
Sent on behalf of the Accounts Commission

The Accounts Commission welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Government consultation on effective community engagement in local development planning guidance.

The Commission focused on the challenges brought about by the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 (the Act) for councils, and their responses to them in our 2020 Local government overview report. Our report highlighted the focus that the Act brings to place-based planning, and the opportunities and challenges created through the increased involvement of local authority partners and their communities as key elements of that approach. We found that some councils were using a place-based approach to improve outcomes for their communities, with some limited but positive examples of councils working with partners to take a place-based approach.

We noted in our report that a planning roundtable in February 2019 highlighted a perception within the profession that the value of planning services is not recognised. There was also evidence (<https://www.gov.scot/publications/barriers-to-community-engagement-in-planning-research/>) that communities lack trust and confidence in, and respect for, planning services. We recommended that to change this and deliver the Act's objectives there needed to be a cultural shift in the way planning services are delivered, to focus on community engagement and empowerment. This change requires different skills and approaches from planning services that challenge their current practice, and so councils must plan for how they will meet these challenges.

In summary the findings from our report were:

- the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 introduces new responsibilities for planning services and requires them to have a more strategic focus.
- planning services' budgets are shrinking at the same time as their responsibilities are expanding.
- strong leadership of planning services is needed to meet the challenge of performing new duties with reducing resources.
- planning services have improved performance over recent years but need to widen their focus from the regulation process to engaging with communities and partners.
- the workforce in planning services is ageing and reducing in number. New skills will be needed to deliver the Act's objectives.
- planning services need to build relationships with other council services, external partners and communities.
- community empowerment and engagement must become a core activity for planning services to deliver the letter and spirit of the Planning Act and the Place Principle.

While published in 2020, we believe our findings remain relevant to this consultation and we hope will provide useful context for the changes proposed.

We look forward to seeing the outcome of this consultation in due course.