Local Government and Communities Committee

Planning (Scotland) Bill

Submission from Blackwood Homes and Care

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 This paper provides the view of Blackwood Homes and Care in response to the call for written evidence for the Planning (Scotland) Bill.

2. SUBMISSION CONTEXT

2.1 Blackwood is a Registered Social Landlord and Care Provider with around 1600 homes and 4 care homes across 29 Local Authorities. It was founded in 1972 by Dr Margaret Blackwood in response to a lack of suitable housing for people with disabilities. We continue to provide homes and services with the aim of maximising independent living and, ultimately, allowing people to live their lives to the full.

2.2 We have recently embarked on an ambitious development programme and will deliver in excess of 130 new homes in the next three years. These homes will be based upon the award-winning Blackwood House using the latest design and technological innovations to maximise independent living. More details on the Blackwood House can be found at www.blackwoodgroup.org.uk/blackwood-house.

3. RESPONSE TO BILL

3.1 The response, as requested, follows the suggested format of answers to the undernoted specific questions. Blackwood’s responses are in bold under each question.

Do you think the Bill, taken, will produce a planning system for Scotland that balances the need to secure the appropriate development with the views of communities and protection of the built and natural environment?

The Bill generally balances protection and consideration of the environments well with community engagement. The Bill could define “community” more robustly to reflect a shared interest or need as well as a geographic term.

To what extent will the proposals in the Bill result in higher levels of new house building? If not, what changes could be made to help further increase house building?

It is somewhat challenging to see that the proposals will result in higher levels of housebuilding. Greater emphasis could be placed upon flexibility in zoning and prioritisation for periodic re-classification of sites previously earmarked for commercial purposes which could meet increasing housing demand. The shortage of land for building affordable homes remains a challenge and the Bill could address this by considering such measures. The Simplified
Planning Zones (SPZ) may have this effect however it is not clear at this stage how this would be worked through.

The introduction of the infrastructure levy may have the impact of dissuading developers from building in particular areas or forcing greater costs upon consumers and affordable housing partners.

Do the proposals in Bill create a sufficiently robust structure to maintain planning at a regional level following the ending of Strategic Development Plans and, if not, what needs to be done to improve regional planning?

The principals in the bill clearly provide the beginning of maintaining and improving regional planning and local decision making. The introduction of the aforementioned SPZs and the extension to 10 years of Local Development Plans should provide flexibility combined with a stable, less politically led approach. The increase requirements for training and skills in members is a positive step that should create a trust in local decision making. As ever, the delivery structure of these principles will be critical.

Will the changes in the Bill to the content and process for producing Local Development Plans achieve the aims of creating plans that are focussed on delivery, complement other local authority priorities and meet the needs of developers and communities? If not, what other changes would you like to see introduced?

The key change we would like to see would be the recognition in Local Development Plans of the need to provide a far greater number of homes specifically earmarked for Independent Living. The challenges faced by communities in enabling people with disabilities, often but not always as a result of the rapidly ageing population, are significant and the Bill makes no real reference to them. The Bill appears to be aimed at allowing a freedom and flexibility around planning decisions – and this is positive – however to successfully achieve sustainable thriving communities that, a strong and explicit reference to the need for LDPs (and potentially SPZs) to prioritise homes for independent living is critical. The practical outworking of this could be achieved by several measures across several agencies, however the statement of intent should be upmost in the Bill.

Would Simplified Development Zones balance the need to enable development with enough safeguards for community and environmental interests?

It is difficult to fully assess at this stage without understanding what operational guidance would be issued. It is clear that it would potentially streamline development in the affordable sector however greater consideration should be given to explicitly protecting areas of housing need – particularly independent living. Incorporating this into definitions of community is a potential solution.

Does the Bill provide more effective avenues for community involvement in the development of plans and decisions that affect their area? Will the proposed Local Place Plans enable communities to influence local development plans and does the
Bill ensure adequate financial and technical support for community bodies wishing to develop local place plans? If not, what more needs to be done?

The Bill has a strong community focus that is welcomed. The support mechanisms are not as explicit however this may be for supplementary guidance. As previously stated, the definition of community should greater reflect interest groups (such as disability groups, neighbourhoods) as well as those currently defined.

Will the proposed changes to enforcement (such as increased level of fines and recovery of expenses) promote better compliance with planning control and, if not, how these could provisions be improved?

They may however it will be dependent upon the provision of local resource investment in planning and building control teams.

Is the proposed Infrastructure Levy the best way to secure investment in new infrastructure from developers, how might it impact on levels of development? Are there any other ways (to the proposed Levy) that could raise funds for infrastructure provision in order to provide services and amenities to support land development? Are there lessons that can be learned from the Infrastructure Levy as it operates in England?

The infrastructure levy is, in principle, a good idea however a comprehensive review of Section 75 contributions will be required, and it is our position that this should be considered as an urgent commitment. Given the requirement for significant further development to meet the 2021 target of 50,000 new affordable homes, uncertainty in the industry will result in 1. delays in site starts and 2. Increased costs that will be passed on to RSL clients.

Do you support the requirement for local government councillors to be trained in planning matters prior to becoming involved in planning decision making? If not, why not?

We support this requirement which will help increase clarity on decisions and appeals.

Will the proposals in the Bill aimed at monitoring and improving the performance of planning authorities help drive performance improvements?

The proposals have the potential to streamline certain aspects of development activity which should, in turn improve performance. It is clear, however, that only an increased operational investment at officer level and improved synergy with Building Control teams will effectively deliver this.

Will the changes in the Bill to enable flexibility in the fees charged by councils and the Scottish Government (such as charging for or waiving fees for some services) provide enough funding for local authority planning departments to deliver the high – performing planning system the Scottish Government wants? If not, what needs to change?
A comprehensive review of working practices across planning teams in councils is the practical way to achieve this. The measures in the Bill do not make it clear that the much-needed funding to improve planning at a local level will be delivered.

Are there any other comments you would like to make about the Bill?

The flexibility and increasingly practical approach of the Bill is largely welcome. We would re-iterate, however, that the opportunity to address an important national issue – the increased requirement for homes capable of providing independent living – should not be lost.