Local Government and Communities Committee

Planning (Scotland) Bill

Submission from the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA)

SEPA welcomes and supports the Bill. Planning done well plays a fundamental role in helping to develop an inclusive economy and society which prospers within the resources of one planet. The Bill as introduced provides the framework for achieving this.

Through our core functions of regulation and flooding we will support implementation of the Bill delivering great places that will stand the test of time. We will do this by working collaboratively to make sure that plans and policies see environmental success as an opportunity to achieve economic and social aspirations rather than being a barrier to growth.

An environment for success

Delivering successful places through the revised planning system will not come though balancing or trading off economic, social and environmental concerns. Rather, the system needs to see community aspirations and a great environment as an opportunity to deliver Scotland’s development needs.

Simplified Development Zones for example should be seen as an opportunity to create places that are extraordinary. Places with innovation at their heart and which place a very high quality environment and delivery of community aspirations as the building blocks for economic growth. They can become exemplars of “one planet” placemaking creating prosperity by bringing forward places where people want to live, work and invest. We can support delivery of SDZs through the provision of a sound evidence base and by building strong and lasting relationships with delivery partners to facilitate innovation.

Similarly, the infrastructure levy can facilitate coordinated strategic action that goes beyond the boundaries of individual development sites and enable future critical infrastructure such as low or zero carbon energy and surface water management. The levy can enable infrastructure that locks the country into a low carbon, resilient future.

Evidence and information to support decision making

Great planning decisions rely on high quality, up to date information and evidence. Part of our role is to make sure that powerful evidence is available in the right form at the right time. The Bill can help us to do that.

For example, we welcome the proposed move from a five to 10 year review period for local development plans, however we will need to make sure that new information is able to inform decision making as it becomes available. Information we hold on flood risk is constantly being improved and updated based upon most up to date evidence. This could change quite significantly over a 10 year period and in some
areas this could have consequences for development delivery. Therefore, local development plan updates need sufficient flexibility to take account of new evidence during the 10 year period which could impact on the plan delivery.

Similarly, we support the training of elected members on planning matters before becoming involved in decision making. In our experience there have been instances where a limited understanding of planning matters relating to flood risk has led to decisions that could place people and property at risk.

The introduction of a “gatecheck” process will help us to target production of the most important information needed for development delivery. Embedding Strategic Environmental Assessment information into the “gatecheck” will streamline processes and ensure that environmental evidence is at the heart of plan making.

Working closely with our Key Agency partners will ensure that our evidence underpins the spatial strategy with a sound evidence base and maximises opportunities to bring our collective evidence, knowledge and expertise to support innovation and practical delivery of low carbon, resilient places through engagement with regional partnerships and local development plans. The Bill should help us to increasingly operate this way, for example, our experience of early engagement at a senior level with the Stirling City Deal has led to ambitious plans to deliver exemplar projects that will drive social, economic and environmental success for Stirling and its people.

As a public body committed to openness and transparency, SEPA feels it is appropriate that this response be placed on the public record. If you require further clarification on any aspect of this correspondence, please contact Lesley Duncan or Katherine Lakeman, Principal Policy Officers (Planning), SEPA Stirling Office.

Yours sincerely

John Kenny
Chief Officer Circular Economy