

Scottish Government Planning Bill
Response by Spokes, the Lothian Cycle Campaign
<http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/CurrentCommittees/107221.aspx>

We welcome the opportunity to comment on the current Planning Bill.

Spokes has had a long association with Planning functions, especially with urban planning. We have witnessed the difficulties faced by local Councils, especially in Edinburgh, in providing sufficient and adequate housing for its population while at the same time trying to keep the advantages which a compact city like Edinburgh has.

For a cycling organisation like ourselves, good urban planning is a vital issue. Residents need to be able to access their amenities easily, but the urban sprawl we are currently witnessing means that amenities are often remote. This encourages private car use and discourages public transport as well as active travel, ie cycling and walking.

The outcome is a car-dominated society and a population poor in health from the pollution, congestion and sedentary lifestyle the car creates. In turn, lack of an active life imposes heavy burdens on the health services; we are now witnessing these at breaking point. *So much poor health is due to excessive car use.*

In addition, our current systems for providing adequate and sufficient housing are broken. Despite huge efforts by governments both local and national over many years, and a variety of attempts at remediation, the housing shortage is getting worse. This is largely because these governments have had to rely on private developers, whose main aim is profit, and for whom any 'public service' is regarded as an optional extra.

The current Bill is a once-in-a-decade chance to reform the system and in our view, the reforms have to be radical in the sense that we get away from current models of provision, which have proved unsatisfactory to all except the speculators.

Rights of Appeal

The following scenario is one that Spokes has witnessed time and again over the past twenty years:

Step 1 Spokes objects to a major residential planning application on grounds such as:

- * sacrifice of greenfield land;
- * sacrifice of Green Belt land;
- * scheme not part of any existing community;
- * scheme remote from local amenities, including schools, shops, medical centre etc, necessitating car use;
- * scheme remote from work places, again favouring car use over public transport or active travel
- *scheme is not part of the Local Plan (speculative development)

Step 2 Local Council rejects application on grounds such as these;

Step 3 Developers appeal to the DPEA;

Step 4 DPEA upholds the appeal on grounds of need for housing;

Step 5 local Council and communities, who have to live with the consequences, left feeling justifiably angry and frustrated, not just over the decision itself but also because of the time and effort we have put in, only to see these efforts overturned.

The effect is to undermine public confidence in the system, and belie our trust and belief

that Government is basically 'on our side' rather than on the side of business and speculators.

The developers have the right to appeal but the communities do not. How can that be fair? And then at the end of the day, the developers fail to provide the housing that the community needs - because their motive is profit, not public service. No wonder there is widespread public dissatisfaction with the planning system!

The current Bill sadly has nothing on the urgent need to reform Rights of Appeal, despite the public support for doing so. Planning is meant to reflect the needs and interests of communities and provide a process for democratic decision-making about how land is allocated to different uses.

What the Bill should be doing is to limit the existing rights of appeal - especially when the application runs contrary to the Local Development Plan - and to admit a (possibly limited) right for communities to challenge the developers.

Homebuilding Strategies

The other key weakness of the current Bill is its failure to offer new strategies for actually getting houses built. The current system, relying on the speculative house-building industry, has clearly failed to provide what's needed, namely, a wide variety new homes for different types of households in different areas.

It makes sense that local government should play the lead role in housing development and infrastructure provision as it does throughout much of the rest of Europe. By acquiring the land at its existing use value, serviced plots could then be sold at a fraction of current prices to housing co-operatives, housing associations, individuals, and yes, even developers, to create the kind of integrated, high quality places that we know are possible.

This so-called self-procurement of housing, by those who will actually occupy it, drives up standards of design and quality - and may well create new business opportunities for builders and architects. By reducing the price of the land, the price of the house will also come down, and young people who now cannot afford to get onto the housing ladder at all might have a chance to own their own property.

With greater local authority involvement in house provision, aspects of transport could be managed much better at the same time. The emphasis could be on land for public transport and for walking and cycling, rather than space for cars, since at present car owners are paying nothing for the vast amounts of land their activity consumes - whether the vehicles are moving or stationary.

We live in a capitalist society, car-owners should be paying all the costs of car use, including the take-up of land; in other words the currently external costs of car use should be internalised. This would do much to tip the balance in favour of active travel and public transport and away from the unhealthy private car. Walking and cycling take up very little land; one bus with 40 passengers takes up the same land as 3 private cars.

The housing crisis can be seen as just one more example of the failure of privatisation to deliver what is needed, to add to the banks, the utilities, the railways etc etc. It is to the Scottish Government's credit that it is now talking about a public-owned railway for Scotland - and that water has remained in public ownership.

In sum, Rights of Appeal and Housebuilding Strategies are the two major issues a Planning Bill should be tackling by any Government which sees itself as people-focussed rather than as a facilitator of speculative business.

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