I am writing on behalf of Opportunity North East (ONE) in its Regional Advisory Board capacity to provide comments on The Planning (Scotland) Bill, which was introduced to the Scottish Parliament on 4 December 2017.

ONE is a private sector led and funded economic development company, established to support the long-term prosperity of North East Scotland through the diversification of the regional economy. ONE delivers its own sector-specific projects and programmes and works in partnership with a range of private and public stakeholders. It is also the private sector partner in the Aberdeen City Region Deal and leads on the innovation projects within the Deal. ONE’s Economic Leadership Board comprises representatives from the private sector, Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Councils, Scottish Enterprise, the University of Aberdeen and Robert Gordon University, and Aberdeen & Grampian Chamber of Commerce. This Board also serves as the Regional Advisory Board to Scottish Enterprise.

I am aware that the Committee was seeking submissions by 2 February 2018 but understand that you have agreed to a late submission from ONE to afford the Board an opportunity to consider the contents of the Bill. The Board met on Thursday 8 February and considered the key elements of the Bill and how they support or otherwise impact upon economic development.

In overall terms, we believe that the Bill could have gone further to enable the planning system to support effective economic development activity at a regional level and thereby contribute to the attainment of national targets. We therefore submit the following points for the Committee's consideration.

We are concerned that work on Strategic Development will be driven at a national level and this risks the North East of Scotland, or other regions, being marginalised. It is vital that a region such as ours can grow and develop both its existing industries and pursue emerging opportunities and new industries. A national view of development may lead to the land use planning system favouring areas where businesses or industry clusters do not wish to be or fail to recognise important regional sector drivers and the key role that place plays in economic development. Supporting economic growth and diversity at a regional level should deliver better medium to long term impacts nationally in terms of productivity and employment.

Our other concern relates to the potential for the new system to slow down economic development by again taking a national view on development and economic impact,
which could be subject to competing and divergent priorities, and creating 10-year Local Development Plans. Our view is that the land use planning system must be quick and fit for purpose; recognise the fundamental role of place in development; take account of the strengths, opportunities and needs of regions; and respond appropriately to these. Flexibility within the Local Development Plans will therefore be very important to ensure that they can take account of changing economic circumstances and cycles

Finally, we considered the Bill’s proposal for Simplified Development Zones (SDZs) as a potential way of facilitating the delivery of development. We are, on the face of it, supportive of this approach as it should reduce the burden on businesses. However, we are keen to ensure that the advantage SDZs may provide is retained by careful selection. Too many SDZs would mean that there is no net economic advantage at a local or regional level to attract investment.

I trust these comments are useful for the Committee’s deliberations.

Yours faithfully,

Sir Ian Wood GBE
Chairman