



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

Tuesday 24 June 2025

Session 6



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LOCAL GOVERNMENT, HOUSING AND PLANNING COMMITTEE
20th Meeting 2025, Session 6

CONVENER

*Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con)

*Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab)

*Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)

*Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Cara Davidson (Scottish Government)

Andy Kinnaird (Scottish Government)

Ivan McKee (Minister for Public Finance)

Fiona Simpson (Scottish Government)

Carrie Thomson (Scottish Government)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Jenny Mouncer

LOCATION

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)

Scottish Parliament
**Local Government, Housing and
Planning Committee**

Tuesday 24 June 2025

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Interests

The Convener (Ariane Burgess): Good morning, and welcome to the 20th meeting in 2025 of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee. I remind all members and witnesses to ensure that their devices are on silent. Mark Griffin and Fulton MacGregor join us online, and I welcome Evelyn Tweed to the committee. I extend the committee's thanks to Emma Roddick for her work on the committee.

Our first item of business is to invite Evelyn Tweed to declare any relevant interests.

Evelyn Tweed (Stirling) (SNP): Thank you, convener. I declare that I am a member of Loreburn Housing Association.

**Decision on Taking Business in
Private**

09:30

The Convener: Under agenda item 2, do members agree to take agenda items 4 and 5 in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

National Planning Framework 4: Annual Review

09:30

The Convener: The next item of business is to take evidence as part of our annual review of the operation of the fourth national planning framework. We will take evidence from the Minister for Public Finance, Ivan McKee. The minister is joined by Scottish Government officials: Cara Davidson, head of environment and net zero; Andy Kinnaird, head of transforming planning; Fiona Simpson, chief planner and director of planning, architecture and regeneration; and Carrie Thomson, head of development, planning and housing. I welcome the witnesses to the meeting. We have about 90 minutes for the discussion.

I am interested to hear an outline of how the Scottish Government is monitoring the effect of the NPF4 policies on the type and location of developments in Scotland and assessing whether they are meeting the policy priorities, such as compact urban growth and rural revitalisation. Those are examples, but you could speak about others.

The Minister for Public Finance (Ivan McKee): I understand clearly that planning decisions are made at the local level, so it is up to local planning authorities to make those decisions, and NPF4 gives them the framework within which to do that, so, as you are aware, those policies cover everything that should require to be covered. The structure means that there is no hierarchy, so all aspects of NPF4 would be considered in the round in relation to any individual planning decision. There are a number of other factors that affect how planned developments are taken forward or decisions are made not to take them forward.

NPF4 is relatively new, so there has been a settling-in period during which we have had to communicate, through guidance and letters, to provide clarification of different aspects as the framework has settled in. However, the framework provides a very solid foundation for planning decisions at the local level. A number of other factors affect what happens but, together with the guidance that has been issued, we are now in a good place with regard to the effectiveness of the system.

The Convener: Okay, but my question was about monitoring and assessing the framework, so do you have detail on that? I know that we are totally in the settling-in period—we have heard that clearly in previous evidence sessions—but what is

the Government's system for monitoring and assessment?

Fiona Simpson (Scottish Government): We have been keeping a close eye on how all 33 policies are playing out in practice. There are two aspects to what is happening. On the development management process, through which decisions are made, where issues arise, we are in close dialogue with stakeholders on a number of the policies—for example with regard to flooding or housing. We are having discussions to look at how the policies are playing out in practice. We are not formally counting up how many times policies are deployed, but we know where issues are arising with some of the policies. We are also following the progress of local authorities in preparing local development plans, and NPF4 will play out in those plans as they emerge.

The Convener: Okay, that is great. Do you bring together stakeholder groups on different issues because something flares up, or do you have those in place and monitor things as you go along?

Ivan McKee: Those are pretty much in place on an on-going basis. There is a heads of planning group, a high-level planning group and specific groups on other issues. There is a lot of, and increasing, engagement with key agencies.

The Convener: You mentioned that guidance has been issued, but the committee has heard in evidence that there is a lack of guidance on the assessment of climate and biodiversity impacts and of new developments and that that has been hampering the delivery of NPF4 policy goals in those areas. We are aware that climate adaptation guidance has just been published but that it took more than two years to prepare and that the biodiversity guidance is still not ready. When can we expect that guidance?

Ivan McKee: I will ask officials to answer with the specifics of the biodiversity guidance, but, in general, we will issue guidance where we see a need, either because planning authorities come forward with questions or because we think that further clarification is needed. There is an awful lot of guidance out there, so there is also an on-going exercise to streamline it and make it more focused. The comments that we get on the guidance are either that there is too much of it or that there is not enough, so getting the balance right is important. However, as I said, this is a settling-in period in which stakeholders, planning authorities and others can come forward with requests for guidance on specific aspects, and we will then produce that guidance.

Cara Davidson (Scottish Government): We are working to build and add to our suite of existing biodiversity guidance. We work closely

with NatureScot, which published its “Developing with Nature” guidance in February 2023, to support the delivery in practice of NPF4 policy 3 on biodiversity. That guidance is applicable to the widest range of developments, so it applies to local development specifically, but it also sets out a range of good practice principles that are more generally applicable. I understand that NatureScot is working to republish that as illustrated guidance, but that is a sort of cosmetic exercise, if you like, to help to draw in and engage people and to make the guidance as accessible as possible.

Later in 2023, the Scottish Government published its planning guidance on biodiversity, which supports the application of policy 3 in the round. That guidance was published in a draft format, recognising that it is intended to be a living document that we continue to add to over time as practice beds in. We expect to update that guidance later this year. I am pleased to say that, earlier this week, NatureScot also published additional guidance on biodiversity to support the use of metrics in the planning system, and that is available to view.

The Convener: On resource and the time that it has taken for this work to be done, it is great to hear that you are collaborating with NatureScot, but the committee has heard that there are very limited numbers of staff working on the guidance. Therefore, we seek assurance that additional resources can be allocated so that we can speed up delivery, particularly around biodiversity but maybe in other areas, too, as things come forward, as you say, Ivan.

Ivan McKee: Yes, and the team is in place to do that. In some cases, it is not a question of resource but of taking on board all the different aspects from different stakeholders and ensuring that we have the guidance to target the right issues and cover all the different aspects that need to be covered. If there is a resource issue, we will look at that, but that is not the primary issue with regard to the production of guidance.

The Convener: We are also hearing that there are issues with the biodiversity policy not filtering down to ground-level action. That can happen in relation to what a local authority is doing on the ground, all the way through to decisions that are taken in planning.

For example, it has come up in quite a few conversations that some local authorities think that it is okay to destroy ancient woodland and replace it with new planting. Therefore, we are not getting the weighting right there. How can we convey in guidance that destroying an ancient woodland is a matter of great concern and has far more weight in relation to the climate response than planting a few new trees, which will not do the heavy lifting that we need for our climate emissions?

Ivan McKee: I will let officials talk to the specifics on ancient woodlands but, in general, the policies are clear in national planning framework 4, which covers all the aspects that would be considered by a planning authority. The guidance supplements NPF4 for specific issues that come up, which the authority then applies. The guidance is there for planning professionals and the planning authorities to use when they make their determinations.

Cara, is there anything to say on ancient woodlands?

Cara Davidson: I will come in to acknowledge the work that is under way in the Scottish Government around ancient woodland, particularly on the ancient woodland register. I believe that colleagues are actively working on that. NatureScot has set up a steering group with key stakeholders, so that project has been initiated. I think that we will start to see more work come through on ancient woodland specifically.

As the minister has said, NPF4 policies must be read and applied as a whole. On biodiversity and nature in particular, we have been working with the Improvement Service. A number of very well-attended information and practice-sharing events have been held for local authorities, particularly on nature issues.

With the national skills work, a range of thematic work is coming through over the course of the year, presenting opportunities for colleagues across the spectrum to learn from one another and to hear from experts on specific topics.

The Convener: Is that work on ancient woodlands happening due to a recognition that existing woodlands are an important feature in responding to biodiversity and climate change?

Cara Davidson: I am speaking about work that is being done by colleagues elsewhere in Government, so you will appreciate that I do not want to say too much on that, but I can say that work has been established by NatureScot around the ancient woodland register. We can provide further information on that, should you wish.

The Convener: Thanks very much.

My final question is on planning conditions. Planning Democracy has concerns about an overreliance on planning conditions to deliver biodiversity goals. It has stated that conditions are often not complied with and that enforcement action is relatively rare. Are you aware of conditions being regularly flouted, and if so, what could be done to rectify the situation?

Ivan McKee: In the planning system, NPF4 and the guidance lay down the framework in which planning decisions are made, and conditions are there to ensure that there is compliance when the

development is taken forward. Enforcement would be up to local planning authorities. I am not aware of specifics on that. If you have more details, it would be helpful to hear them. Cara might wish to say more.

Cara Davidson: I can come in on that briefly. We are aware of the research that was undertaken, which applies to England specifically. We are also aware that Planning Democracy has undertaken some initial research here, and we have invited Planning Democracy to come in and speak to us about that.

I welcomed the comments from some of your witnesses last week about our guidance, which recommends and focuses on the benefits of considering climate and nature from the outset. We want NPF4 policies to drive from the outset the early consideration of climate and nature, so that those considerations are at the forefront of the proposals as they are worked up. Rather than being retrospectively fitted at the end as an afterthought, we want to see biodiversity, nature and climate designed into the development proposal from the outset.

09:45

To reflect what others have said, this is a significant change and will take time to flow through the planning system. It is very early days to see how that will work out on the ground as the time lag plays out.

The Convener: In the monitoring and assessment work that the Government is doing, could you look at that factor—that planning conditions are not being complied with?

Ivan McKee: I am trying to work out how we would do that other than if people came forward and told us that it was happening.

Fiona Simpson: We produce a monitoring report every year around autumn time, and as part of that work we look at practice and how things are evolving. I am not sure that we would get into that level of detail, but we have been working with Heads of Planning Scotland, which has been looking at planning conditions and whether we could standardise those a bit more, so there are on-going workstreams in addition to those that Cara covered.

The Convener: That sounds helpful and useful.

Evelyn Tweed: Good morning. NPF4 was brought in prior to the housing emergency being declared. Some people are calling for it to be revised to support the delivery of more housing. Is that considered necessary?

Ivan McKee: No, I do not think that we need to change NPF4.

We have just had a conversation on biodiversity and environmental aspects. There is a wide range of policies in NPF4 and, as I have indicated, there is no hierarchy, so it depends on the situation, the proposal and the local circumstances. The planning authority will take a view as to whether it will grant planning permission and what conditions it will put on that. The housing emergency is obviously a factor in those decisions.

The chief planner and I have written to planning authorities to highlight that there is a housing emergency across the country and, in many local authorities, that is a consideration. Given the stage that we are at, however, it is all about delivery. It is about taking the existing policy, which went through the Parliament, and the guidelines that sit around about it—the letters from myself and the chief planner to clarify any aspects—and delivering the system.

Evelyn Tweed: Will NPF4 be reviewed in future, if it is not working?

Ivan McKee: Well, it depends on what you mean by “not working”—

Evelyn Tweed: Not delivering.

Ivan McKee: If we look at the numbers, we see that far more units are given planning permission every year than are started or completed. There is a significant amount of land out there for which there is planning permission but which is not getting built out. I do not think that the issue is that not enough planning permission is being granted; there is plenty of land that could be built on. There are other issues, and part of the work that we are doing is to understand why, once land has got planning permission, development is not being taken forward.

There are resourcing challenges that we will talk about, and we have done an awful lot of work to address that, but the evidence shows that although units are being given planning permission in significant numbers under NPF4, those numbers are significantly in excess of the number of units that are actually getting built.

Evelyn Tweed: Homes for Scotland has suggested a minimum target of 25,000 new homes to be built each year. What are your thoughts on that suggestion?

Ivan McKee: We would be delighted for house builders to build 25,000 units a year. In recent years, an average of 29,000 units a year have gone through the planning system. That goes back to the point that I made earlier. There is planning permission for 164,000 units that have not been built out yet. Clearly, there is a range of reasons why they have not been built, and we are doing quite a bit of work to understand the specifics of that, but a target of 25,000 homes when we are

giving planning permission for 29,000 homes each year points to the fact that a lack of planning permission is not the barrier to people building houses.

Evelyn Tweed: Does the Government actually have a target?

Ivan McKee: The numbers are there in the minimum all-tenure housing land requirement, which is based on the housing needs assessment. With an additional factor built on top of that, the number comes to just under 20,000 homes a year and some 197,000 over the 10-year period. That is an assessment of what the need is. Each local authority has a minimum number and some have significantly higher numbers in their local development plans—in some cases, 30 or 40 per cent higher, depending on the local situation—but none has numbers below the minimum. That is what the assessed need is, but if developers want to take forward more of the plots that have already been given planning permission, we are supportive of that.

The Convener: Meghan Gallacher, did you want to ask a supplementary question?

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): Good morning. Evelyn Tweed asked about the minimum target of 25,000 new homes. The Scottish Government has a target: it is 110,000 affordable homes by 2032. Minister, you said that roughly 20,000 homes are being built each year. That is certainly not enough to achieve that target by 2032. In order for the Government to achieve its housing targets, what additional measures can be brought forward through NPF4, if that is to be the tool for getting those homes built?

Ivan McKee: The 110,000 homes target is over a 10-year period, so that is only part of the picture. That target covers just affordable homes, not all homes, and it averages out at 11,000 a year. As I said, about 20,000 homes are getting built at the moment. The housing needs demand assessment and the MATHLR process, which builds on that assessment, led to the number of 197,000 over a 10-year period.

As I have indicated, NPF4 is not a blockage to that happening. Significantly more houses are being given planning permission each year than are being built, and a significant number of houses that have already been given planning permission are not being built. We accept that there are other challenges. A lot of our work on stalled sites and our proactive work with the sector and others is to address those challenges, but that is not because NPF4 is stopping planning permission being given for houses.

The Convener: I will pick up on that point. A number of times, you mentioned stalled sites and your efforts to understand why work is not being

taken forward on a significant amount of land that has planning permission. Are you in a position to tell us what you are discovering? You mentioned that resource is an issue.

Ivan McKee: Resource is clearly an issue for the planning system, but that is not the blockage that is stopping planning permission from being granted.

We have some analysis on stalled sites. The first cohort of sites were identified by industry as sites where blockages were stopping things from happening. The next steps on that involve working through the 164,000 units to understand the reasons for those blockages. Some of the plots will have longer-term build-out plans, so there are then questions about whether we can accelerate some of those and bring them forward. For some sites, commercial aspects might have changed since planning permission was granted and the development might not make economic sense in the way that it used to. There is a whole series of reasons why building is not happening. Frankly, some applications will have been speculative, but if we are using resources within the planning system to give planning permission to units that will never be built, or that are unlikely to be built, that is a separate question that we need to address.

In terms of stalled sites, 20,000 units were looked at, which we distilled to about 11,000 units over a number of sites. Most of those sites are fairly large, comprising some 2,000 units, and are spread around the country. There are some in Aberdeenshire, Fife, Ayrshire and elsewhere. Understanding what the blockages are is a question of getting people around the table. Some of the issues relate to section 75 of the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997 and education provision, some relate to transport, and some are key agency issues. For each specific issue, the planning hub team is pulling together the relevant parties. It is the first time that we have taken the approach of getting parties around the table in order to understand what the specific blockages are on specific sites and who needs to do what for things to move on.

The Convener: That is helpful. The issue has certainly come up in other areas of our work and in our evidence sessions, so it is good to hear that you are doing that work. The committee would be interested to see the conclusion of that work, when you get to it.

Ivan McKee: It is work that will never conclude, because there will always be more to look at, but we will be able to give you an update as sites move through that process. There is a limit to how much we will say up front, because some of that information will be commercially sensitive, as it will include financial figures. However, as we get the

sites unblocked, I will be happy to share the information.

The Convener: It is about seeing what the blockages are and whether there are patterns in that. How often is it a transport issue? How often is it a section 75 issue? We want to understand that.

Ivan McKee: Absolutely. There will be a mixture of stuff in there. There will be stuff about flooding and some of the issues that we have talked about, such as biodiversity and woodland and so forth—some of which we might be able to resolve and some of which are harder to resolve. That also leads into the work that we are doing on the review and audit of key agencies to see how they are approaching planning and what can be done to streamline those processes.

The Convener: Great. We look forward to seeing what you come up with.

I will go online and bring in Mark Griffin.

Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab): Before I ask the minister a couple of questions on the adoption of local development plans, I have a supplementary question about his comment that 164,000 homes across Scotland have planning permission but have not yet been built. Sir Robert Chote, who is chair of the UK Statistics Authority, wrote to Scottish ministers on 6 March to say that the data for that claim

“remains unclear based on the limited information”

and that future use of that figure

“should clearly indicate that this is a high-level estimate.”

Has the minister reflected on that assessment from the UK Statistics Authority? Is it helpful to use that figure as though it were a matter of fact?

Ivan McKee: It is a matter of fact that it is a figure that is a high-level estimate. It has come from adding the numbers from local authorities on what they have in their planning systems that has been given planning permission but has not yet been built out. Clearly, the number is dynamic, which I think is the point that the Statistics Authority is making. It is moving, because more units are being given permission and more units are being built on a weekly basis. I absolutely accept that it is a high-level estimate, but that does not take away from the fact that a significant number of units have permission but have not been built out.

Mark Griffin: At no point in your answers to two previous questions did you say that the figure was a high-level estimate. It was stated as a matter of fact and not—

Ivan McKee: I have said that it is a high-level estimate, and that is on the record. I have said that before.

Mark Griffin: It is helpful to have that clarification on the record after the figure has been stated as a matter of fact previously.

On local development plans, we have heard concerns from several witnesses that LDP evidence reports have been rejected at gate check and returned to planning authorities for further work. Is the gate-check process working as expected? Can more be done to streamline it?

Ivan McKee: We are always looking for ways to streamline processes. We work closely with Heads of Planning Scotland, the national planning improvement champion and others to do that, and that applies to local development plans as well as the planning system more generally.

I recognise that gate checks are there for a reason, which is to make sure that the plans that come through are robust. It is better to address issues with plans earlier in the process rather than later, when a lot more work could have been put into a plan but evidence is not in place or is missing or there are other reasons why the plan cannot be taken forward to completion.

At the moment, six planning authority plans have passed the gate check, and those plans are being further prepared off the back of that. Another two are at the gate check, and three have been sent back because of insufficient evidence. Work by the planning authorities is on-going to fill the gaps in the evidence.

Mark Griffin: Do you know the reasons for the failures at gate check? Have local authorities had a failure of understanding such that they did not include the information that ministers or officials would expect? Is anything going out to local authorities to clarify the level of detail that you expect to be in the plans?

10:00

Ivan McKee: I will let officials answer on the specifics in relation to authorities but, when there are issues because authorities are not clear or have misinterpreted what is required, it is important that there is a dialogue to resolve that. If we felt that it was worth putting in place guidance, we would do that, too.

Fiona Simpson: On the specifics, the reporter at the gate check will be looking for sufficient evidence in the evidence report to back up the key points that local authorities are raising. That will have varied across the six cases that have gone through and the cases that have been returned.

There is a lot of learning around this. We have held two sessions with local authorities to focus on evidence reports and to reflect on the lessons learned. We have also done a session on delivery programmes. It is very much a case of learning as we go and reflecting with the planning and environmental appeals division—DPEA—reporters and the planning authorities on where we have got to and what we can share about lessons learned.

Mark Griffin: Concerns have been expressed about the impact of out-of-date local development plans. Minister, how long do you expect it to take for the new local development plans to be drafted and adopted? Does the Government have in mind a set date for all 34 to have been drafted and adopted by?

Ivan McKee: The requirement is to have the new plans in place by May 2028. We are watching that closely, to assess whether there is a risk of authorities not meeting the deadline, and we will work with them to address that as necessary.

Mark Griffin: In previous national planning documents, the now-famous policy 16(f) was in place to allow for additional land to be released when local development plans were getting towards the end of their cycle or were becoming close to being out of date because the land that had been released in previous rounds had not been effective. That speaks to the amount of land that the Government has said is available but has not been built on.

If there are concerns about authorities not meeting the deadline for getting new local development plans in place, is it a missed opportunity not to have some form of old policy 16(f) to allow additional land to be released for housing before the new development plans come into force?

Ivan McKee: We are watching the situation closely. From conversations with industry and others, I know that it is more of a challenge for some local authorities than others. I will let officials talk to the provisions that are in place to support the specific issue that you mentioned, but I will say that there is a pipeline of land in place across the country to enable development to take place.

The whole point behind NPF4 is that it is a planned system, so you agree up front where you will build and then you build there. Moving away from that takes us back to having speculative opportunities come forward in the middle of the process, which causes problems around the other factors that must be considered.

The planning system must be robust, and all the policies, including the biodiversity and woodland policies that we talked about earlier, and flooding issues, which I am sure that we will come on to talk about, need to be considered in the round.

The whole point is that you get the plans laid down, you make sure that there is enough supply in place and then you move forward on that basis.

Fiona Simpson will talk about the specifics of addressing some of the challenges.

Fiona Simpson: I will start and then bring in Carrie Thomson, because she is the expert in this area. We have written to planning authorities to set out how to deploy policy 16, and we have made clear the aims of the policy and the approach that we are taking, framed in the context of the broader planning system. It is a discretionary planning system, so there is, naturally, flex within it. Carrie can add more on the specifics.

Carrie Thomson (Scottish Government): The policy that we used to have was the presumption in favour of sustainable development. One issue is that that brings forward land that has not been allocated or planned for. Communities do not tend to have had early input into, or a say in, such land allocation. Quite often, infrastructure has not been planned for it either, so there are concerns that such a policy brings out development that is not the kind of sustainable development that we want.

We have a flexible system in which the NPF can be used. There are different parts to NPF policy 16. Paragraph (c) refers to “affordability and choice”. If a proposal brings in housing tenures that are needed in a particular area, authorities have the flexibility to apply judgment in their decision making and to put the weight where they would prefer to see it, so that a development can go forward.

Meghan Gallacher: Minister, there is some confusion over the status of local place plans, given the complexities surrounding NPF4. I believe that the original intention was that they would be incorporated in the new local development plans, but that now seems unlikely, given that many community groups are well advanced in preparing their local place plans, and we are not going to see the new local development plans in place for quite some time.

I think that communities would be disappointed if local place plans amounted to an item on a wish list rather than being material factors in planning applications, as previous locality plans have been. What will the Scottish Government do to balance that out in order to make sure that communities are very much involved and that local development plans match local place plans, so that they work together as they should?

Ivan McKee: First, in terms of the premise, nothing has changed on the timelines for local development plans—the deadline is May 2028. As I said, we are monitoring the situation to understand any risk, and we will work with

planning authorities to make sure that they hit the deadline. That has not changed.

I do not know why you think that local place plans would not be included—there is provision for them to be included. If anything, if local development plans were taking longer, there would be even more scope for local place plans to be included, because there would be more time to do that. As I said, the requirement is for planning authorities to consider local place plans as part of the process.

We have deliberately set quite a low bar in relation to what needs to be in a local place plan. It does not need to be a professionally prepared document; it just needs to be an indication from the community of what is important to it. That gets taken into account as part of the local development plan process.

Any communities that are looking at this should be assured that their local place plan will be taken into account. There is support out there to work with communities on preparing and producing a local place plan. Does Andy Kinnaird want to comment?

Andy Kinnaird (Scottish Government): When an authority is preparing its local development plan, it is required by statute to take into account any local place plan that is in place and has been registered, so that forms part of the process of preparing a local development plan. When a local place plan has not gone through, or if it exists in advance of the local development plan being prepared but misses the cut-off to feed into the LDP, any relevant information in the local place plan is a material consideration in the consideration of planning applications and in decision making.

Meghan Gallacher: Many communities have completed their local place plans. With respect, I note that there is no mechanism for such plans to be adopted and for what communities want to happen to be brought to fruition. If local development plans are not going to be in place until 2028, there is an imbalance when it comes to how long communities might need to wait for any measures to be adopted or for feedback or direction from the local authority.

That is the feedback that I am getting from community councils and local communities. Their local place plans are already well advanced, but there is no communication from local authorities or the Scottish Government about when they will be adopted or about what parts of the local place plans will be included in the local development plan. There seems to be a bit of an imbalance. I am trying to ascertain how you will balance that out and how communities will be heard. How long

will they have to wait before local authorities adopt local place plans?

Ivan McKee: There are a few things in that. You are saying that communities that have local place plans may want help for them to be reflected in the local development plans. Andy Kinnaird has indicated that that is a requirement and that that will need to happen.

If your question is about communities that have local place plans that they want the current system to take into account, Andy can talk to the specifics of how that works.

Andy Kinnaird: Local development plans are being prepared and are in the first round of evidence reports. Writing the proposed LDPs will be the next step, so the local place plans will not have fed through to them yet. In the meantime, if a local place plan that has been completed and registered raises issues that are relevant to any planning decision, it will be a material consideration.

Meghan Gallacher: How long will communities have to wait for the journey to be concluded?

Andy Kinnaird: Place as a material consideration can come into play for any decisions that are being made right now. On the timeline for local place plans feeding through to local development plans, the LDPs are being written and we are looking to have them in place by 2028.

Meghan Gallacher: The committee has heard evidence that overly rigid interpretation of NPF4 is potentially stifling development. Developers have stressed the importance of planning departments being properly resourced, local authorities being supported to adopt new LDPs within a good timeframe, and the chief planner continuing to give guidance to ensure that the objectives of NPF4 and LDPs are considered pragmatically, but also in the round. Evelyn Tweed made an important point about reviewing NPF4 to ensure that it is practical and that it is right for areas across Scotland.

The committee has heard evidence that the application of 20-minute neighbourhoods to remote and rural areas could stifle development or drive developers away. How do we overcome that? How do we encourage development and remove red tape so that development can happen in areas across the country?

Ivan McKee: Any planning system must ensure that the balance is right and that, where development is taking place, all the different factors are considered. We have opened that up by discussing biodiversity and environmental aspects, and NPF4 covers many other aspects, such as infrastructure and the consideration of brownfield sites. All that is considered in the

planning system. When there are specific issues—you mentioned policy 22 on flooding, which is one of the policies that are being considered—the issuing of guidance and letters from me and the chief planner to offer clarification to planning authorities, when required, is an important part of the process.

I go back to the point that policies must be designed in such a way that they are applicable across the country. Local planning authorities must take into account local considerations when they look at how they apply policies. That is precisely why there is no hierarchy, because different factors could be more or less important in different parts of the country, and local planning authorities need to make such decisions.

As I said, guidance is issued as necessary to support the process when there are concerns that local authorities are not interpreting the policies in the round. That will feed into the process, and we can give more guidance through planning letters and other mechanisms to offer clarification.

Meghan Gallacher: My final question is about brownfield sites, which you just referenced. We know that brownfield sites are associated with higher costs and that using them may involve remediation of contaminated land. NPF4 has a presumption of utilising brownfield sites. We need to make it more attractive for developers to better use the land. Is the Government considering any grants or additional mechanisms to make it more attractive for developers to use brownfield sites?

10:15

Ivan McKee: Mechanisms are already in place to support the use of vacant and derelict land, although that depends on the specifics of the site, and local authorities have a big part to play, because it depends on what they see as priorities. Funding streams are in place for that. We are also looking at whether there is scope to implement other measures that would encourage brownfield site use. Where there is scope to do so, we are open to considering such measures to deliver exactly what you outlined.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Good morning. On 15 June, the chief planner wrote to authorities about the application of NPF4 policy 22, which concerns flood risk and water management. Why was it necessary for that letter to be sent? Following the issuing of the letter, what changes do you expect planning authorities and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency to make to how they assess flood risk?

Ivan McKee: As with everything else that we have talked about, the letter was intended to bring clarity—in this case, it was to bring clarity to how

policy 22, in particular, should be considered. The point that we have made throughout is that NPF4 has been laid out to cover all the different aspects and policies that need to be considered and determined in planning applications. However, if we see the need to give clarification because of how a policy has been implemented, we are very willing and keen to do so to ensure that expectations are more fully understood.

As I mentioned, we are also progressing earlier work in order to do audits of the planning functions at key agencies, including SEPA, to understand specifically how the interplay between what advice SEPA is offering and what the flood teams at planning authorities are looking at is being considered, to ensure that we get the balance right.

Clearly, flood risk is real. For lots of very good reasons, the last thing that anyone wants to do is build somewhere that will get flooded. We are gathering more information all the time about the risks associated with climate change, and the situation is deteriorating over time because of that challenge, which needs to be considered in the round. Getting the balance right is really important, but we are working with all those involved to ensure that we do that.

Alexander Stewart: Fiona Simpson, do you want to add anything to that?

Fiona Simpson: The minister has covered the issue pretty comprehensively. Policy 22 has been quite heavily debated since it was introduced, and it is not really clear whether that is because of the policy itself or the context that the minister has outlined, with flood risk and the evidence that is associated with it being quite technical and challenging. We need to take climate change and its impacts into account, which will always be challenging regardless of what the NPF4 policy says. The letter's purpose was really only to provide clarity on roles in the process and to link across to the updated guidance that SEPA has produced.

Alexander Stewart: My second question is about the resourcing of planning departments, which has continued to be a concern for a number of years, even after the changes to the fee system that have been introduced. Do you have any plans to increase funding for planning authorities, because those changes will have an impact, depending on how the funding is managed? Do you support the ring fencing of planning fee income, which is another area that has been touched on in the past? If it were implemented, how would it work and what would it mean? It would be good to get a flavour of your views on that.

Ivan McKee: The data across planning authorities shows that none of them have planning fees that cover the cost of the planning department. The best that the fees generate is about 80-odd per cent of the overall cost; the average is about 67 per cent. Even with the fee increase, there is still a gap between what it costs local authorities to run their planning department and what the fee income generates. Clearly, the economic and other social benefits of the planning system justify the support for it, but that is the reality of where we are at. The steps that we have taken to introduce different planning fees and index-link them has helped provide planning authorities with more resources.

The point about ring fencing is important. The Verity house agreement between the Government, local authorities and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities has a presumption against ring fencing. We strongly encourage planning authorities to use the fee increases to further invest in their planning functions, but, as a consequence of the Verity house agreement that we have signed up to, we are not in a position to mandate that through ring fencing.

As well as resourcing, the efficiency of the process is an issue. In that regard, the work that the national planning improvement champion is progressing—the peer-to-peer audit work between planning authorities to identify best practice, the digitisation work and the whole series of process improvement activities that are being actively pursued—can deliver more with the same resource.

In the past few months, we have taken a number of quite solid measures to increase the number of people who come into the system, such as trialling a number of funded bursaries. That has triggered others in the industry and elsewhere to come in on the back of that and further invest in bursaries in order to bring more planners into the system. At our own expense, we have brought 18 planners into the Government so that we can train them to go and work in the planning system. I have been heavily involved in other work. In the Government, my team has been leading on encouraging individuals in the early or middle stages of their careers to choose a career in planning, and we have been raising the profile of the career in general. A lot of things are happening to take that work forward.

It is important to recognise that a lot of people who leave planning authorities go to work in industry. We are also having conversations with the industry about how we can work together on that, because it does not do anyone any good if developers cannot get their plans through because they have hired the planner who used to work at the planning authority.

Alexander Stewart: You have identified a very strong issue there. There is an attempt to do more, build more, and create that atmosphere and energy as you build up that industry. However, it is hard to do that if you do not have the manpower and resource to follow that effort through.

Some local authorities have many more planning applications than others. Some get dozens of planning applications daily while others do not have the same flow. Authorities have to manage the number of applications and the time that they take and then ensure that they have procedures in place to deal with them. As you have identified, all of that can have a knock-on effect on how effective and efficient the system is. However, it appears that not having the foundations and building blocks in place is making it more difficult to achieve some of your goals and ambitions.

You realise that, but it needs to be further realised that more needs to be done and achieved. At the end of the day, if you do not have the processes in place to ensure that your goals in some areas can be achieved, you are setting things up to fail. As you have identified, some areas do not have as much demand as others, but for those that have a high level, it is crucial that we enable them to achieve their planning goals and aspirations and ensure that we get things built in those locations.

Ivan McKee: As I said, it is for planning authorities to make such decisions, but we are very active in working with them to share best practice and put more resource into the planning system at a macro level across the country. As I have said, we have done so by increasing fees and taking steps to bring in more individuals to be trained as planners.

We are also working with some local authorities—particularly smaller ones—to explore opportunities for them to co-operate with other local authorities in sharing resources, particularly specialist resources that are in shorter supply. We are active in that space, but where there are opportunities to do more, we are very interested in pursuing them.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP): Good morning. I want to jump back to the issue of flooding for a moment. As you know, minister, I have written to the Government about the issue of SEPA's revised flood risk assessments designating adjacent housing developments—where people are already living—as being at risk of flooding. The clear and obvious problem that local people have with that is that they cannot sell their houses, or are having difficulty doing so, because of the revised flood risk assessment.

My question for the Government and the chief planner is this: how do we plan to resolve that? I have read Fiona Simpson's letter, but I cannot quite see how it addresses the particular issue of adjacent housing developments being affected by SEPA's revised flood risk assessment.

Ivan McKee: That is a knock-on effect of the determination that SEPA has made. It is important to recognise that SEPA will take a view, and the planning authority will make the decision. As I said earlier, things are changing, so areas that were not previously at risk of flooding might be now or in the future. On your specific point about individuals who have properties adjacent to land where planning permission has been refused on those grounds, that is outside the planning system's scope.

Cara Davidson: The minister has touched on the point, but to come in briefly, SEPA has statutory obligations in relation to flood risk that sit outwith the planning system. One of its roles is to provide information and evidence on the flood risk that exists across the country. It is entirely appropriate that, if such information and evidence on flood risk exists, it is taken into account in decisions. If development already exists, that is a separate issue, because the planning system's role is to guide future development.

The chief planner letter that you mentioned was actually output that came from a short-life working group that brought together planning authorities, SEPA and industry. Government officials are certainly aware of the issues that arise around existing development. The focus through the planning system is on new development proposals and how the information and evidence relating to them are taken into account, weighed in the round and balanced in planning decisions, as we have heard is the case with all NPF4 policies.

Willie Coffey: Thank you for that, but I do not quite see how that helps the situation. A number of constituents have come forward and said that, because of what has happened, they cannot sell their house. Only a year ago, their house was not deemed to be liable to flood risk, but it now is. They are living in really expensive homes that they cannot sell because of the change. How does the Government plan to get them out of that situation?

Ivan McKee: Just to be clear, that is not a function of the planning system; it is a function of SEPA developing advice based on the guidelines that it has to follow to calculate the likelihood of flooding in any particular area. SEPA generates the flood maps and so on that feed into the planning system. In any given situation, the planning system would take a view based on the information that is fed into it, but any solution to the problem does not lie in the planning system.

Willie Coffey: Well, it clearly has to lie with somebody—perhaps SEPA. The question that people are asking me is, “Why should SEPA suddenly designate my home as being at risk of flooding, when I bought it on the strength of it not being at risk of flooding a year ago?” Why are we allowing that situation to develop?

Ivan McKee: SEPA's remit is not in my ministerial portfolio—it is elsewhere—but if you want to communicate with me on the specifics of the case, we can look at SEPA's assessment and the technical data that it used to make it.

Willie Coffey: I will have to leave that one and follow up on it with the minister, convener.

On a more positive note, the planning hub idea was broadly well received at previous committee sessions and had quite a lot of support. I will give you an opportunity to remind the committee of the principle that is behind the planning hub. What ideas do you have for its staffing, budget, resources and so on, and what will its specific role be in supporting planning development?

Ivan McKee: Conceptually, the plan is for the hub to be able to leverage resources to address and unblock specific issues. The hub contains a range of elements, and it is important to recognise that they are trying to solve different problems in different sectors.

10:30

On housing, as we talked about, we have to identify stalled sites where there are specific blockages. We then need to get the right people around the table to unblock those and move them forward. Before there was a hub, everyone would be talking from their own script about why they were doing what they were doing in their part of the process, but the hubs hook all that together. Having them has added value, as they bring everyone around the table to identify how, as a collective, they can help to unblock some of the stalled sites. The housing planning hub has been quite significant, and we will continue to roll that work out to more sites.

In hydrogen, in the areas where we are rolling out the hub, we want to get ahead of the curve and understand the issues that will be pertinent to that technology as it comes into play. That technology is new to everybody, and smaller local authorities will find it more difficult to access the technical information and expertise to do that. We therefore want to address some of the issues with it up front, so that we are not learning as those applications start to come through because we will have done a lot of the learning previously. We want to identify the specialist technical resource that can support those planning applications. We are doing similar work on renewable energy. The

concept has been very well received, and the execution of it has landed well, so we will continue to develop it.

On the point about how that will be resourced, we are in a learning phase just now, and we are making a difference. As we go into the next parliamentary term, we will assess that in the round and talk to stakeholders so that we can understand whether we need more investment in specific activities that the hub is carrying out in order to make a material difference.

Willie Coffey: Our friends the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland were talking about masterplan consent areas, which is a scheme that has come up at the committee several times. The idea is to reduce the administrative burden on planning authorities, speed up planning decisions and so on. You were a bit less enthusiastic about that idea. What is the Government's view on the purpose behind masterplan consent areas? Who would be involved in such a scheme and how would local authorities work with it?

Ivan McKee: In areas where significant development is likely to take place, the scheme allows the planning authority to put in place a masterplan consent area. A lot of the work would happen up front to address considerations in the area, which would mean that when planning applications were submitted, they could go through a streamlined process.

There are a number of examples of that from around the country. We think that it is a vehicle to be used in specific situations, such as in areas where there is likely to be a high concentration of development for various reasons. It allows the process to be streamlined, which would allow the development to happen faster, which is what it is all about.

Andy Kinnaird: The principle behind masterplan consent areas is that they can incentivise investment. A masterplan consent area means that planning permission is already in place through the designation of an MCA scheme, so basically, it de-risks the planning system to allow potential developers to come forward. They can come and develop under the terms of the scheme that has already been set.

It is also an opportunity for authorities to show that bit of place leadership, as they can pick out the priority areas where they want to see the investment, choose the style of the development, consider the quality of development that they want to bring into the area and work with landowners and potential developers to come up with a plan for the area. MCAs will deliver those consents from the outset.

Willie Coffey: Great. How do we get local participation in the masterplan consent process? How can local communities that are disparate and spread around be part of the process?

Andy Kinnaird: We worked out the process for the designation of a masterplan consent area using the same process that we have for planning applications. We aligned those processes so that the opportunities for local engagement would be the same on an MCA scheme as they are on a planning application.

If the application is for a major area that would involve a major development, that would also bring in the pre-application consultation arrangements that we already have for planning applications. Therefore, nobody would miss out if a masterplan consent area scheme were in place, because it would replicate the process that we have when a private developer submits an application.

Willie Coffey: The number of local consultees could be quite large. I am thinking about community groups. They can help to shape such plans, but involving them would require quite wide-ranging and extensive consultation. I would certainly welcome it, but is that part of the vision?

Andy Kinnaird: That is the thinking behind it, since the process would be aligned to that of a planning application. We are already working with a few authorities that are considering being early adopters. The masterplan consent area provisions have only existed since last December. We have seen examples of the types of development that they might be used for in different areas of the country.

We have spoken quite openly about working with Highland Council on potential housing developments that will support the incoming workers around the green freeport in the area. We are also looking at town centre masterplan consent areas with some other authorities.

The Convener: It was helpful to get a couple of examples of where masterplan consent areas might be used.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): Good morning, minister; I have a couple of quick questions. As you will know, the Royal Town Planning Institute has asked that NPF4 be made a dynamic document that is continually updated to reference new advice and guidance as it is published. Can you and the Government do that?

Ivan McKee: We would need to separate the NPF4 document and the policies that are articulated in it, which, as I indicated earlier, we would not want to change. The guidance that sits alongside the NPF4 document gives clarification

on whether it is required and how it may be interpreted, adopted and implemented.

The guidance is dynamic. If we identify that more information or more clarification is required, we follow that up. The suite of guidance is easily accessible for those who are seeking to review it. What we have in that regard is already dynamic in that the guidance changes to address challenges, concerns and more new information.

We would not want to go back through the NPF4 process, because that process gives us stability on the policies and it is important for people to have certainty on that.

Fulton MacGregor: Do you believe that the NPF4 supports the delivery of a gender-sensitive approach to planning? If so, how do you think that it achieves that? Do you believe that more can be done?

Ivan McKee: Quite a bit of work has been done on that. We want to design places that support everyone who uses them, across genders. If we get that right, it has a positive effect on everybody who uses the space.

As I said, quite a bit of work is happening on that with representatives from the United Nations Institute for Training and Research, including research fellow Dr May East. I have also been involved in events with young planners where the gender-sensitive approach to planning has been given significant prominence. Young planners are very interested in that, because they see that it adds value to the place-making aspect of what they do and part of the reason that they came into planning is to make places better.

It certainly got prominence in our discussions, and it was embedded through NPF4. We are taking the opportunity to work with others on that, and to articulate it where we can.

Fiona Simpson: I will add that it is very much embedded in NPF4. NPF4 takes a regenerative approach to development, and the principles are explicitly and implicitly referenced across its policies. Things such as local living planning are consistent with the gender-sensitive approach. We did intensive work on that during a workshop last year, which was well attended and well received. Since then, we have done less direct work, because it has become a movement that has taken on a life beyond NPF4. It has long been discussed, but there is now a lot of enthusiasm for it in the planning world, which is positive.

The Convener: That concludes our questions, but I will pick up on a few threads, if you do not mind. Fulton MacGregor asked about dynamic documents. As I understand it, RTPI has said that its members and planners in general are finding that, although NPF4 is an unchanging document,

many different bits of guidance pop up, so navigating and keeping track of them is a challenge. The metaphor that I use is that it is like walking through a field after a rainstorm and seeing all the mushrooms that have popped up: work is being done on a mycelial Government network and lots of things have appeared, but it is unclear how they link to each other. My sense is that the RTPI is asking for a dashboard or a way of organising all the materials in one place so that it is easy to see it all and where it has been updated. What are your thoughts on that?

Ivan McKee: Anything that we can do to make that work more easily visible is to be encouraged. We will certainly reflect on and consider how we can do that. As I said, it is a dynamic process, and guidance is issued in response to challenges that present themselves or requests for further information or clarification. That process will continue. There is on-going work to review historical guidance and see how much of it is no longer relevant and can be taken down, which would help to simplify what is online and how it is presented. It makes sense for that to be done.

As an exercise, I went on to the internet this morning and typed in "Scottish Government planning guidance". I was quickly taken to the Government webpage, where one or two pages lay out the overview with all the links to everything that you might ever want to see in guidance. I think that it is all there, but we will seek to make it as easily accessible as possible.

The Convener: Great. I am glad that you checked that out. Clearly, there are some areas of the Scottish Government's website that you could get lost in for a long time, and not quite find what you are looking for.

Ivan McKee: Indeed. Point taken.

The Convener: I heard recently about the UK Government's plans for neighbourhoods. It is not a Labour Government initiative, but was originally part of the Conservative Government's levelling up and town boards programme. Are you aware of those emerging plans? A number of local authorities in Scotland have been given funding, although I cannot remember how many. There are 75 local authorities across the UK, including a portion in Scotland, that can access a £20 million pot over 10 years for regeneration initiatives. They have to come up with a regeneration plan. My sense of that is that it is not only about spatial planning, which we have been talking about, but it also cuts into community action plans and community planning partnership-type work. Are you keeping track of that? I have heard from Orkney Islands Council that it has made good use of its access to the fund by funding all its local place plans. One of the councils in Ayrshire is part

of that initiative, as well as Moray Council, and there may be some others.

Ivan McKee: It is not my portfolio and I am not aware of that specific fund but, if funds are available—from whatever source—that can help to support communities, I would encourage local authorities to access them to invest in place plans or other activities.

More broadly, we have done quite a bit of work to review and understand the work that the UK Government is doing. A number of categories are not relevant in a Scottish context, because we have already taken steps to address them, or because they do not apply. We have already done some things in Scotland, such as the improvements that we have made through NPF4 and other activities. We are looking at other things that are being done down south to see whether there is anything that we can learn from them. We are very open to taking that forward.

I do not know whether anyone is aware of the specific fund that the convener mentioned?

Fiona Simpson: I cannot add anything on the specific fund, but there is a lot of read across between planning, local place plans and our regeneration programmes, including our place-based investment programme. The landscape of community-driven engagement comes together with what we are trying to achieve in planning through local place plans and other engagement. Good work is being done and there is a lot of potential.

10:45

The Convener: My concern is that it would add another layer, in that there would be a requirement to set up a board. I think that Orkney Islands Council has demonstrated a good approach, which is to say, “We are going to set up this board. We are going to do this, get the funding and support the local place plan, rather than creating something new.” I am concerned that we will start to create lots of different streams of activity in communities where we do not have the capacity to manage it all.

When the Dunoon Community Development Trust produced its local place plan, it realised that it needed to create a community action plan. It is interesting that that work has triggered activity beyond the spatial plan. The committee identified early on that there is a connection between what is needed for spatial planning, public services and support for communities. That is quite interesting.

Finally, I want to take us back to the beginning of the conversation. Minister, earlier, you were talking about the fact that there are a certain number of sites that have planning permission. I

do not think that the Government can necessarily rule on that but, as an example, I was speaking to a development trust in Highland, which pointed out that, in its area, there were 53 small sites where a private developer had received planning permission for a personal home that was not built, which means that there are 53 houses that could be being built but are not being built. You are all nodding your heads—as you know, one house in a community in rural Scotland can make the difference in keeping a community alive. Is there anything that can be done in the guidance or to create a culture of support for local authorities to somehow find a way to put those sites back into the mix so that communities could take a project forward?

Ivan McKee: It is a valid point that goes back to what we said earlier about the high-level estimate of 164,000 stalled sites, which is made up of all kinds of units, from very big sites that are not being built over a period of time because there are commercial issues, for example, right down to very small sites that have individual units. The team is carrying out initial stalled sites work to understand the issues across the country. We will start with the bigger sites and work our way down, because that will have the most impact most immediately. That work is on-going and we have seen the first cut of it. We want to understand the issues that are holding up those developments. We encourage local authorities to look at small sites, particularly in rural areas, to try to understand whether there is anything that they can do to help to secure the build-out of those units.

The Convener: That concludes our questions. It has been a useful discussion; it has been great to hear the Government's position on guidance and to get into some of the details. The fact that a certain number of sites already have planning permission and you are looking into why that is not translating into housing being built on the ground is interesting.

I thank the minister and his officials for their evidence.

10:48

Meeting continued in private until 12:07.

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