Local Government and Communities Committee
Planning (Scotland) Bill
Notes from Visit to Linlithgow, 19 February 2018

Background

Two members of the Committee (Graham Simpson MSP and Andy Wightman MSP) visited Linlithgow to meet with representatives of the Linlithgow Planning Forum and officers of West Lothian Council to discuss the value of local place plans within the context of the reforms proposed by the Scottish Government’s Planning (Scotland) Bill.

The following is a high-level, non-attributable note of the discussions that took place. It has been agreed with the participants of the informal meetings.

Meeting Notes – Linlithgow Planning Forum

- The meeting began with introductions and a background briefing from representatives of the Linlithgow Planning Forum on the development of their local plan for the town.

- Of particular interest to the Members was the process by which the Forum had developed their local plan and how this had been received by the Council and issues around local engagement on planning matters.

- The Members noted the origins of the Forum and the drivers behind the original Plan, namely local issues relating to planning, development of the town, problems with traffic, the need for improved infrastructure (e.g. schools, roads, health provision etc.), a desire to further develop the town’s attraction for tourism, a desire to increase social housing provision etc.

- The essence of the Plan developed by the Forum was to seek to use land value gains from project developments to fund wider infrastructure development over a 15 year period.

- There was a strong desire from these local representatives of the community to identify issues for Linlithgow alone and what needs to be done, and in effect produce a Local Place Plan of the kind now envisaged in the Bill.

- The Group expressed disappointment that, in their view, not much of their Plan had been incorporated into the Council’s work.

- One of the issues for the Forum is the extent of community engagement by the Planning Authority in the town on planning matters and what forms that takes. A view was expressed that it was important to go beyond exhibitions in civic centres to also involve the use of local press/media, social media fora, street
canvassing etc. as these had proved effective means for the Forum in its own work.

- The meeting discussed a recent proposal for redevelopment of The Vennel area of Linlithgow and what activities the Forum/Council had been carrying out to consult the local community and their effectiveness.

- The meeting then discussed whether the kind of activities and organisation structure that had been set up in Linlithgow could be replicated elsewhere in Scotland. It was noted that Linlithgow benefitted from a number of committed local residents, some of whom had planning/business expertise to bring.

- The need and value of resources and support to help build local groups like the Forum was thought to be very important.

- It was also important to have an agreed and structured process for meaningful local engagement between groups like the Forum and the Planning Authority, recognising that the latter had a role to play in balancing the views that are heard locally with the overall strategic plan of a council, plus balancing the key objectives of the need to tackle deprivation in other parts of a council’s area whilst ensuring that development can still happen in the more prosperous areas.

- There was some discussion about whether the demise of the local newspaper industry was making it harder to have effective civic engagement with the loss of this means of communicating.

- There was also a discussion amongst the Forum members on the phraseology in the Bill that councils needed to “have regard to” local place plans and whether this was sufficient.

- There was discussion about how a number of local place plans drawn up by civic groups across the towns and villages in a council’s area might be weaved into the skeleton of a Local Development Plan (LDP) from the outset, with someone playing a role in arbitrating where there is overlap or conflict. This is a kind of ‘bottom up’ approach to the development of an LDP.

- There was also a discussion on the merits and challenges of a system whereby local place plans were mandatory or better left to local decisions on how/whether to produce one as a contribution to an LDP.

- The meeting also discussed the value of effective feedback to a local community that show the influence they had had on an LDP via their local place plan.

- The value of local arrangements for community engagement and flexibility to better reflect local circumstances was discussed as an alternative to a more statutorily-based, once-size-fits-all process.
We also heard that this had been a learning exercise both on the part of the Planning Forum in undertaking a consultation and on the part of the community in responding. They said they are much better at consulting with the Linlithgow community and the community is much better, in terms of being attuned, at responding than was the case at the MIR stage in 2012.

Meeting Notes – West Lothian Council officers

- The meeting discussed the means by which the Council engages with local communities on planning matters.

- One issue which was highlighted was the need to ensure that the timeframes being looked at in local place plans were consistent with a council’s wider approach to strategic planning and the timescales for that. The move in the Bill towards a 10-year cycle may help here.

- The process for sequencing LDPs with local place plans was discussed, as well as the demands on a council’s resources to support local communities with the development of the latter and if provisions for local place plans were to be enhanced.

- The meeting discussed the challenges faced by a planning authority such as a council in balancing the views of a local community via a local place plan with the overall strategic development goals of a council, which is having to manage competing views, manage resources and reconcile requests with a wider need to provide transportation, educational and other needs across a wider geographic area that can be covered in any local development plan.

- The meeting also discussed the importance in managing expectations of what can be incorporated into a wider plan from local place plans.

- The meeting also discussed the importance of the actual implementation of plans and delivery of projects.

- Finally, the issue of the means by which local land availability for development (especially the housing needs and demand assessment calculation) is currently calculated and the mismatch between targets set in current LDPs was discussed, and the implications of this mismatch to the approval of developments.

- There is a challenge in that the development plan system is not flexible enough to have regard to the most up to date assessment of housing needs and demand. The supply side of the equation is updated annual through the housing land audit process but the demand side of the equation is only updated when the development plan is reviewed. This can mean (as in the case in West Lothian) that the land supply is tested against figures which are significantly out of date. The most recent Housing Needs and Demand Assessment for West Lothian, which has been signed off as ‘Robust and Credible’ by the Scottish
Government, identifies demand for housing in West Lothian as being around 700 houses per annum. In recent appeal decisions, Reporters have taken the view that demand is around 2,000 per annum and have found a deficiency in the land supply on this basis. They have dismissed the more up to date assessment of demand on the basis that it is not yet part of the development plan and, therefore, carries little weight. If the more up to date assessment had been applied there would have been no basis for supporting these applications which were otherwise contrary to the development plan.

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