



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Ivan McKee  
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By email only

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee  
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26 June 2024

Dear Ivan,

### **National Planning Framework 4**

Thank you for informing the Committee's annual review of NPF4. We are particularly grateful to you for your contribution given the very short time you had been in post at the time of your appearance.

This is the first of the Committee's annual reviews of NPF4. We recognise that as NPF4 has only been in place for a year it is perhaps difficult to draw many conclusions at this juncture, but there are nonetheless a few issues arising out of our scrutiny that we would wish to highlight to you.

Firstly, the concerns we heard about the resourcing of planning departments are no less pronounced than they were when we considered the draft NPF4. Witnesses stressed to us that there has been no increase in resources available to planning authorities, with some evidence that the situation continues to worsen. While the proposals set out in the Scottish Government's Investing in Planning consultation were generally welcomed, many witnesses remained unconvinced that they would resolve the resources issue. We noted your recognition of this issue and your commitment to pursue various different means to address it. However, this continues to be an area of concern to the Committee and one that needs to be addressed if NPF4 is to deliver on its ambitions. We will be monitoring progress on addressing this issue closely in the context of our annual reviews. The Committee would welcome any updates in the meantime on progress made in addressing this issue.

Relatedly, concerns were raised that neither planning authorities nor developers have the resources or incentives to pursue some NPF4 policy outcomes. One example given was 20-minute neighbourhoods – concerns were raised that the centralisation of public services worked against the creation of such neighbourhoods, while developers argued that the level of infrastructure required to support 20-minute

neighbourhoods could potentially undermine the financial viability of some proposed developments. You stressed to the Committee how important the plan-led system with an emphasis on an infrastructure first approach will be to addressing these concerns. We would welcome being kept updated on how you will ensure that the next round local development plans place an emphasis on this.

It is not just the capacity of planning departments that is of concern. We also heard about the capacity of statutory consultees and the extent to which the time they are taking to respond to planning applications is holding up the process. We note your commitment to explore this issue further and would welcome any further reflections on this issue, particularly in the context of the national planning improvement champion's work on the whole breadth of the planning system.

Similarly, the Committee would welcome updates on the national planning improvement champion's work on the development of a monitoring framework. In the absence of such a framework it is very difficult to assess the impact of NPF4. This work is therefore critical to understanding the effectiveness of NPF4 as well as informing any future work this Committee might pursue on this issue.

During the course of our annual review of NPF4 the Scottish Government declared a housing emergency. The Committee will be closely examining how we can respond to this emergency. We explored with you how NPF4 could contribute to the response to the housing emergency. You stressed the need for it to inform a planning system that supported rather than militated against housing development. In particular you highlighted the need to obtain data on where land is and why it is not moving through the planning system. Given the current housing predicament it is essential that work to obtain this data is progressed as a matter of urgency. We would very much appreciate being kept updated on progress being made in obtaining this data.

As we consider this data of particular interest to the Committee will be the extent to which it points to land banking as being an obstacle to housing development and the extent to which there is potential to develop more brownfield sites.

At the heart of NPF4 is obviously a focus on the climate and biodiversity emergencies. It was therefore disappointing to hear the experience of some witnesses, particularly Planning Democracy that the new climate and biodiversity requirements in NPF4 were having little real impact on individual planning decisions. It is welcoming to hear that you are speaking to Planning Democracy about its findings and we look forward to hearing about the outcomes of those conversations.

At the same time, several witnesses representing professional and developer interests argued that new NPF4 requirements, particularly relating to the assessment of the climate and biodiversity impacts of proposed developments, are adding cost, complexity and time to the submission and consideration of planning applications for both developers and planning authorities. This appears to run counter to the Scottish Government efforts to streamline the development management system. In your evidence to the Committee you noted that you would look to ensure that the guidance you produce ensures proportionality in decision making. The Committee would welcome being kept up to date with the development of guidance.

Concerns were also raised in the course of our evidence sessions that the strict interpretation of Policy 5 (Soils) and Policy 22 (Flooding) was having a significant impact on the ability of developers to build new homes and renewable energy developments in flood prone areas or on peatland, even where appropriate mitigation measures could be deployed. Witnesses asked for greater flexibility to be applied. We welcome your recognition of these issues and that you are having conversations about these issues as they bed in. The Committee would an updates on the outcomes of these conversations.

You also noted ongoing work on masterplan consent areas, compulsory purchase orders and the infrastructure levy. In addition, you noted that you were still considering the implications of the outcome of Miller Homes Ltd v the Scottish Ministers. The Committee would welcome an update on all of these issues.

Finally, for NPF4 to be effective community voices must inform the planning system and we need to see a significant increase in the number of local place plans. We recognise from your evidence that local place plans do not need to be complex. Nonetheless they still require there be an engaged community and the Committee would appreciate further reflection and what can be done to build skills and capacity in communities to prepare plans.

I look forward to continuing to work with you on NPF4 and would welcome any updates you can give us on the issues highlighted above.

Yours sincerely,

Ariane Burgess  
Convener, Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee