



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE

Wednesday 22 May 2013

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE
16th Meeting 2013, Session 4

CONVENER

*Kevin Stewart (Aberdeen Central) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP)

*Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab)

Margaret Mitchell (Central Scotland) (Con)

*John Pentland (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab)

*Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Derek Mackay (Minister for Local Government and Planning)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

David Cullum

LOCATION

Committee Room 2

Scottish Parliament

Local Government and Regeneration Committee

Wednesday 22 May 2013

[The Convener *opened the meeting in private at 10:46*]

11:15

Meeting continued in public.

National Planning Framework 3 and Scottish Planning Policy

The Convener (Kevin Stewart): Good morning and welcome to the Local Government and Regeneration Committee's 16th meeting in 2013. I ask everyone to ensure that they have switched off their mobile phones and other electronic devices, please. I have received apologies from Margaret Mitchell, who I understand is in the Cayman Islands on election duties. I never get those good jobs.

Agenda item 2 concerns the national planning framework 3 and Scottish planning policy. We will hear evidence from Derek Mackay, the Minister for Local Government and Planning; and from the Scottish Government John McNairney, chief planner, and Fiona Simpson, head of the environmental assessment team.

The Minister for Local Government and Planning (Derek Mackay): I welcome the opportunity to discuss the important changes to Scotland's national planning policies. I have brief opening remarks, which I hope will be useful to the committee, to outline the context and background to the important consultations. SPP and NPF3 are wide ranging, so I will not attempt to summarise them, but I will focus on a few key points.

Now more than ever, I want the planning system to focus on delivering jobs and growth. I want it to facilitate investment in infrastructure, which will be crucial as we make the transition to a low-carbon economy. I want the planning process to design better places: places that are distinctive, healthier, more sustainable and attractive to investors.

I turn to the first comprehensive review of the Scottish planning policy. First and foremost, I want SPP to be much clearer about how important it is for the planning system to be an enabler for delivering jobs and growth. The economic benefits of a proposed development need to be a material consideration and significant weight should be placed on economic benefits and jobs. The

proposed policy reflects the issues that are being covered in the review of town centres, which will report shortly.

The Scottish Government's support for renewable energy, including onshore wind, remains as strong as ever, but we need the right developments in the right places. We propose to strengthen protection for our finest landscapes, including greater protection for wild land. Alongside that we want more community benefits from new wind farms and more locally owned developments.

We are committed to making a transition to a sustainable, growing, low-carbon economy. That is the primary focus of our proposals for the third national planning framework.

The main issues report explores what Scotland should look like as a low-carbon place. It looks at the energy mix as a whole and considers the infrastructure that we need to facilitate onshore and offshore renewable energy development. It also supports emerging carbon capture and storage technology and recognises the continuing importance of oil and gas.

The main issues report explores planning and the environment: what makes Scotland a natural place in which to invest. There is strong support for green infrastructure, including the central Scotland green network and a new national network of long-distance routes for walking and cycling.

NPF3 should help us to deliver our ambitions for cities and make Scotland a successful, sustainable place. We attach a great deal of importance to effective collaboration through the Scottish cities alliance. Our proposed strategy will promote cohesion and regeneration by reducing disparities in wealth and environmental quality between different parts of Scotland.

We want to support stronger transport links to make Scotland a connected place. The strategy aims to reduce the need to travel and to link development with public transport networks. It emphasises the importance of strengthening international connections, links between our cities and connections to areas in which we expect growth to take place in the longer term.

Before preparing the documents, we engaged extensively. In particular, we have made the process for identifying national developments more transparent by inviting proposals from the start. The main issues report and the draft SPP are products of that extensive and inclusive engagement. The two consultation documents provide a great opportunity for an inclusive debate on the role of national spatial planning.

Over the coming weeks I will visit many of the sites of the proposed national developments that are identified in the main issues report, to raise awareness of our proposals and encourage people to give us their views. I look forward to hearing the committee's views on what we propose in the documents.

The Convener: From a parochial point of view, I am happy to see the Aberdeen and north-east elements of NPF3, particularly those that relate to the harbour and the airport. Today, we will touch on the committee's past recommendations on the High Hedges (Scotland) Bill and in our report on the second climate change report on proposals and policies.

We have some avid followers of the committee on Twitter and we have had a couple of tweets from a Mr Bob Reid, who has asked why "the Brownfield definition" has been removed or "expunged" from SPP. He says:

"Brownfield regeneration policy is crucial to West of Scotland Towns like Paisley & Greenock".

Do you have any comments on his comments?

Derek Mackay: Of course, convener. Mr Reid asks a pertinent question, because definitions matter so much in the planning system. However, I do not want to tie us up in bureaucratic knots around language. The planning system should enable development and regeneration. The importance that we place on regeneration has not changed; in fact, it is strengthened by our planning policies. It is correct to say that the current drafts do not mention brownfield sites as such. However, this is a consultation so, if people prefer that we refer to brownfield sites, we can restore that language. There has been no shift in our policy; it is only different language that is being used.

We can debate whether the terminology can be improved. The term "brownfield sites" gives the impression of rusty, contaminated, previously used land. The consultation documents refer to "previously developed land", which gives a sense that infrastructure might already be in place but does not carry any baggage, so to speak. The policies are robust about regeneration and regenerating brownfield sites—if people want to use that terminology—before turning to the green belt. The environmental protection aspect of the policies is perfectly clear.

I reassure the committee's many Twitter followers that our sense of the importance of regeneration and investing in it remains intact, but the language has been improved. If that is not clear, we are happy to look at that in the consultation process.

The Convener: That was very useful, minister.

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I will raise one general point and one more specific point. To start with the general one, we have in front of us a revised Scottish planning policy and NPF3. How useful has it been to change those two documents together for the first time? What particularly useful interplay has there been between the two?

Derek Mackay: That is an excellent question. Given his expertise, Mr Stevenson will know that running consultations together on the same themes is very productive. Some people often complain of consultation fatigue because they are asked questions again and again. Doing both consultations together is very productive and effective, because it means that people can engage once and feed into both processes.

Simultaneously reviewing Scottish planning policy and the national planning framework seemed eminently sensible to me, which is why I instructed our officials to conduct the process in that fashion. It means that people can engage once and do so properly, which then feeds into both documents. That is a very co-ordinated way of changing the planning system.

If there were three legs to the reform, they would be national planning policy as the top of the planning hierarchy; Scottish planning policy for judgments on individual applications; and performance, for which there is a separate action plan, which we have previously discussed. By ensuring that all that is cohesive and co-ordinated so that, as Mr Stevenson said, there is interplay between the policies, they will be modern, fit for purpose and properly transparent about how we have engaged in consultation on them. There has therefore been great benefit in how we have undertaken the process. Of course, there has probably been a saving as well in doing all that together at one time.

Stewart Stevenson: Can you identify in what is before us anything specific that was drawn from that interplay?

Derek Mackay: On realising the offshore ambitions, whether on marine issues or offshore renewables, it has been beneficial to conduct the policy reviews at the same time as we have been working up the marine plan and marine strategy. Similarly, we have been reviewing the architecture policy, which is imminent, and the focus on place and "Designing Streets".

Ministers' demands have set a pretty hard pace for all our stakeholders and partners as well as the ever-enduring civil service, but it has been productive to do all that work together. I hope that it means that we have a package of policies across the portfolios in team Scotland that are focused on our ambitions for the country.

Stewart Stevenson: I saw Mr McNairney smile there momentarily, so you have hit some buttons.

Derek Mackay: That is a rare sight.

Stewart Stevenson: Indeed, which is why I draw it to everyone's attention and say that Mr McNairney can do it as often as he likes as far as the committee is concerned.

My specific point is on map 24 in NPF3, which is about digital infrastructure. I will not be terribly detailed, but I just wonder whether, in highlighting that, there is enough in NPF3 specifically that will help to make a fundamental difference. The map is—properly—in the section on decarbonisation, because if we can do more things without having to travel, that will be more carbon efficient. Can you point us to how the big investment that the Government is making to increase our digital infrastructure's capability will really help in and of itself and in addition to other things that are happening?

Derek Mackay: Digital infrastructure and the digital revolution are key, not just for public sector partners but for private enterprise and others. Only this morning, I spoke to leaders of public sector bodies about the importance of putting digital first in the provision of public services. There is also an opportunity for our enterprising economy.

As you say, we must have the infrastructure in place. NPF3 is not a spending document; it is a planning document at the top of the planning hierarchy. It sets out how important the digital strategy is and gives a sympathetic and supportive environment in which financial and investment decisions can be made on the digital revolution. The digital strategy works in harmony with that. Attached to that are spending commitments to which the public and private sectors have signed up and which will open up much of the country to the new age of digital technology. That is important so that Scotland and rural parts of Scotland are not left behind. There is a substantial financial commitment from the Government and local authorities on that.

There is scope in the planning system for more work on the issue. We have outlined a vision of a consenting environment, which we are exploring. One follow-on from that that I am actively considering is the planning system for telecommunications, where infrastructure is in place but technology has moved forward. I am interested in what is happening on that in England. I do not want Scotland to be left behind on the planning system, permitted development and consents. Therefore, we will launch a consultation on the back of the policies and in light of what is happening in England to ensure that, if we get the investment and the infrastructure, the planning

system is not a bureaucratic barrier to further roll-out.

There was a time when people said that they did not want the technology in their community; now, I sense that that has completely changed and that people are saying, "Why can't we have 4G broadband so that we can have businesses, get access and be connected in the way the rest of the world can be?" That is a dynamic and emerging area in which we are doing further work. The proposition is very good. We will return to the question of permitted development for emerging technology in the weeks and months ahead.

The Convener: How involved are private companies in such consultation? The other week, I met a representative of the company 3 and was absolutely amazed by the amount of digital material that is downloaded on mobile devices. I was impressed to hear that, in some places where there is a difficulty with the broadband connection—if I remember rightly, Durness was mentioned—the infrastructure is there to allow folk to do with mobile digital technology all that they could do with fixed-line broadband. How involved are folk in sharing facilities? Does the planning process help with that?

11:30

Derek Mackay: As a former local authority elected member, you will know about the difficulties to do with communities' perceptions of the telecommunications industry. However, I sense that things have moved on. We have looked at the evidence. I met telecommunications operators before they became engaged in the process, but we are now looking at options that might emerge as a result of what is happening in England. Only yesterday I asked for a further meeting with operators, to see whether the policy goes far enough.

On general business engagement, there has been far more engagement with the SPP review and the national planning framework than there has been with any other planning review. There were more than 250 bids for candidate national projects and there have been events throughout the country. The engagement process has been comprehensive. When we talk to particular sectoral interests, we find of course that they are most interested in things that affect them.

For the reasons that we have talked about, I want to probe the impetus that the planning system can add, so that it is not regarded as a barrier. My aspiration is that the planning system should enable Scotland to be the best place in these islands in which to do business. That will involve choices. I hope that we are setting the

context in which we can create such an environment.

The Convener: We will move on and talk about the committee's recommendations. At stage 1 of the High Hedges (Scotland) Bill we made a number of recommendations, including the recommendation

"that the Scottish Government take the opportunity of the on-going review of Scottish Planning Policy to examine the issues raised such as residential development in proximity to woodlands."

We heard a lot about the issue in evidence and saw the problem for ourselves on our visit to Cumbernauld. Will the recommendations that we made during the bill's passage be considered during the consultation process?

Derek Mackay: Absolutely, if people want us to refine things further. However, if the planning system is overly formulaic and bureaucratic, it might be a barrier to development. Our ethos in the planning system, and what drives us, is a focus on place, quality and environment, so comments about where trees and shrubbery are planted—I remember the debate well—and about how we design the green infrastructure, as much as the physical infrastructure, will be taken into account in consideration of any planning application. I suppose that the success of Mark McDonald's bill will have raised awareness about high hedges and will feed into planners' thinking when they make decisions.

We produce planning policy to guide planners and give them strength and comfort when they make decisions, but I do not want it to give chapter and verse on absolutely everything. That is unnecessary; it would be top-down government. Our approach is to create the right conditions for planners to be able to make decisions with confidence. The committee's sentiments have been taken on board. If you want me to be more specific, we can consider the matter, but I do not think that the committee wanted us to make the planning system overly specific about types of shrubbery.

The Convener: I do not think that that is what we wanted at all. What we were driving at was the need for a degree of gumption—common sense—about how development takes place and the need for folks to take cognisance of the environment around a development, as it is now and as it will be in 20 years' time.

I had the opportunity to go to a pilot charrette in Aberdeen, which was extremely useful for everyone who took part. What are we doing to create an environment in which there is huge input from people about what can happen if there is a major development?

Derek Mackay: You are absolutely right to raise that point. If we engage communities properly at the start of the process, that can take a lot of the heat out of the system at the end of the process and avoid objections and dissatisfaction with the system. We need to build such confidence. At the core of our proposals is a plan-led planning system, whereby we formulate a plan that sets out land use in each part of the country. My four pillars of planning reform are: first and foremost, a plan-led system; streamlining and simplification; improved performance; and delivering development on the ground. At the core of that is plan-led development.

To ensure that plans reflect what people want, we are rolling out charrettes. Rather than just have good projects here and there, we want to upscale efforts so that local authorities increasingly use charrettes to arrive at their local plans. That should help to direct where development should more appropriately go in the planning system. Charrettes—or whatever we term them—are about engagement and early intervention in the planning process to help to shape future decisions. That is exactly how I want to turn the system around.

That goes for elected members, too. Elected members are often consulted only at the end of the process when they are making a determination. We are encouraging pre-application discussion of significant applications so that elected members can have their say earlier. That will be good not just for the community and the elected member but for the applicant, who will be able to hear the early views without prejudice to the application and by properly engaging in the system. That will be far more effective and efficient and will help to build confidence in the planning system.

Stewart Stevenson: I will move on to ports. I very much welcome the fact that Aberdeen and Peterhead ports have been added to the draft national planning framework. Given the significant economic input from the north-east, it is important that we support continued growth via ports.

In connection with that, the previous NPF included the proposed interchange for container traffic at Scapa Flow, whereas neither Peterhead port nor Aberdeen port is particularly container focused. Is the focus now moving away from container traffic—albeit that I recognise that the draft NPF includes development at Grangemouth, which is essentially a container port—and towards having more international connections, with more offshore services being provided from those ports? Given that the Scotland Act 1998 prevents the Scottish Government from directly supporting international shipping services, is the proposed support for ports part of the way in which we can

offer genuine assistance within the limitations on our existing powers?

Derek Mackay: I am happy that Mr Stevenson has picked up on the limitations to our powers. When I was in local government, I had a colleague who used to ask, “What has this to do with independence?”, but this has everything to do with independence because it is about what we can do with the powers that are at our disposal. As the foreword to the NPF document helpfully captures, we could do much more to bring forward investment decisions if we had access not just to our own resources but to the full levers of control over a range of policies. That point is adequately covered in the foreword, but it is mentioned for good reason, as this is about investment in our country.

There are still long-term ambitions for the proposals for Scapa Flow, which is therefore safeguarded for that range of opportunities. There were 250 bids for national designation so, just because a proposal does not feature in NPF, that does not mean that it is not a priority. NPF is about the hierarchy of planning. A range of potential opportunities that exist around the coast can still be realised.

You are correct that the third national planning framework has a much stronger focus on our coasts than its predecessor document had. That is partly because we recognise the opportunities that exist for transport, for tourism—the document is much stronger on tourism—and for the diversity of our ports. Aberdeen is just one place that will benefit from the new designation.

We have looked to the coasts—not least the east coast—not just for their economic potential but for a range of functions, including freight and the onshore opportunities that will come from the offshore development that we have touched on. The harbours have been given such support because we recognise the economic and environmental potential that exists around the coast. That also connects helpfully with the marine plan, on which a great deal of work has been done over the past few years.

That is just the east coast. There are also issues on the west coast and—importantly—in the northern isles.

Stewart Stevenson: The specific restriction is at section E3 in schedule 5 to the 1998 act, which refers to

“Financial assistance for shipping services which start or finish or both outside Scotland.”

That reads as if that is something that we cannot provide. As I recall, that restriction presented a particular difficulty when we were grappling with trying to sustain the ferry service to Zeebrugge

from Rosyth, as we were specifically excluded from doing certain things. I leave you with the strong thought that investing in our port infrastructure is very important, given that we cannot do some of the things that we might otherwise choose to do.

Derek Mackay: It is important to add that many investors around the world will see the documents that we are discussing as a prospectus on where to invest and do business. The documents offer a degree of planning certainty and provide a positive commercial environment in which people can make investment decisions. Mr Stevenson's comments are very welcome.

The Convener: I am glad that Mr Stevenson touched on the issue of cruise liners and tourism. I will not say much more because Stuart McMillan is next, and I have a funny feeling that he may touch on it too.

Stuart McMillan (West Scotland) (SNP): How did you know that, convener?

I will take you to the west coast, minister. You will be very much aware of the growth in the cruise liner industry, and cruise liners certainly come into the port at Greenock. There have already been five vessels with more than 10,000 passengers this season, and that is only in the past two and a half weeks, so it is clear that the industry plays a huge role in bringing additional revenue to the Inverclyde economy.

There are limitations at that particular port on the other vessels that the companies might bring in. The port has had to turn away vessels this year, and that might continue to happen in future because the port is at capacity. Various discussions have taken place between the owners and the Government to see whether there is any way in which assistance can be provided.

I am very aware of the minister's comment a moment ago that, just because something does not feature in a document, that does not mean that it cannot be included in future or that it has been ruled out for potential assistance. Can you provide any clarification or words of comfort or hope to suggest that the likes of the facility in Greenock might be included? Is there any information on further discussions that might take place?

Derek Mackay: Absolutely. First, if you look at page 71 of NPF3—I hope that your document has the same page numbers as mine has—you should see a diagram that outlines some of the points of connection in the Firth of Clyde. The document is able to crystallise and exemplify where such connection points are.

The issue with Inverclyde is not necessarily that national designation is required for the improvements to be achieved. It might require

investment decisions or other policy decisions to be made, but that in no way lessens our ambition for Inverclyde or the Firth of Clyde, or for that part of the country. In fact, the document is a green light—without prejudicing any planning application, of course—and is very positive with regard to securing economic growth. Industrial and tourism interests are addressed in it, and there is a focus on place. All those elements are complementary for Inverclyde.

Stuart McMillan has been a strong advocate of the cruise industry and the importance of its connections with the local economy and Scotland as a whole. People come to Scotland not just because it is a place on a map, but because of the beauty, the environment and the economic attractions that we have in this country. Those things are all promoted in the policy document, and the Firth of Clyde and its connections are in there.

Another example is the way in which the west of Scotland has benefited from NPF2. That benefit has included massive investment in rail to improve connections so that we have an integrated transport system, and the central Scotland green network, which is about regeneration, greening the environment and using green infrastructure.

11:45

The focus on tourism in the planning document is very positive and presents further opportunities. The expansion and consolidation of further opportunities can be realised through those policies at that location; the document does not need to give it a national designation because it does not require that status. The designation adds value to national sites in cases in which that status helps in achieving planning consents. Inverclyde does not necessarily need that status, as the issues are more to do with regeneration, connectivity and so on rather than a requirement for planning status.

Knowing those who are interested in regenerating the riverside in that area, I imagine that they would be quite keen about and sympathetic to a positive and proactive planning status so that the ambitions of the regeneration company and others can be achieved. I hope that that gives Stuart McMillan certainty that we completely support the ambitions for Inverclyde. The area does not require the added status that national designation brings in order to achieve those ambitions, but the thrust of the documents is very supportive.

Stuart McMillan: That is very helpful—thank you.

Stewart Stevenson: I very much welcome the promotion that appears to have taken place of the

value that we place on natural spaces in Scotland, as those are one of the reasons that many people come to this country. They come not because we have the type of climate that one finds on Mediterranean beaches—although today may be an exception—but because of the natural vistas.

One of the changes that has come about in the document before us is an increase in the separation distance for wind turbines from 2km to 2.5km. Given that a number of councils have not adopted the recommendations in the Scottish planning policy document in their local policies—I am thinking in particular of Aberdeenshire Council, which covers 85 per cent of my constituency and operates a 400m separation distance, and then complains about having too many wind turbines—I wonder whether you would consider promoting more heavily to the 34 planning authorities the need to look closely at what constitutes an appropriate distance.

We would need to have regard to the national recommendation and to local circumstances, because we do not want to take discretion away from local authorities. However, is it perhaps time to draw firmly to the attention of some councils the fact that the national guidance is now 2.5km, rather than some of the figures that are used by councils such as Aberdeenshire?

Derek Mackay: I make clear that the Scottish planning policy document is out for consultation. Once that consultation is concluded, the policy will be adopted. The terminology that councils should abide by now will therefore be relevant when that happens, which will probably be in December this year. Because of the process and the need to abide by the will of Parliament, the NPF3 will be adopted probably in June 2014. We have given guidance in the past about how policies should be interpreted, and it is clear that the right time to give such guidance is when we adopt the new policies.

The way in which policies relate to renewables—specifically to wind farms—is much clearer. The renewables industry has been asking for clarity—as have communities—and I think that our proposals on separation distances and other matters are clearer. We propose to extend the separation distance from settlements from 2km to 2.5km, and we are posing a question on that. People might have different views and different evidence on why we should consider such an option.

Of course, every planning application must be considered on the merits of the case, and local circumstances will always feature. There is now a range of proposals to give communities greater protection, but renewables will continue to grow; that is absolutely right as we move towards a low-carbon economy and attempt to meet the most ambitious climate change targets in the world.

That is why we have posed a question on separation distance, and when we proceed the advice that we give will be very strong. People wanted clarity, and with clarity should come compliance.

Stewart Stevenson: I very much welcome that statement and the greater clarity that we have to enable our renewables industry to be as successful as it reasonably can be, but also to allow communities to have the space that they feel they need. Given that what is before us for consultation shows a direction of travel—I think that you have used that phrase a number of times previously—towards a 2.5km separation distance, I take it that there will be nothing to prevent councils in the interim from, at their own hand, adopting through their proper processes a revised separation distance in local policies, if they wish to do so.

Derek Mackay: I would prefer that local authorities adhered to the existing guidance until we change it, because if they employed a mixture of existing and emerging policy, that would create a muddle. I would prefer it if people stuck to the advice that is provided at present.

If people adhered to the advice comprehensively, we would probably be in a better place. Many people have said to me, not just on this subject but in a range of areas, that interpretation of planning policy across the country is too variable. I hope that the policies, in being as clear as they are, will result in greater conformity. There will still be local interpretation and discretion, and planners will make judgments, but the national policies should be as clear as possible so that people know what is expected of them and investors can have confidence that applications will progress if they are in line with policy.

Stewart Stevenson: There is clearly a legal framework around the timetable for NPF3, but I do not think that that is the case for the Scottish planning policy. When do you expect that the necessary processes to update SPP will be complete? That will be the point at which councils might, in the context of what you have just said, reasonably consider their local application.

Derek Mackay: The public consultation will last for 12 weeks. It was launched about two or three weeks ago and it continues. When it concludes, I will consider the responses and return with a set of proposals and policies on the SPP. I think that we will have them in place and adopted by the end of the year. One of the reasons is that I am absolutely convinced that the planning system must be more of an enabler of economic recovery. I am keen to make progress on that, which is why I want it to be concluded by the end of the year.

I work in partnership with the local planning authorities and I work closely with the Royal Town Planning Institute, Heads of Planning Scotland, the chief executives and others. We have taken a partnership approach, with early engagement and full consultation, so I do not think that there will be many surprises and we should be in a good place to have implementation on adoption by the end of the year and the start of 2014.

There is clearly a bit of work to do on refinement but, as the Scottish Parliament information centre briefing note and other briefing notes have said, some of it is not a departure from existing policy. That is a good sign that, broadly speaking, the planning system is working well. Of the areas in which there will be changes and refinement, the most high profile is undoubtedly wind farms and renewables. People are watching that closely, and rightly so. They will then be able to implement the policies at a local level.

To help with that, the Government allocated more than £700,000 in the current financial year to support planning authorities that have resource issues and face challenges and pressures around renewables applications. That can help to invest in the service. In addition, members supported the 20 per cent increase in planning fees, which should also lead to further investment in the system. We have the resources, the tools, the expertise and the engagement to get it right and to get the policies implemented as quickly as possible.

John Pentland (Motherwell and Wishaw) (Lab): The minister will not be surprised to hear that I welcome the inclusion of Ravenscraig in NPF3. I thank him for taking on board the concerns that were raised by me and many others. I hope that Ravenscraig's inclusion in the document will be the catalyst for much that could happen there. I also welcome the change in language, with the move from "brownfield sites" to "previously developed land". That in itself will send out a strong message to anyone who might want to come to Ravenscraig.

My question is on the SPP. I listened carefully to what the minister said and I note that he hopes that the policy will be clearer and that it will be an enabler, particularly with regard to town centres.

Everyone can agree that there must be a strategy, but the circumstances do not always fit the planners' idealised vision. There is a particular problem with adhering to the tablets of stone, rather than responding to changing circumstances. Does the minister agree that flexibility and willingness to review such matters must be ensured, so that proposals that would significantly boost employment and consumer choice, for instance, are not overridden by a strict interpretation of guidelines for the location and of

what is and is not considered to be part of a town centre?

Derek Mackay: I sense that that was a slightly leading question. In the spirit in which it was asked, I will give a direct answer: yes, I agree. I will explain the reason for that. Policies sometimes come into conflict with one another, and the planning system can be about conflict and people's individual demands, but let me be crystal clear about the planning system that we are trying to create: it is an enabler, with a can-do culture that is focused on sustainable economic growth. All the other formulas, ratios and planning policies should flow from that.

Sometimes, a plan-led system will work fine, but there should not be slavish adherence to lines on a map as the be-all and end-all in our consideration. We can depart from a plan if it can be shown that the material considerations are such that they justify such a decision. Those considerations may well involve economic impact, jobs, economic recovery or what an application and a development could bring to a community. Those factors could be very powerful, and planners should bear that in mind.

I think that the policy represents a favourable shift towards economic impact being a stronger material consideration in the planning system. That is not to say that the idea is to have any development in any place—it is about having the right development in the right place, with the focus on quality, and not necessarily at the expense of the environment. With that culture, I am convinced that the planning system can be more of an enabler.

We have a good story to tell. More than 93 per cent of applications in Scotland are approved. It is not as if the planning system is full of bureaucrats who love to say no. That is not the case. Better partnership working, people understanding one another's needs and creating a can-do culture mean—to follow Mr Pentland's language—that we can sometimes depart from individual policy aspects, because of the material considerations that may well have an impact.

On town centres, of course we need to diversify and be more creative. That is why there is a new, strong section in NPF3 on town centres, with a town centre first policy, relating to the sequential approach that we have widened out from retail to all aspects of development in a town centre. The policies relating to our town centres are strengthened through that approach.

I welcome Mr Pentland's welcome of Ravenscraig as a national project. It is symbolic of the regeneration of the central belt. The area has its issues, and it became renowned for the deindustrialisation of Scotland. It also presents an

opportunity for housing, employment, skills, colleges, education, environmental innovation and green networks. Those sound to me like good criteria to designate a project as a national candidate, and I am very keen that Ravenscraig stays as one of the 14 new designations—I am sure that the member is, too.

The Convener: That sounds like gumption again in your answer, minister.

John Wilson (Central Scotland) (SNP): I will break the happy consensus now, minister.

Derek Mackay: That is unlike you, Mr Wilson.

John Wilson: I know. However, I want to ask about the conflicts that exist around SPP and NPF3. We have just discussed Ravenscraig as a major project. My understanding is that it is almost a new town project. That conflicts with the Scottish planning policy, under which we try to protect existing town centres. Two town centres—Wishaw and Motherwell—border Ravenscraig. Given Ravenscraig's inclusion in NPF3, how does the minister deal with any conflict that arises from such a proposal? Among other things, the proposal is for housing, education facilities and the possibility of a new retail centre between the two existing towns, which are struggling economically. If you visit either Wishaw town centre or Motherwell town centre, you will see that they are in decline, and they need an economic boost. By creating, in effect, a new town centre in between the two existing town centres, you could create greater problems for the existing town centres.

12:00

How do the minister and his team deal with the conflict between the Scottish planning policy to protect and enhance town centres and such a major development? It is not just about Ravenscraig. As the minister said, NPF3 and the planning policy must be flexible to take account of new proposals. There is another proposal for Owenstown in the Clyde valley. There was a display in the Parliament a couple of weeks ago showing how people want to develop a new town, in effect, in the Borders. What can you say about such conflicts and how to measure the relevant factors?

Derek Mackay: I do not believe that there is a conflict at all. The policies provide greater protection for town centres because of the sequential approach. Mr Wilson is rightly concerned about issues relating to Motherwell and Wishaw. They have their challenges, as do all towns right now. That is why the external advisory group will imminently report on what we can do to support the rejuvenation of towns across Scotland.

I am not sure that simply preventing any development from happening within a 20-mile radius is in itself a solution. If we were to deploy the policy that there must be no new towns—which was deployed some years ago—there would be no Cumbernauld, no East Kilbride and no Owenstown, as proposed.

I think that the towns can be complementary. Motherwell and Wishaw can have their functions, their support, their protections and rejuvenation—but so, too, can Ravenscraig. If Ravenscraig was just a big site for commerce, entertainment and leisure, it would not be a new town. Because so much housing is also proposed, along with employment and a college, and given the inclusion of existing infrastructure, there are good foundations to create a sense of place.

When planning works properly, it creates that sense of place, so that a development is not just a commuterville, from which people travel elsewhere for their local amenities or for employment. We are trying to put those opportunities in the one place. Those things are quite complementary, although I do not dismiss the immense challenges that the surrounding communities face. They should see what is happening at Ravenscraig as an opportunity, not a disadvantage. However, we know that we must turn even more attention to the issues that are faced by town centres, and indeed communities within cities, with regard to regeneration.

The policies are not in conflict. The policies say what applies if something has designation. The Government did not pick Ravenscraig in isolation to be defined as a town centre. That was a matter for the local planning authority, which determined—possibly after inquiry; it would have gone through the full process of consultation, engagement and local and regional development plans—that Ravenscraig should be a town centre within the hierarchy. I would have expected engagement in all that process, as the planning authority arrived at the decision that Ravenscraig would be a town, as designated by the local development plan. What flows from that is the protections that apply in the policy. There is a good, robust case around how the policies are complementary and how they will assist not just the emerging town and community of Ravenscraig, but Motherwell and Wishaw.

John Wilson: I thank the minister for his assurances that he has scrutinised the proposal to include Ravenscraig in NPF3.

Returning to SPP, you referred—as did my colleague Stewart Stevenson—to the present situation of local authorities, in particular with regard to wind turbines. Some authorities apply the current guidance of a 2km separation distance for the erection of wind turbines; other authorities

use the 400m criterion, as Stewart Stevenson said. That raises issues about the guidance.

I seek assurance that the guidance that will be issued to local authorities come December will be clearer—more precise—with regard to how the planning authorities make decisions, because it is not just the planning officers who make those decisions, but elected members on planning committees. That would help the communities that surround some of the developments to be clear about such matters.

At present, South Lanarkshire Council makes a decision on wind turbines as a local authority and Scottish Borders Council makes a decision on wind turbines as a local authority. However, the councils seem to have different policy criteria. That leads to confusion for communities who live in the middle. Is it correct to say that we need greater clarity in the guidance that is issued, not just for planners but so that communities can understand it as well?

Derek Mackay: That is a helpful point.

With regard to your final comment on Ravenscraig, you trusted my judgment. I suggest that you do not do that but trust your own judgment. You can analyse, as can anyone. We will publish the full criteria that were agreed—I raised the criteria in Parliament before they were used—on what is mandatory and what a candidate project would have to comply with to become a national development. I am sure that you will be further reassured by the transparency around the process and around how we used the criteria to arrive at the 14 designations. I refer you to that documentation.

Clarity comes from the policies, and of course it should flow from the guidance, too. We work closely with all our partners, not least Heads of Planning Scotland—the professionals who use the policies and deploy them to deliver planning. We work with the private sector, with the Confederation of British Industry Scotland—I have a supportive comment from it, for example, on the planning policy—the Scottish Property Federation and others.

Crucially, Mr Wilson's question was about community involvement and we will engage with community council liaison officers. Planning Aid for Scotland, to which we have given financial core support to assist communities with the planning system, has also welcomed the approach in both documents, so the answer to the question is yes—we will provide as much clarity as we can. Of course, we have also provided increased resources through the planning fee increase. That was a tough decision to make at this point in the economic cycle.

It is quite important to recognise that there are mixed opinions out there on renewables. There is the mainstream opinion and the extremes on either side with regard to being pro or anti-renewables, especially on wind farms. However, investors are not saying that they want to build anywhere and everywhere at any pace. They want clarity on what is appropriate and what is not, so they appreciate the Scottish Natural Heritage guidance on cumulative impact on the mapping and on Government intention around separation distance and so on. I think that we will be even clearer than before and that is probably why the renewables industry has welcomed our proportionate approach. Jenny Hogan, the director of policy for Scottish Renewables, said:

"It is important that the consultation ... brings greater clarity to all those concerned with making decisions".

We agree.

Anne McTaggart (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank the minister for an extremely beneficial briefing. Having read through the documents and listened to you today, I want to ask about the roles of the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee and the Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee. Where do they fit in? I think that their roles will be huge.

Derek Mackay: I am happy to attend other committees if I am asked to speak about the policies. I am happy to engage in further scrutiny. There is more scrutiny in the process than there was in either NPF2 or the original NPF—public scrutiny, stakeholder scrutiny, and engagement. I have been to a number of stakeholder events; there has been the parliamentary process; parliamentary scrutiny will continue; and there is the mandatory 60 days. We published a participation statement on whom we would engage with and how. I am at the service of the Parliament's committees if I have to appear elsewhere.

I emphasise that this is the planning culmination of other strategic policies so this does not change, for example, the infrastructure investment plan or the marine strategy or other strategies that have been through the relevant committees. It brings together my contribution, the contribution of the planning service, and the Scottish Government's vision around planning as they relate to all the other strategies. Those strategies have been consulted on in the appropriate places, but this serves to ensure that we have the planning hierarchy and the planning policies right. I hope that that answers the member's question.

Anne McTaggart: It does. Thank you very much, minister.

The Convener: I have a compliment—unfortunately, minister, the compliment is not for

your good self; it is about the NPF document. The graphics are absolutely fantastic—they are so easy to take in. I believe that they are similar to the graphics that were used by Aberdeen city and shire, which probably led the way in that regard. The document is much easier to read than some of the previous documents that I have seen, which is always useful when it comes to getting responses to consultations from the public and other organisations.

I thank you all for your time.

Meeting closed at 12:11.

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