

Email to: LGCCCommittee@parliament.scot

13 October 2017

Dear Sir/Madam,

WRITTEN EVIDENCE ON DRAFT BUDGET 2018-19

The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) is the champion of planning and the planning profession. We work to promote the art and science of planning for the public benefit. We have around 2000 members in Scotland and a worldwide membership of over 24,000. We:

- support policy development to improve approaches to planning for the benefit of the public;
- maintain the professional standards of our members;
- support our members, and therefore the majority of the planning workforce, to have the skills and knowledge they need to deliver planning effectively;
- maintain high standards of planning education;
- develop and promote new thinking, ideas and approaches which can improve planning;
- support our membership to work with others who have a role in developing places in Scotland; and
- improve the understanding of planning and the planning system to policy makers, politicians, practitioners and the general public.

RTPI Scotland welcomes this opportunity to submit written evidence to the Local Government and Communities Committee of the Scottish Parliament regarding its inquiry into the Draft Budget 2018-19. Local authority planning services have been deeply affected by the local government budget cuts of recent years, with implications for performance and morale within the planning profession. With Scotland facing challenges such as the housing crisis, climate change, and the need for economic stimulation, we need a well-equipped planning service ready to play its part in shaping a stronger and more sustainable future.

‘We want to hear how national policies are impacting on local government spending’

Cumulative cuts to local government budgets in recent years have had a major impact on the resourcing of planning services across Scotland. RTPI Scotland analysis of local government resourcing data¹ shows that planning authorities’ planning budgets have been cut by 32.5% in real terms since 2009. There has been an associated 23% reduction in staffing of planning teams over the same period. Our analysis also shows that only 63% of the cost of processing planning applications is recovered by fees. The recent increase in fees will not be sufficient to result in full cost recovery for the development management function.

¹ Annex A – Progressing Performance 2017 update

The Planning Performance Framework, used to monitor the performance of local authority planning departments, has showed consistent year on year improvements since its inception in 2012, in spite of the cuts to resourcing outlined above: Not only are there fewer planners in local government, but those that remain are working much harder.

‘We want to hear how fees are being used, and how decisions are made on which service areas are affected’

RTPI Scotland has found anecdotally that there is some uncertainty among local authority planning services about to what extent non-statutory services, such as pre-application advice, can be charged for. To ensure that such fees do not increase the opacity of planning requirements at the expense of good practice among customers, we recommend that provision should be made for the introduction of fees for face to face support to be accompanied by the provision of good quality ‘self-help’ advice. Heads of Planning Scotland has recently developed standardised application validation guidance, for example, that clearly shows all of the elements of a planning application that are needed for it to be successfully validated at the first time of asking. Likewise, the roll-out of the e-planning service should improve the information provided to local authorities as part of planning applications.

It is important to note that development planning is an essential and statutory service which does not and should not for reasons of probity ever be used as a fee raising service. Development planning, from plan preparation and adoption to plan delivery, needs to be funded as a core local government service. The cuts to planning service staffing in recent years have we have found been focused on development planning planners. This has implications for local authorities’ ability to not just produce a plan in a timely and transparent fashion, but also on their ability to deliver its policies and allocations.

‘We also invite views on any of these aspects of the Local Government and Communities Budget 2018-19’ - Preventative spend

RTPI Scotland does not consider increased resources for local authority planning services to be solely a matter of spending. Rather, we believe them to be an investment in better places that can result in better outcomes for Scotland’s people. Planning services that are equipped to deliver infrastructure to serve new development mean that more economic opportunities can be unlocked. Increasing the proportion of journeys made by walking and cycling by creating environments that make this the preferred option not only help to tackle the poor air quality that plagues Scotland’s towns and cities, but help to decrease inactivity and the public health challenges associated with this. A warm, affordable home available to all is one of the main means by which we can challenge the causes and consequences of poverty.

The current review of the planning system presents an exciting opportunity for planners. Scottish Government has emphasised that it is a chance for planning to move away from the micro-management of the built environment with which it has unfortunately become synonymous, to being a powerful tool for strategic intervention in a whole host of public policy issues. RTPI Scotland is strongly supportive of this shift and has engaged heavily with the review process to try and design new ways of working that will see this ambition realised. However, we have stressed throughout that this opportunity to shape better places for Scotland’s people – places that include warm, affordable homes, opportunities for active travel, ample high quality green space, economic opportunities, thriving town centres – will depend on a planning service that is properly resourced.

I trust that you will find these comments helpful. If you would like to discuss any aspect, or require clarification of any points raised, please contact me on 0131 229 9628 or by email to kate.houghton@rtpi.org.uk.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'KHoughton', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Kate Houghton
Policy and Practice Officer