

Local Government and Regeneration Committee
Scrutiny of Scottish Government's Draft Budget 2014/15

SUBMISSION FROM ROYAL TOWN PLANNING INSTITUTE (RTPI)

RTPI Scotland is pleased to be able to provide written evidence to the Committee on Scottish Government's Draft Budget 2014 -15. The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) is the champion of planning and the planning profession. A charity registered in Scotland and England and Wales it works to promote the art and science of planning for the public benefit. We have around 2,200 members in Scotland and a worldwide membership of nearly 23,000. We:

- support policy development to improve approaches to planning for the benefit of the public
- maintain the professional standards of our members
- support our members, and therefore the majority of the planning workforce, to have the skills and knowledge they need to deliver planning effectively
- maintain high standards of planning education
- develop and promote new thinking, ideas and approaches which can improve planning
- support our membership to work with others who have a role in developing places in Scotland
- improve the understanding of planning and the planning system to policy makers, politicians, practitioners and the general public.

We recognise the tight fiscal circumstances that Government has to work in, and feel that, the planning service should be given the resources it requires to function effectively. Planning is an essential contributor to economic growth, social cohesion and environmental sustainability.

The last year has seen an unparalleled reduction in professional planning staff in local authorities across Scotland. Although this is as yet unquantified, intelligence received by the Institute tells us that this is beginning to have an impact upon how the service is being delivered. Planning can often be seen as a 'Cinderella' service which is not always regarded as a priority for investment. We believe that this is short sighted given the important roles that it can play in creating better places for people. A properly resourced planning system, working within the right framework, is key to achieving ambitions for sustainable development, economic growth and successful places for people across Scotland. It can highlight pressures for change, identify opportunities and build appropriate safeguards. It can provide the long term, proactive vision for Scotland through integrating and future-proofing development. And it can allow people across Scotland to have a say in the future of the places where they live, work and relax.

We have five points we would like to make, which cover the issues raised in the Committee's call for evidence. These are complementary and are set out below.

1. There is a need to ensure that resources raised by the planning service are given to the planning service

It is imperative that planning authorities are given the resources they need if we want them to provide high quality and speedy services. Scottish Government recognised this by agreeing a rise in planning fees in April 2012, averaging around 20%. However, these

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fees are not ringfenced which means that the uplift may always be directly invested in the planning service. RTPI Scotland is firmly of the view that any increase in planning fees must be passed on directly to planning services to help ensure improvement in performance.

The current situation could be said to be unfair to the customers of the planning service who expect their fees to cover the costs of the work involved in assessing their planning application. It could also be said to be unfair on planning authorities who are expected to improve their performance with no guarantee that they will benefit from the fee increase.

2. There is need to invest in continuous improvement

RTPI Scotland is concerned that at a time when there is strong pressure to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the planning system planning authorities do not have the resources required to support them to adopt and implement continuous improvement programmes. We appreciate that it is currently difficult to fund this from existing planning authority and/ or Scottish Government budgets. Nonetheless we feel that there is a real need to find resources to enable this to happen, and ultimately, to improve performance. Given this, we believe that there may be need to look at this creatively and to explore the possibility of top-slicing, or adding a levy onto, planning fees which can then provide a pot of money to support improvement. This could help to provide a significant resource which can be used to create a nationwide, coordinated improvement programme and best practice portal. Investing in such a programme should benefit the customers of the planning service through improved performance.

3. There is a need to continue to examine how best to streamline procedures and processes and to use new online approaches, where possible

Through its Planning Reform, Next Steps programme Scottish Government is working closely with the Institute, Heads of Planning Scotland, COSLA and other interests to examine how best to streamline aspects of the planning system that do not add value or which can be better coordinated with one another. This includes exploring the possibility of expanding permitted development rights; considering how to join up or make better connections between different consenting regimes; and examining more effective ways of commissioning impact assessments. The Institute is supportive of this and is keen to explore how to take this further forward.

The ePlanning website and processes, which have been introduced by Scottish Government, the Key Agencies Group and the planning authorities, delivers online, easy access to apply for planning permission, tracking progress of applications, making comments and understand decisions, and where applicable, appeals against a decision. It is made up of four interrelated projects covering online Local Development Plans; submitting planning applications and appeals; improving the amount and quality of planning information available online to improve transparency, accessibility and inclusivity; and moving from paper to electronic consultation on planning applications, standardising processes between the planning authorities and external consultees. Take up of the services has exceeded expectation with 48% of planning applications submitted online in 2012/13 compared to the target of 22%. We believe that investment in the ePlanning tool could go some way to creating financial savings in the medium to longer term.

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4. There is a need for public authorities to recognise that good planning can prevent additional spending in the future

Local authorities should ensure that policy and investment decisions recognise that good planning is 'early intervention' which can save costs in the long term by eliminating future issues. Planning looks to the long term and integrates activity. It can help to achieve sustainable change. In looking making saving in the longer run there is a need to ensure that the planning system is used as a key mechanism to achieve the ambitions of Scotland's people and communities through setting out a long term vision for the future of Scotland. This requires improved links between planning and key programmes for infrastructure, economic development, regeneration, housing, transport and rural development through Single Outcome Agreements and Community Planning.

5. There is a need to recognise that planning can help to synergise budgets

Better coordination of Community Planning, Single Outcome Agreements and Development Plans can help to bring synergy to budgets at community and neighbourhood levels. Linking these together allow for a more holistic approach to joining up activities and impacts on communities. Development Plans should be seen as key delivery mechanisms for this, providing opportunities for community and stakeholder engagement and partnership, as well as the coordination of funding and programmes across agencies, and the private sector. This requires Community Planning Partnerships to engage in the Development Plan process, and vice versa.

Townscape Heritage Initiatives can also be a useful way of bringing together programmes and funding and for engaging communities, often in challenging contexts. At a regional level there should be role for Strategic Development Plans. The Cities Review appeared to conclude that economic growth could be better encouraged by consideration at the City-Region scale, and Strategic Development Plans should reflect this. The forthcoming 3rd National Planning Framework should be help to identify those areas where there should be investment and where infrastructure should be developed to help support this.

I trust that you find these comments useful. We would be happy to expand on, or clarify them and/or provide oral evidence to the Committee.