Session 1: Parts 1 and 2

MSP: Monica Lennon

Part 1: Development Planning and Local Place Plans

- The group were in full agreement on the main principles of the Bill however all agreed that there was not enough detail contained within it and that a significant amount of secondary legislation would therefore be required.

- The group were pleased to note that the Bill takes a more holistic approach to planning and indicates a move to more joined-up thinking between the different policy areas of the Scottish Government however agreed that the government could still go further.

- The group welcomed making the National Planning Framework (NPF) part of each local development plan however expressed concern that the Bill lacked detail on Parliamentary scrutiny of the NPF.

- The group generally agreed that the current five year review cycle of the NPF should be changed to ten years as it was felt that this would give planners more room to work and would help both local authority officials and local communities to understand the longer term plans for their area.

- It was noted that local authorities are already under significant pressure and financial constraint and that resources would need to be put in place to allow them to cope with this additional workload.

- The group welcomed the introduction of Local Place Plans (LPPs) however voiced concerns that some communities may engage more than others and that LPPs may therefore be inconsistent across the country.

- Similarly the group was concerned that there could potentially be varying levels of support provided by local authorities to local communities in the preparation of LPPs and that LPPs in neighbouring areas could in some cases conflict with one another.

- There was a discussion around the fact that the Bill only requires planning authorities to “have a regard” to LPPs when preparing or reviewing their local development plans and that the expectations of community groups would therefore need to be managed.

- Concern was expressed at the proposed removal of the existing provisions for statutory supplementary guidance. It was acknowledged that this guidance
The group welcomed the proposed move to front-loading the development of plans. It was felt that this would give local communities much more time to consider and contribute to plans and give them a greater sense of ownership. This could also result in a clearer focus on outcomes.

It was noted however that people are often unaware of development plans until a planning decision that affects them is made. It was also noted that often the same small group of people within the community engage with consultations. Local Authorities should therefore work to engage with a more diverse cross-section of their communities having particular regard to the various access requirements of people in their local area.

The group were generally in favour of giving local authorities the power to designate Simplified Development Zones (SDZ) noting that these zones could make the development of specific areas significantly easier.

There was concern about the lack of scrutiny over the development of these zones as well as the lack of guidance on standards within them. Some members felt that the standard of development within these zones may be inconsistent especially with regard to environmental issues.

The group also expressed concern at the resources needed for a local authority to establish and manage an SDZ given that most local authorities are currently working with reduced budgets within their planning departments.

During a short discussion on training being made available for decision makers the group agreed that some level of training would be useful. There were however questions raised over who would provide this training and how it would be resourced.

Some members of the group agreed that although the Bill moves in the right direction with regards to a more holistic approach to planning there was still concern that planning was not being put at the centre of government thinking.

The group also felt that the policy memorandum was at times too simplistic when discussing alternative approaches, noting that only one alternative was given in each area when more could and should be offered.
Session 2: Parts 3, 4 and 5

MSP: Monica Lennon

This discussion was held with a different group to that of Parts 1 and 2.

- In general terms, the group welcomed the more streamlined approach to the development management process, however they expressed a great deal of concern over the lack of specific detail contained within the Bill.

- Several members expressed the view that development plans should be clearer about how developments would be delivered with a degree of flexibility built in to them. It was also expressed that these plans should be active documents, evolving over time as circumstances change.

- There was a general frustration amongst the group at the lack of consistency of approach by different local authorities with regards to development plans and planning decisions. It was suggested that the NPF could be one way to address this.

- The group agreed that council planning departments across Scotland were extremely under resourced and concerns were raised about the increased workload of planning departments as a result of this Bill.

- It was noted that planning decisions made by council officials are often overturned by Councillors or Ministers after local objections are made at the end of the process, despite developments being included in approved development plans. It was suggested that the emphasis on front-loading in the Bill may go some way to tackle this by having more local people and organisations input into the process from the very beginning.

- There was a general consensus that local authority planning departments are already extremely under resourced despite the fact that planning fees have recently increased. Several members of the group raised the difficulty in being able to have access to planning officials during planning applications, especially during the initial stages of an application where vital pre-application discussions take place.

- There was agreement amongst the group that developers would be content to pay higher fees if this money was being allocated to planning departments to allow them to provide a better service.

- The group agreed that training for councillors with regards to the planning process was very important. It was noted that there was again a lack of consistency in this area with some local authorities providing a level of training and others not. It was also suggested that MSPs and Scottish Government Ministers should also be provided with some level of training in this area.
- The issue of statutory timescales was raised and it was noted that these timescales are rarely met. It was felt that the move towards front loading may go some way to mitigate this but it was suggested that the Scottish Government may wish to review these.

- Again the group expressed frustration at the lack of consistency across different local authorities with planning teams being structured differently in each area, making it more difficult for developers working throughout the country.

- The group welcomed the expansion of SDZs noting the economic development that they facilitate. There was however concern expressed at the increased work load that this would place on council planning departments given that they are already significantly under resourced.

- There was a lengthy discussion on the proposed Infrastructure Levy. The levy was generally welcomed by the group however there was again concern at the lack of detail provided in the Bill.

- There was discussion around the fact that the Bill empowers the Scottish Government to establish a levy but that the detail of if, when and how it would happen are not specified.

- It was noted that after the introduction of the Community Infrastructure Levy in England it took a long time for charges to be introduced.

- There was concern about the impact that the levy would have on developments in poorer areas. It was felt that developers in more affluent areas may be happy to pay a levy however in poorer areas where profit margins are much lower developers may be discouraged.

- The allocation of the funds raised by the proposed Infrastructure Levy was also discussed. Some members of the group agreed that the funds should be allocated centrally as part of wider development plans so that money can be distributed across Scotland based on need, while others felt that this principle was wrong and that any money collected should be allocated to the local authority where the development is taking place.

- The timing of the Infrastructure Levy payment was also raised. It was noted that the Scottish Government seem to imply that payments would be made prior to planning permission being granted. This was of concern to some members as it would directly impact upon how developers secure sites for development as most land sales are dependent on planning being granted prior to the sale taking place.