



# **Independent Review of Planning**

The UNISON Scotland Evidence to the Independent Review of Planning

**December 2015**

## **Introduction**

UNISON is Scotland's largest public sector trade union representing a range of public sector workers including Scotland's planners. UNISON Scotland is able to collate and analyse member's experience to provide evidence to inform the policy process. We therefore welcome the opportunity to submit evidence to the Independent Review of Planning.

## **Response**

Despite the radical reform of the planning system in 2009 the government is proposing further changes to the performance management of planning authorities. The real issues in planning are already constrained planning budgets and staff shortages. Delays are due to underfunding and heavy workloads. Planners deal with a range of issues from large developments to house extensions. The number of planning disputes and often bitter and lengthy neighbourhood feuds over boundaries, extensions and hedges show how important it is for planning decisions to be right in the first place. This requires adequate funding. Improvement will come through adequate funding and staffing levels and empowering staff and giving them the time to reflect, learn and implement change.

- The review group would have been better placed to conduct its work if it included a representative from the elected member and staff side of Scottish Councils delivering planning functions. Members are also concerned that the timescale of the review is too tight to fully engage with local authorities, planners and communities.
- This is a strategic review but the concerns raised about planning delivery issues are not strategic rather they are about shortage of resources. Staff levels across planning departments have decreased by approximately 20% since 2009, and median departments have decreased from 27 in 2012/2013 to 25.5 in 2014/2015. Solutions will require adequate funding not another top down strategy.
- The review is very procedures and processes focused when some planning principles may need closer scrutiny. Planning is a public arena and sorting house where development and construction industry aspirations are played out alongside community needs and public sector duties. Planning is a service to and for communities not for developers.
- There are a number of quantitative targets for planning but few qualitative targets. It is essential that communities have a proper say in local planning decision this takes time and resources and that the developments that are approved are the right ones for local communities.
- The review needs to consider staff time, skills and resources. A focus on meeting deadlines should not be more important than ensuring that a development is the right one. The requirement to review local development plans, conservation areas and tree preservation orders or to determine planning applications of varying complexities within too tight a timescale will have its drawbacks. Imposing penalties on local authorities which do not meet a "one-size-fits-all" deadline for determining applications is not an appropriate technique or lead to good governance.

- Restrictive budgets and scrutiny over future resources may affect how planning authorities maintain adequate staff and improve the service, particularly with increased development pressure. Developers should pay a fairer share of the costs of planning: for example through increased planning application fees or charging for pre-application discussions.

### **Conclusion**

UNISON is Scotland's largest public sector trade union representing a range of public sector workers including Scotland's planners. UNISON Scotland is able to collate and analyse member's experience to provide evidence to inform the policy process. We therefore welcome the opportunity to submit written evidence to the Independent Review of Planning. UNISON members would also welcome the opportunity to meet with the review panel to discuss the review in more detail.

For further information, please contact:

Dave Watson [d.watson@unison.co.uk](mailto:d.watson@unison.co.uk)

Kay Sillars: [k.sillars@unison.co.uk](mailto:k.sillars@unison.co.uk)

Mike J Kirby, Scottish Secretary

UNISON Scotland,

UNISON House,

14, West Campbell Street,

Glasgow

G2 6RX

Tel: 0845 3550845

Fax: 0141-331 1203

Email: [m.kirby@unison.co.uk](mailto:m.kirby@unison.co.uk)