consider the impacts of current initiatives and whether they are moving us towards our desired goal, or whether recalibrating is required.

The intensive multi day approach to considering how national spatial strategy options might be informed by scaling up regional thinking seems to have resulted in a novel approach to informing the development of a national plan. This entails viewing the country as interactive ecosystem where environment, economy, people and place are all interconnected. Broad geographic areas have key contributions to make to their own localities whilst also impacting upon wider areas, for instance in terms of carbon capture. This is arguably somewhat wider, strategic, and less project oriented, than previous approaches.

The NPF4 sessions produced a lot of thought provoking material from participants. We hope that the summary bulletins and associated outputs give a clear impression of what was discussed and the direction of current thinking. Everyone who contributed to this exercise can reflect positively on what has been achieved from this process in such challenging circumstances.

It is not a finished product yet, and there will be further opportunities to contribute thinking as part of a formal consultation process once the draft NPF4 is published. As a piece of innovative national planning developed through remote, collaborative, online working, we have aimed to support leading edge collaborative working that helps to set a positive platform from which to develop the next steps.