



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 18 May 2023

Session 6



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Thursday 18 May 2023

CONTENTS

	Col.
DECISION ON TAKING BUSINESS IN PRIVATE	1
CULTURE IN COMMUNITIES	2

CONSTITUTION, EUROPE, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND CULTURE COMMITTEE
16th Meeting 2023, Session 6

CONVENER

*Clare Adamson (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)

*Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab)

*Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con)

*Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)

*Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Johanna Boyd (Planning Aid for Scotland)

Ailsa Macfarlane (Built Environment Forum Scotland)

Craig McLaren (Royal Town Planning Institute)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

James Johnston

LOCATION

The Robert Burns Room (CR1)

Scottish Parliament

Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Thursday 18 May 2023

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:00]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Clare Adamson): Good morning, and a very warm welcome to the 16th meeting in 2023 of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee.

Agenda item 1 is a decision on taking business in private. Are members content to consider a draft of the committee's annual report in private at future meetings?

Members indicated agreement.

Culture in Communities

09:00

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is evidence taking for our culture in communities inquiry, which is focused on taking a place-based approach to culture. This morning, we are joined by Craig McLaren, director of Scotland, Ireland and English regions, Royal Town Planning Institute; Johanna Boyd, chief executive, Planning Aid for Scotland; and Ailsa Macfarlane, director, Built Environment Forum Scotland. I welcome you all to the meeting. I should also say that we have received apologies from Euan Leitch, the chief executive of SURF—Scotland's Regeneration Forum.

We will move straight to questions, and I will open by asking about the extent to which culture and heritage are prioritised in planning across Scotland. How can they be more embedded in the planning process? Perhaps we can start with Ms Macfarlane.

Ailsa Macfarlane (Built Environment Forum Scotland): Thank you very much, and good morning to the committee.

National planning framework 4 contains a planning policy relating to culture, but it speaks very much about culture being sustainable if there is a threat to it. As we know, communities have less and less resource for taking part in culture, so the threats with regard to sustainability are perhaps not fully represented in planning. I draw your attention to the document itself, which says:

"Development proposals"

where there would be

"the loss of an arts or cultural venue will only be supported where ... there is no longer a sustainable demand".

We really have to consider what "sustainable demand" currently means in a lot of communities.

There are specific protections for heritage—indeed, it is fairly well protected in planning—but I would say that sustainability is the issue that we have to consider. There are other challenges that come with that, such as asset condition, which is an issue that I know has been referenced in many submissions to the committee.

I would say that those are the main considerations.

The Convener: Mr Macfarlane? I beg your pardon—I mean Mr McLaren.

Craig McLaren (Royal Town Planning Institute): That is all right—I will answer to anything.

Thank you very much for the invitation to speak today. As Ailsa Macfarlane has said, NPF4 has a

policy on planning for culture—I think that it is policy 21—and it is useful that it is in there, because it shows what priority it has. I do think that it is embedded. The important thing about the national planning framework and its policies is that they are now part of local development plans, which means that this particular policy applies at local as well as national level.

Ailsa Macfarlane also made a good point with regard to concerns about how these things are resourced. One of our issues with planning in general is that planners provide the vision of what a place can look like but, very often, the resources for delivering that vision or maintaining the services in the area are held elsewhere, and there is, as a result, an implementation gap that needs to be bridged, which is difficult.

Something that might help—and which is a trend that we have been trying to establish across Scotland—is linking the spatial planning framework and policy with community planning and local outcome agreements, where a lot of the resource is. That approach should be explored even more. Under the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019, there is now an obligation on planning authorities to take account of community plans and local outcomes improvement plans, and we need to ensure that that connection works much more effectively.

The other important thing about culture and something that I think is a key theme in the national planning framework is its role in helping to regenerate our town centres. The town centre policy in the national planning framework is good. It is fairly strong on trying to get a mix of uses in town centres, and using them as a basis for not just retailing but many other things, including cultural facilities.

Johanna Boyd (Planning Aid for Scotland): Thank you for the opportunity to speak to the committee. As has been said, policy 31 in NPF4 deals with culture. It might be helpful to flag up the policy intent, which is to

“encourage, promote and facilitate development which reflects our diverse culture and creativity, and to support our culture and creative industries.”

The policy intent is clear. Through policy 31, local development plans are encouraged to

“recognise and support opportunities for jobs and investment in the creative sector, culture, heritage and the arts.”

Therefore, the policy directive is clear, but the question of how much awareness there is of that might be a key issue for the committee. How is awareness raised in relation to policy 31?

As I think Craig McLaren mentioned, local place plans must have regard to NPF4. I want to

mention LPPs straight off the bat. Members might know them as community-led plans, which is how they were known prior to LPPs coming in through the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019. They are not new, but the LPPs are specifically related to land use and development. The LPP is created by the community and sets out the community’s vision for the development of land and the use of buildings in their community. Those plans have to have regard to NPF4, which means that they have to have regard to policy 31. Although LPPs are at a very early stage, there is also a question about how much awareness there is of communities’ ability to flag culture, heritage and the arts in their LPPs.

The Convener: To drill down into that a little, when you talk about raising awareness, do you mean among local government elected members, local government officers or communities in general, and the people who might be feeding into LPPs to develop them?

Johanna Boyd: It needs to happen in all those places. Certainly, we have been approached about providing training for elected members on NPF4 and, as an educational charity, we are of course keen to provide that. We are also involved in projects in which we work alongside councils to do capacity building in communities. We have discovered that the first training session is often about what the planning system is and how it works. We should not assume that such a complex system is understood easily by anyone. As Craig McLaren touched on, there is the interaction between community planning and local outcomes improvement plans—that is a complex structure in itself—and then we have planning.

We need training and knowledge sharing around NPF4 and what is in it, particularly in relation to culture and how that can be embedded into local place plans. That raises the question of good community engagement, which I know the committee has heard about in evidence. At PAS, we are community engagement specialists in planning. That engagement is absolutely crucial. We need culture to be embedded right at the start of the LPP process. If that is done well, culture can be used as a methodology for creating a really powerful LPP with culture in the mix.

The Convener: Thank you. We move to questions from committee members. I will start with Mr Cameron, who joins us online and who, unfortunately, has to leave the committee fairly early.

Donald Cameron (Highlands and Islands) (Con): The committee has heard from previous witnesses about the difficulty of knowing what cultural opportunities exist, getting information about available venues and so on. In that vein, I was interested to read in Planning Aid for

Scotland's submission of your work in helping communities to create community-led plans or LPPs and that, in so doing, people often discover underutilised assets that can then be used. How can we improve the data and information for local communities to their benefit? Do you have any wider observations on that? I will start with Johanna Boyd.

Johanna Boyd: Thank you for the question, which is absolutely on point with my previous point, which relates to the issue of inclusive engagement. Inclusivity is absolutely at the heart of what we do. We are always keen to engage with seldom-heard groups, such as children and young people; I am engaging with marginalised communities where deprivation and poverty exist.

When you are thinking about preparing or planning those engagement processes, it is really important that you ensure that they are inclusive right from the start, so that the data and information that you have when you go into the plan creation part of the process is as good as it can be. There are good, hard reasons for doing that, other than simply to have a reliable and persuasive plan at the end of the process. Because that plan will then be used for delivery, if you have a broad range of community groups and elected members on board, along with town and country planners and community planners, you will have a very good base for taking that plan forward to bid for a cultural, heritage or arts project.

I could say more about that, but I will pause there.

The Convener: Mr McLaren, do you want to come in on that point?

Craig McLaren: Yes. I echo what Johanna Boyd has said. One thing that we have been advocating for in the approach that is taken in the planning system is to have much more front-loaded engagement and discussion around what people want a place to look like. It is about trying to create that place vision. As we have seen in the past, an important way of doing that is through the use of things such as charrettes, where as many stakeholders as possible are brought together to have a discussion. Through that process, you can map your assets and identify what the opportunities are in that area, as well as what the constraints are to delivering the vision. We talk about having the vision and then developing a route map to deliver it, which involves using milestones and looking at where the resources will come from.

From there, you can have a continuous dialogue involving all the various stakeholders as part of the delivery plan that is put out at the end of the process. That is a means of identifying what assets are there and keeping a watching eye on

what the picture could look like as it evolves over time.

Ailsa Macfarlane: I wonder whether Mr Cameron is pointing towards an aim in the culture strategy around gathering the data on our cultural assets and cultural places, which I believe is work that is yet to be completed, although I hope that it has been started.

I appreciate that PAS's written evidence touched on that, but co-ordination of the data on all our assets, cultural or otherwise, will be increasingly important when we consider the potential for assets to be transferred into community hands. We are well aware that local authorities will be divesting themselves of sites and that churches might be coming into community use, and those that are still publicly accessible will need to have sustainable purposes for the future. Even the most enthusiastic local community cannot support multiple cultural centres and that sort of thing, so the underpinning data will help us to make sound investments for the future.

On culture having a place, a lot is made in the culture strategy of community planning partnerships, which are mentioned many times as part of the place-based approach. As planning is, that is a policy area with lots of competing demands. The question is how culture finds its voice within that when there are health and education priorities, as well as all sorts of other asks that communities might have for local place plans. We need to deal with community priorities, so there is an even greater threat to culture and cultural assets from within that process.

09:15

Donald Cameron: Thank you for those answers. Ailsa Macfarlane's point about community assets brings me neatly on to my next question: how do we rocket boost community asset transfer sustainably? As we all know, community ownership has been steadily increasing over the past 15 or 20 years. However, last week, we heard from Volunteer Scotland a warning that people in some communities feel forced to take on the responsibilities and liabilities associated with a venue for fear of it being lost to the community.

There are a number of challenges around community asset transfer, not least funding. What further assistance can be given to community groups that want to take on a community asset or already have one but need to maintain it? Do the witnesses have any views about other avenues short of community ownership that could be used?

Craig McLaren: It is a thorny issue that we have been talking about for a number of years.

Often, one of the key issues is not about getting the asset, which can be done fairly easily, but about the management and maintenance after that. There are a number of well-informed communities that have done it, but there are also a number that do not have the capacity, knowledge or skills to do it. We need to see how we can allow those communities to build capacity as much as we can.

Johanna Boyd mentioned the concept of local place plans, which could provide an opportunity to map the assets that could be transferred. Although the concept behind local place plans is good and it is good to encourage communities to think about what their places could look like, one issue that we have with them is that there is a need to build capacity in some communities to make it happen and there are no resources, or limited resources, to do that.

We have been calling for some form of funding to support communities to develop local place plans, perhaps through PAS and other bodies, but that is not forthcoming. I hear from a number of local authorities that would really like to work with communities to build their capacity but do not have the time to do it because there have been cuts in planning services—we have lost 25 per cent of staff since 2009—so they have to concentrate on the statutory things that they have to undertake. There is a need to free up some of the local authority time and resources as well.

Planners are generally really keen to work with communities. Around 20 per cent of our members volunteer for PAS. There is an appetite to try to make community asset transfer work.

Johanna Boyd: The crucial thing for making community asset transfer successful is to work with the communities right from the outset. That might sound like an obvious point, but it is really important to identify who has the capacity and the skill set within communities to ensure that, once the asset is transferred, it has a long-term sustainable future.

In many communities, there is a willingness to become involved but, as Craig McLaren touched on, there is a question of capacity. When people move on from a community or there is a change, suddenly, you can find that a lot of the good will or support—the hours that have been put in—just disappears.

Capacity building is key not just in producing a local place plan but in understanding the community planning framework because, as I mentioned, it is a completely separate and complex legal system. Members will be well aware of all the obligations and the process that communities have to go through.

I would like to flag up something else. In relation to communities that are interested in creating local place plans and in discussing all the assets, communities with resources are much more ready to step forward and deliver local place plans, because they take time and money to deliver. Those communities might be able to draw on wind farm development funding, or they might have money sitting in trusts.

As I have said, we have a strong interest in working with marginalised communities. PAS has a real concern that communities that have the financial and capacity resources will be able to push forward and produce an LPP, which must be taken into account by the council in the LDP process, so those communities might be able to influence the LDP. The LPP does not form part of the LDP, but the LPP must be taken into account, so those communities could influence the broader planning picture. It is important to say, as someone has done already, that NPF4 now sits within that statutory framework. When a planning application comes along, a decision has to be made, and those communities will have all that influence because they had the initial resources right at the start of the process.

We are concerned with how we ensure that we do not widen inequality through the process and that we empower the communities that we need to empower. The process is well meaning—I do not think that anybody would disagree with the idea of engaging and empowering communities—but we need to be mindful of the ultimate outcome.

Ailsa Macfarlane: I go back to the earlier point about co-ordination. Communities need to know what might be coming on to the market so that there is not a knee-jerk reaction as soon as something comes into place. Even if there is a well-meaning intention behind saving an asset for a community, that does not necessarily mean that it is the right asset in the right place.

The cross-border bridging the gap project did some research on barriers to the sustainable community ownership of churches. Yes, finance was an issue, but the biggest problem that all communities mentioned was finding people to answer their questions, to do the work and to be part of voluntary groups, because the time that people have to do those things has been diminishing.

Everything has been taking longer, including the time taken to find volunteers. There have also been reductions in local authority staffing. Therefore, everything is taking more and more capacity from local communities. We should bear that in mind.

In relation to other mechanisms, I know that the Development Trusts Association Scotland is keen

on the introduction of compulsory sale orders. There is the potential for those to be powerful tools, particularly in relation to vacant and derelict land. That could be another avenue to take.

The Convener: I have a supplementary question on community asset transfers. I am struggling to think of an example in my community—I represent the Motherwell and Wishaw constituency. Is there a demographic issue? Is there a geographical issue? Why do some local authorities embrace the idea more than others? Are there examples of good practice in engaging with communities?

Johanna Boyd: I can think of a very recent example that PAS was involved in prior to my joining PAS. It involved a primary school being transferred to the Heart of Newhaven, which is a community group that focuses on intergenerational work in the community.

I have been around the school—it is an old Victorian school, so you can imagine that there are lots of things to consider, from energy to roofs to insurance. PAS was involved in engaging with the community prior to the transfer of that community asset, and my understanding is that the fact that a very good, thorough and inclusive engagement process took place at the start assisted in that transfer.

Craig McLaren: I remember a couple of historical asset transfers that we came across, both of which involved cinemas—one in Bo'ness and the Birks cinema in Aberfeldy. The communities there were well informed and knew what they were doing; they had some people who had experience in property development and management, which helped to make things happen. There will be other examples—I am drawing a bit of a blank, to be honest—but, again, it depends very much on the capacity in a community with regard to the skills and knowledge, and the time to do the work.

The Convener: That feeds into the inequality that you mentioned earlier. Do you want to come in on that point, Ms Macfarlane?

Ailsa Macfarlane: I have no particular further comment.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): I know Heart of Newhaven well, being the constituency MSP. That community asset transfer was very successful, and I pay tribute to all the people who were involved in making it happen. Several of them had significant time, as they had stopped working, and were very knowledgeable about how to make the system work for the benefit of the community, which created a good outcome.

Do you have any further reflections on how critical it is that we have individuals with enthusiasm, knowledge and determination, as well as foresight? Indeed, that project came about because there was an early awareness in the community that an asset was coming on stream as the primary school moved into another part of Newhaven.

Johanna Boyd: Those are absolutely the key points. It goes back to the question of inclusivity and good communication from the outset. We have touched on the idea of capacity in communities and that of people moving on, passing away or gaining other interests—we know, for example, that volunteering has taken a hit from Covid.

If resources are tight, we need to be very selective about where we direct them, whether that is in relation to a community asset transfer or the delivery of an LPP. Some communities are very well resourced, in terms of their expertise and perhaps other resources. It is still incredibly important that those communities have good engagement processes so that they are inclusive and that what comes out of the processes at the end, whether it is a physical building or a plan, has buy-in from all the community, by which I mean the council, community groups and so on. Where skills and expertise are not there, that is where we should put that resource.

Ben Macpherson: As a wider point in those considerations, community asset transfers are sometimes led by specific groups of individuals, such as in the case of Heart of Newhaven. However, individuals in community councils are often important, too. Through their general considerations as community councillors, they can be involved in community groups and the community council. With the on-going wider considerations around the local governance review, how important do you see community councils as being?

Johanna Boyd: In relation to asset transfer and delivery of plans, from what we see at PAS, it is often community councils that are driving the request for assistance. PAS does not deal with community asset transfers, but we will often be asked about them and direct people to other organisations. In terms of LPPs, it is often community councils.

I should make another point about community councils, which is that they also need trained. Covid of course had a huge impact on the ability of community councils to do their important business. We also go out and support community councils with training and we are just seeing that coming back. That is an absolutely critical point, because so much of that good will, volunteering and time comes from our community councils.

09:30

Craig McLaren: Community councils have a very important role to play in this and in the broader planning of their area. They are consulted on planning applications just now. I would like community councils to work in a way such that they tell us what they want for their area rather than what they do not want. Too much of the discussion in planning is about what people do not want, and we need to try to flip that. Although people absolutely have the right to make objections, we do not want it to be only about objections; I would rather have a discussion about what people want to do.

The early engagement of community councils and visioning, which can include asset transfer, would be a much more effective use of their time. Making that change and shift is important. It is about a cultural shift as well as a bit of resourcing and training people up to try to think that way. That would add to the value that community councils bring to the process.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): You touched on the issue of community capacity and the stress that there is for communities in taking on an asset that has been transferred. I think that we all see in our constituencies that one of the biggest stresses of that kind and one of the biggest pressures on capacity is when somebody takes on an asset and then has to apply for funding from multiple organisations to actually make something of it. They then have to juggle multiple different deadlines, with the continual risk of having to retender in the current climate. I have no idea what the answer to that is, or whether there is one, but is there anything that we can all do to try and simplify the burden of competing deadlines that organisations suddenly face when they take on an asset? I do not know whether other countries do that differently. I have no idea what the answer is, but I am curious to know whether witnesses think that there is some way that that particular burden could be lessened.

Ailsa Macfarlane: There are funders bodies—particularly in cultural heritage—that meet regularly to try to ensure that things are aligned as best as possible so that it is as easy as it can be for applicants. However, every individual funder obviously has its own mechanisms, its own outcomes to meet and everything else. I appreciate that that is part of the complexity of taking on any particular asset. Funders are supported to work together in order to help communities.

Craig McLaren: One of the ambitions of community planning was to join things up more, and I am not quite sure that we have done that as yet. Progress is being made, but more has to be done. The more outcomes-based approach surely

allows people to think about what role they and their funds play in trying to deliver that outcome. In many ways, we are still trying to get to grips with that in the public sector and the third sector. I think that everyone sees the benefit in it. If and when it works, it will be much more streamlined. I say “streamlined”, but the situation will be complicated because it is quite murky territory, in that everyone has to work together. However, it should provide a better idea of how things can be joined up to achieve that outcome, which should include funding streams.

Neil Bibby (West Scotland) (Lab): The issue of church closures, which community groups have raised with me, was mentioned earlier. The committee has heard concerns about the scale of proposed closures to churches. A number of churches are converted into flats, but they are used by a lot of community and cultural groups as well as their congregations. One point that was made is that there are very good acoustics in churches and church halls. It would be really unfortunate if we lose those assets.

Given that a significant number of closures is proposed, does that not reinforce the need for practical support and funding to ensure that we preserve those existing cultural assets? Are there any other thoughts on what we should do specifically in relation to churches? If community asset transfers of public assets are hard enough, that suggests that it will be even more difficult to retain those assets.

Ailsa Macfarlane: I think that that is going to be incredibly difficult. A very large number of churches are being spoken about. In particular, the Church of Scotland is considering its estate broadly, and it is a private owner and a charity. However, there is a social outcome and a civic need for those buildings to be part of our places and our community. Unless people are considering legislation, I am not sure whether there is anything that we can do to force what happens to those buildings. However, I do not think that that is what you are considering.

On support, I am working with a number of organisations. The Built Environment Forum Scotland runs the places of worship forum, in which organisations with a strategic interest in the future of places of worship gather to discuss and hope to impact a positive future for those places, as they move beyond worship.

Resource for communities will always be one of the hardest issues, as it depends on the geography. There are rural versus urban arguments about what sustainable uses for those places will be. I know that, in project work, Historic Environment Scotland is considering support versus policy advice for those places so that appropriate decisions can be made about their

cultural and heritage significance. However, that area has not been fully supported yet.

With regard to places of worship, people quite often do not want to get involved with faith. There can be a very specific challenge. The funding that is needed can be considered to be faith based, and that can be a challenge for some organisations, as it has been for the Scottish Government in the past. We have known that issues in that area have been coming to a head for many years.

Neil Bibby: Thank you. Are there any other thoughts on that?

Craig McLaren: I do not have any answers, but I have three points to put into the discussion.

First, a lot of our churches are particularly costly to maintain. A lot of them are listed buildings and were designed in a certain way that did not put maintenance at the heart of that. A lot of them are also very large. There is an issue with that.

Secondly, a lot of churches are quite difficult to convert. It is sometimes quite awkward to try to convert them into housing, given the shape of the buildings.

The third thing to bear in mind goes back to the national planning framework and the planning policy around it. Ailsa Macfarlane mentioned this at the start. Viability of, and sustainable demand for, cultural assets are part of the decision-making process. If those things are not there, those buildings have less protection. We need to bear that in mind.

Neil Bibby: Does Johanna Boyd have any thoughts on that?

Johanna Boyd: Just two, really. The first relates to local place plans. If the church was identified as being a key cultural asset, that was done through a good engagement process. The community would be put in a more powerful position with an LPP and a vision for the community that includes the church—the cultural asset—and the LPP forming part of the LDP, depending on the position that the council has taken.

That would make it much more difficult for a developer to come along and say, “We want a change of use into flats, please”, because the community’s position would have been stated very clearly. By taking that into account and ensuring that it influences the LDP, it provides the front loading that I think Craig McLaren mentioned with regard to protecting an asset in a community.

Secondly, I was just looking again at policy 31, which, as part of NPF4, will form part of the LDP, and I note that paragraph (c) of the policy says:

“Development proposals that would result in the loss of an arts or cultural venue will only be supported”

in certain circumstances. As a result, a developer would have to come along and say, “There’s no longer a sustainable need for this, and here’s all my evidence for that.” I would also highlight another bit of the policy, which talks about

“the venue, as evidenced by consultation, no longer”

meeting

“the needs of users”,

which would require the developer to go off and have a whole consultation on whether or not the building in question met those needs.

Again, this is all to be tested. I am not saying that my interpretation is correct; I am just saying that it could be argued that, through the LPP or through the policy in NPF4, a community could very clearly state its position with regard to the value that a church brings to its community. Planning is always about balance, but the interesting question about this is: to what extent are we going to have a plan-led system through the LDPs and LPPs? To what extent will other material considerations be able to outweigh the very clear position taken in plans across a council area or in a particular community?

Neil Bibby: I also want to ask about regeneration and culture. Paisley, in my region, bid to be UK city of culture in 2021, and that has been a catalyst not just for cultural participation but for the regeneration of assets, with investment being made in the town hall and the museum. Ultimately, the bid was, unfortunately, unsuccessful, but it has had some real benefits with regard to regeneration.

I note that the Scottish Government has said that it will be doing a national towns of culture programme in Scotland. What lessons can be learned in that respect from the Paisley example, and what role do competitions play in driving forward that kind of regeneration and being a catalyst for change in participation in Scotland?

Craig McLaren: We have seen accolades for and campaigns on regeneration not just in Paisley, as you have highlighted, but in other parts of Scotland, and I think that these things can be useful catalysts by bringing attention to an area and what it wants to do. They often bring funding, too, just because the area has that particular badge.

The issue, certainly from my experience of working in regeneration, has always been the legacy that comes from these things. I do not think that this will be news to anyone, but we really need to embed that legacy from the beginning of the process. Indeed, that issue was looked at as part of the Glasgow Commonwealth games, with

their physical legacy such as some of the stadiums and the games village, which is now housing in the east end of the city.

We also need to look at the cultural approach to things and the way in which people engage with and use facilities. That has often been the harder bit, because it is a much more complex issue involving a lot of different players, but if we are to do these things, we really have to embed them from the start.

I have never been a big fan of competitions, particularly in regeneration, and I think that we should be looking at and trying to direct our resources towards more needs-based approaches. I am not 100 per cent sure, though, how that would work as far as accolades are concerned, but as I have said, such a badge or accolade can be a really useful catalyst.

09:45

Ailsa Macfarlane: I very much agree with what Craig McLaren has just said. Even though regeneration of cultural assets in particular has been successful, we are now talking about a different economic climate. I am aware that Museums Galleries Scotland's evidence was clear that some sites are in a perfect storm, particularly civic museums. Even with successes and, perhaps, accolades, the issue of sustainability keeps returning for culture.

In the recently released Accounts Commission report, culture and leisure services are in the at risk or declining categories, and there is a clear statement that says:

"With little resilience in these services owing to long-term funding reductions, future challenges are significant. A recent survey of leisure trusts suggests a high risk of closures as a result of inflationary cost pressures."

It is one of those situations where the accolades and attention are good things that can highlight the civic and societal importance of cultural facilities, but the current challenges to them are very severe.

Johanna Boyd: I agree with everything that has been said. The benefit of regeneration is the galvanising of community spirit, which was obvious in the evidence session about Paisley and everything that had come out of that bid. The thing that really struck me about that was the collaboration. We talk about not being in silos, planning and working with community planning, but in that evidence session, I heard lots of examples of how the collaboration that happened because of the bid continued between health and social care, with culture, education and so on. That is the power of regeneration, and sustaining it is where the real benefit can lie.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I am interested to hear how you think the dial has shifted since Covid and what some of the challenges and opportunities are. Looking around some of the communities that are close to me, I notice that high streets look very different now and shop spaces are opening up. During Covid, there was more discussion about the value of green space and we started to think about how streets could look different and how civic spaces could be opened up. I guess that there were some opportunities there, but cultural organisations are also facing into some headwinds. It would be interesting to get your views on how the post-Covid world looks a little bit different and the implications of that.

Johanna Boyd: We have seen the changing nature of the high street and some of the benefits of that through people wanting to shop locally, keep money invested in their local area and support independent traders. I have certainly seen that in my immediate area, where lots of microbusinesses are growing up. Things such as that are all to be supported.

The planning system and how we use it is now talked about a lot as an enabler. It can be seen as something to prevent bad things from happening, but how do we use it to allow good things to happen once we have a vision for a community? There are clear challenges there, but the new policy framework that we have in front of us contains opportunities with things such as local place plans and the inclusion of culture and creativity along with clear links to the culture strategy.

There are clear challenges around 20-minute neighbourhoods and so on, but there are also strong opportunities. Planning can be used to deliver on that, but it requires quite a shift, especially in councils' view of the role of planning.

Craig McLaren: A key thing that has come out of Covid is a greater appreciation of people's places—where they live and where they work. That is more anchored in how they feel about things, and I think that that is a good thing. Part of that is about an appreciation of the quality of the place. Much more attention has been given to things such as active travel and green spaces, as Mark Ruskell mentioned. There is an idea that town and city centres are not just about retailing any more; they have much more of a mix of different uses including culture, retail and other things that provide more of an experience for people, rather than just a transaction. That has been useful.

Johanna Boyd mentioned 20-minute neighbourhoods. In some ways, that idea came from the post-Covid period. It was around before that, but Covid has given it wings, so to speak,

and it is a really interesting concept. The 20-minute neighbourhood and the concept of living locally can provide some great opportunities in relation to demand for certain functions. A higher-density community will have more people in it, which expands the customer base, to put it in simple terms. We can try to use 20-minute neighbourhoods as a mechanism for that.

A lot of the discussion about 20-minute neighbourhoods is about people meeting their daily needs within 10-minute walks there and back. However, it has a broader application in how people locate themselves close to things that they can use, which can benefit from people being close at hand.

Ailsa Macfarlane: I absolutely agree with what the other members of the panel have said. That appreciation of place is one of the keenest things to note, and I know that it has come out strongly in the heritage sector. However, I would add that appreciation is not the same as resource. No matter how strongly people appreciate things, they can still be underresourced.

I agree that 20-minute neighbourhoods have a lot of potential for culture, but in that regard I want to mention the draft guidance that has been published and is out for consultation. Health gets 57 mentions, very understandably, while culture gets only four, one of which relates to the play standard and another of which refers to different cultural backgrounds. Again, it is a marketplace of competing needs.

Mark Ruskell: Is how we define culture and the creative sector an issue? Creative Stirling is a very creative organisation that works in the cultural space and the regeneration space, but its physical space is an abandoned high street department store. It does not occupy a traditional cultural venue and it works in a very unsiloed way to meet its various objectives, although it would probably go to Creative Scotland for funding. Is there a fuzziness in how the creative sector operates, how it accesses opportunities and spaces and, therefore, how it is planned?

Ailsa Macfarlane: I have been to Creative Stirling. We will see more of that cross-disciplinary funding approach, because it makes it easier to go to different funding pots and build a holistic and sustainable cultural offer. However, there are challenges around things such as the condition of cultural sites. That has been mentioned in a number of pieces of evidence to the committee.

In a previous life, I trained people on how to fundraise. There is a trope that nobody will pay to fix the roof but that, if you tell them what is happening underneath it, you might get some money for the activity. A lot of organisations say, "We have a fantastic cultural offer, but we need to

do things to our site to make it sustainable and suitable for occupants and activities for the future." Funding mechanisms can inhibit that sort of thing if they are focused too narrowly. Short-term funding mechanisms will always be a challenge for projects.

Craig McLaren: This is perhaps not a direct answer to Mr Ruskell's question, but one thing that is happening with the fluidity from a planning perspective is that the planning policy for our town centres is becoming a bit more agile than it was previously. In particular, temporary uses and the idea of "meanwhile" uses, which mean that things can happen before something permanent happens, are now embedded in the town centre policy in the national planning framework, which is good. That is useful and I am sure that cultural organisations and facilities can use it to good effect. A lot of community-based organisations have certainly done so. We have seen some really interesting stuff in Glasgow, which is trying to pioneer that.

Mark Ruskell: You are referring to pop-up shops, pop-up facilities and creative opportunities.

Craig McLaren: Yes—things like that. Before, the granting of planning permission for such uses would have been seen as setting a precedent, whereas the concept of "meanwhile" uses has now been accepted and planning authorities are more open to that approach.

Johanna Boyd: As I have mentioned before, there is definitely a need to raise awareness in the planning and place-making space of culture's role in that area. There is policy 31, but it is low key at the moment. Its profile could be a lot higher. In the delivery programme for NPF4, which came out towards the end of last year, culture gets, I think, six references. However, those are references to the culture strategy. The question is what the delivery of NPF4 will do for culture and the creative industries. There is a real question mark over that.

When we were thinking about some of the outputs or outcomes for communities that have come from community-led plans and LPPs that we have been involved with at PAS, we identified things such as wayfinding and public art. The idea of co-ordinating community cultural activities taking place on the same night came out of one community engagement exercise, and another suggestion was about the sharing of venues. Does that come to light through conversations with different community groups?

There is a huge amount that planning and place making can do for culture but, at the moment, the connectivity between the two is not as strong as it could be.

Mark Ruskell: The question that comes out of that is what culture can do for planning and place making. The final question that I have been pondering concerns the local place plan process. From the way that you describe it, it seems that, at its heart, it is quite co-creative. In so, where are creative and cultural organisations in that? We look to planners and planning departments—which are underfunded, perhaps—to deliver the process, but is there a role for creative organisations in supporting planning charrettes and accessing and enabling the voices of young people and other disadvantaged groups in the process? Are there examples of a creative sector or creative groups in communities working with planners to assist in the local place plan process and help to create the vision? That feels like quite an exciting opportunity.

Johanna Boyd: Absolutely. We can certainly provide the committee with further information on plans with which Planning Aid for Scotland has been involved and in which creatives have been involved in the process, if that will help.

Policy 31 is quite specific in what it says about public art being supported. Recently, we have been discussing that with a local authority and a developer in relation to the creation of a public art strategy. Where large-scale developments might be happening, how do we create a policy that is embedded in the LDP process so that public art is given a priority in the way that, for example, a developer might make contributions to affordable housing or other section 106 or section 75 contributions that they have to make? My apologies: section 106 might be the English system.

If we want culture and, in particular, public art to have a key role in creating sustainable communities where culture is valued in all its different forms—I do not just mean putting up statues—it is important that the council has a hook on which to hang those demands, because it simply will not make them if it cannot do it in relation to its own LDPs.

10:00

Mark Ruskell: Do you mean that that whole area—civic space, green space and interconnected spaces between communities—is about creative design?

Johanna Boyd: Absolutely. It is about how space is used and embedded where a new community is being created and about how that then translates into a policy so that the council can ensure that a high standard of public art is delivered.

Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con): We have already discussed elements of the theme

of my questions. I was interested in Craig McLaren's comment about cuts to planning services in local authorities. Third sector and community organisations often look to redevelop or refurbish historic or listed buildings in order to provide facilities for their communities, but the planning process can be costly and cumbersome for those organisations. What more can be done to support them, given the constraints under which they and we are working?

Craig McLaren: We have been through planning reform since 2016, the outputs of which have been the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 and a new national planning framework. Another thing that has come out of that reform is a cultural shift in how the planning profession works. Many people see planning as being about regulation. That is an element of what we do, but what we are trying to unleash through that reform is the planners' role as facilitators and enablers.

There is also a focus on trying to create great places and thinking not just about the process but about the outcomes of the decisions that are made and the policies that are set. The proxy for success in planning has been how quickly you process a planning application, but that does not tell us anything about the quality of the outcome, so there is also a bit about considering how we measure success, and we have done some work on that.

Because of that work—I echo what I and, I think, others said earlier—planners are now trying to do front-loaded engagement to support communities to identify the opportunities, and we are also trying to contextualise that within the constraints that we face. I mentioned earlier the idea of creating a place vision. Planners can work creatively with communities, stakeholders, funders and cultural organisations to try to pull together the vision and the delivery plan to make it happen.

We will absolutely still come up against issues around resources and capacity, but the shift in how the profession and the system work will go some way towards creating an approach in which we think about what we want to happen, what we want the community to look like and what we need to put in place to try to make that happen, based on what assets there are in the community.

Maurice Golden: Anecdotally, I have heard of real recruitment and retention problems in planning departments in my area. The system might have improved, but is the capacity stable or is it going up or down?

Craig McLaren: The planning service is still in a bad place in relation to resources. We have lost a quarter of planners since 2009 and budgets have been reduced markedly by—I have a figure somewhere—38 per cent since 2010. Increasing

demands on planners are an issue. The 2019 act introduced 49 new duties that were unfunded and which we estimate could cost up to £60 million, so we need to tackle that.

Another issue that we have as a profession is that increasing demands mean that there is a growing need to increase the pipeline of planners coming in. Work that was done by Skills Development Scotland estimated a need for 700 new planners over the next 15 years. That might not sound like a hell of a lot, but the RTPI has 2,100 members across Scotland, so we are going to have to try to generate a third as many again. As part of that, we are doing some work with the Scottish Government and Heads of Planning Scotland on what we are calling the future planners initiative, which is about how we can build that pipeline. We are pushing for a planning apprenticeship programme to be opened up as a route, and we are talking to people about that at the moment.

We also need to show that planning is a profession that gives people a real sense of achievement. Too often, people talk about planners negatively, which makes my job of attracting people into the profession a lot harder. If we change the narrative on planning to be about working with communities and stakeholders to deliver great places, and we use it in that way, that could make a major difference.

Maurice Golden: I think that planners are still above politicians in the public's perception. Who else would like to comment?

Johanna Boyd: I echo everything that Craig McLaren has just said about the clear challenges in the profession. We have a network of around 400 volunteers, many of whom are planners. They often volunteer with us at the start of their careers or towards the end of their careers when they are retiring. It is a question of when people have the time, because people who are in the middle of their careers become incredibly busy with caring responsibilities and so on. We are always on the lookout for volunteers, and they do not have to be planners; we have other built environment specialists as well.

We are always keen to engage with children and young people. We go into schools to talk about planning and place making and why they are such great things to be involved in.

In many areas across the public sector, we have a challenge around language. What is planning? What is community planning? What is place making? When we have gone out and spoken to people in education, we have found that it can be a real challenge just to explain those things.

We are about to kick off a virtual work placement with Education Scotland and the

developing the young workforce initiative, which is all about getting young people who are between S4 and S6 to experience the different strands of what Planning Aid for Scotland does. The bigger driver there is to get young people interested in potentially becoming a planner or a landscape architect, getting involved with the third sector or understanding the work of councils better. We are keen to do our bit in finding those future planners.

Ailsa Macfarlane: Maurice Golden mentioned the challenges around historic and listed buildings. For anybody who has to deal with such sites, Historic Environment Scotland has good guidance on managing change and making appropriate changes to buildings for community and many other uses. BEFS is responsible for running what is erroneously called the conservation officers group, which comprises local authority planning officers who deal with conservation and heritage matters within planning. That is a particularly underresourced part of the underresourced area of planning. Early conversations are always welcomed. It is very much a question of looking at pre-application advice, which is one of the most useful things that communities can consider when they are looking at sites.

It would be remiss of me not to mention two other important things. First, VAT being zero on new build but not on existing buildings continues to be a challenge, depending on how community groups are constituted.

Secondly, where community groups are looking to work on such sites, there are obvious challenges around traditional skills. We know that there is a skills shortage in this area. I highly recommend to members what is happening outside Parliament today, where you will be able to see traditional skills and hear more about the challenges. That is another area where communities that are dealing with venues can run into challenges.

Maurice Golden: That is helpful, and it also feeds into retrofitting and achieving net zero. It is useful that you have highlighted those two issues.

The Convener: As we have exhausted our questions, I thank you all for your attendance and for your helpful submissions to the committee.

10:10

Meeting continued in private until 10:17.

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