

Workshop Summary: Resourcing the Planning System

20 November 2023, Victoria Quay, Edinburgh

It is an important and exciting time for planning in Scotland, as we strive to deliver our agreed policy framework set out in National Planning Framework 4. It is also, however, a particularly challenging time as we all grapple with resourcing and skills challenges across the system. It is vital that we work together to deliver change that will strengthen Scotland's planning service, support delivery of the development we need now and in the coming years and provide cross sector support for our planning community.

On 20 November, a wide range of stakeholders came together to discuss resourcing and skills issues. The aim of the session was to identify practical solutions that we could collectively take forward without additional resourcing. This note provides a summary of the workshop session.

Stakeholders

50 stakeholders representing the following organisations participated in the workshop:

- Development Trust Association
- Federation of Master Builders
- Glasgow University
- Heads of Planning Scotland
- Heriot Watt University
- Homes for Scotland
- Key Agencies Group
- Mobile UK
- National Planning Improvement Champion
- Partners in Planning
- Planning Aid Scotland
- Royal Incorporation Architects Scotland
- Royal Town Planning Institute Scotland
- Scottish Government
- Scottish Planning Consultants Forum
- Scottish Property Federation
- Scottish Renewables
- Scottish Sea Farms
- Scottish Tourism Alliance
- Society of Lawyers and Administrators in Scotland

Format

Delegates were divided into groups and each group was asked to focus on a themed set of questions:

Skills

- How can the current skills and resource gaps be filled?
- Are there opportunities for skills/services to be shared?
- How can each sector support skills development, for instance identifying, sharing and implementing good practice?

Recruitment and Retention

- How can the current recruitment and retention issues faced by authorities be resolved/improved?
- What opportunities are there for people to gain practical work experience while working towards a planning or related qualification? How can this be expanded?

Smarter working

- How can we work smarter to improve the process for determining applications through the various stages (pre-submission, validation, determination, conditions, legal agreements and appeals)?

Planning fees

- What different approaches could be taken to set planning fees (applications and appeals) in the future which would allow better recovery of their individual costs?
- How do we ensure that any fees or charges are reactive to the increased costs involved?

Charging

- What other services/types of application could a fee or charge be introduced for?
- How should planning fees and other income be reinvested in the planning service?

Following initial discussion about the issues, the groups were tasked with identifying practical solutions. The groups were asked to identify 3 or 4 priorities and then complete a template outlining what action was required to deliver the solution, who should be involved, the potential timeline for implementation and any barriers to delivery.

Suggested Action

Each group discussed a number of potential solutions. The following ideas were considered to be the top priorities:

- Introduce a Knowledge Hub for Planning – modelled on the Building Standards Knowledge Hub.
- Introduce framework contracts so that authorities and agencies can access specialist skills and knowledge quickly and efficiently.
- Explore the ability of the public sector to share knowledge and skills between organisations.
- Develop and implement a workforce plan for the planning system – identifying how many planners and other technical specialists are required over the next 10 years and how to meet that identified need.
- Develop and implement a skills strategy for those working in planning, reflecting the key skills and knowledge needed over the next 10 years.
- Explore the potential of adding planning to the school curriculum.
- Promote planning as a career opportunity to school pupils, leavers, university students and others, demonstrating alternative ways into the profession.
- Promote the value and influence of planning in order to encourage more people into the profession and ensure that planning is recognised, valued and resourced.
- Identify opportunities for standardisation across authorities, perhaps on a regional basis. This could include standard base templates for Section 75 agreements and pre-application discussions.
- Provide guidance on what a proportionate approach to implementing NPF4 polices looks like.
- Better promote the primacy of the development plan to provide certainty. Potential to increase planning application fees for proposals which are not on allocated sites or are contrary to the development plan.
- Introduce fees for appealing planning decisions to fund improvements and speed up appeal timescales.
- Introduce development permits – aligning planning and other consenting regimes within authorities to provide a one stop shop to consenting.
- Review Schemes of Delegation to identify if there are opportunities to reduce the number of applications which require to be determined by Planning Committee.

Next Steps

The ideas generated from the workshop will inform a resourcing consultation which will be published in early 2024. The priority actions will also be reported to the High Level Group on Planning Performance at their meeting in December. The High Level Group is jointly chaired by the Minister for Local Government Empowerment and Planning and COSLA Spokesperson for Environment and Economy. The group also includes the Scottish Government Chief Planner, the National Planning Improvement Champion, Heads of Planning Scotland, Society of Local Authority Chief Executives, Society of Lawyers and Administrators in Scotland, the Key Agencies Group and the Royal Town Planning Institute.

Thank you to all participants at the workshop for their positive and constructive input.