

**ABERDEEN CITY & SHIRE
STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT PLANNING AUTHORITY**

Date: 15 December 2011

Title: Modernising the Planning System – Audit Scotland Report

1 Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to inform the Strategic Development Planning Authority (SDPA) of the publication by Audit Scotland of a recent report on progress with the modernisation of the planning system in Scotland and agree responses to the four recommendations they make for the four SDPAs.

2 Background

- 2.1 The Planning etc (Scotland) Act 2006 and associated secondary legislation brought in significant changes to all aspects of the planning system in Scotland. In addition to these, and in recognition that legislation on its own cannot deliver the improvements needed, a culture change agenda has been pursued which seeks to change how organisations and individuals implement new processes through their attitudes and behaviours.
- 2.2 Audit Scotland decided to evaluate the overall progress made by the public sector in modernising the system and the impact that modernisation is having on performance.
- 2.3 While the Audit Scotland report focuses on development management, it does cover development planning – including the preparation of strategic development plans. The Strategic Development Plan Manager and the Head of Planning and Sustainable Development at Aberdeen City Council both met Audit Scotland during the evidence-gathering phase of the report.
- 2.4 Audit Scotland published its report (and a range of supporting material, including a 5 minute podcast) on 15 September 2011 and these are available from the [Audit Scotland website](#). The main report is attached at Appendix 1.

3 Overview

- 3.1 Part 2 of the report focuses on progress with modernisation and is the section which relates particularly to the four strategic development planning authorities (particularly paragraphs 38 – 48).
- 3.2 The report focuses particularly on the speed with which strategic development plans are being produced and the performance against the original development plan schemes published in March 2009.

3.3 The report also makes four specific recommendations for strategic development planning authorities (outlined on page 20 of the Audit Scotland report). These are that strategic development planning authorities should:

- monitor progress against key milestones and ensure any delays are minimised
- agree resource requirements with constituent councils and put in place formal arrangements or protocols to support this
- work with key agencies to develop a shared understanding of roles, responsibilities and expectations
- ensure processes are in place to enable and support better and more creative engagement with community councils and the wider community.

3.4 Only the second recommendation is specific to the SDPAs, the other three recommendations are also made to the 34 councils and national park authorities in relation to local development plans.

3.5 Appendix 2 provides a summary of the relevant sections of the SDPA report and a response from a local perspective.

4 Proposed response

4.1 The Audit Scotland report has a clear focus on development management and in many ways it is too early to fully assess the impact of the changes to the development plan system. However, the report is welcomed and identifies some areas for action over the coming months.

4.2 The main action required of the SDPA is to put in place more formal staff support arrangements with the two partner councils to ensure appropriate staffing for the work of the SDPA. Work on implementing this action is already underway in the north east.

4.3 The four strategic development plan managers met on 9 November 2011 and agreed that recommendations 3 and 4 were ones where it would be more efficient if the four areas worked together. This workstream will build on existing joint work and will be taken forward to enable progress to be reported back to the SDPA and Audit Scotland over the next year.

4.4 It is therefore proposed that the SDPA send a letter to the Auditor General welcoming the report, emphasising the importance of an up-to-date development plan and setting out the intention to put in place more formal staff support arrangements. The letter would also highlight that the four SDP Managers will work together in looking at recommendations 3 and 4 while highlighting the joint work already taking place.

5 Recommendations

- 5.1 It is recommended that the SDPA note the contents of this report (including appendix 2) and agree to send a letter to the Auditor General as outlined in paragraph 4.4 above.

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Appendix 2: Summary of Audit Scotland Key Messages / Recommendations and the SDPA response

| Ref | Key Message / Para / Recommendation | Response |
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| KM | Strategic and local development plans are essential in achieving a plan-led system but progress in establishing these has been slower than expected. | The Aberdeen City and Shire SDPA did re-profile its SDP timetable in March 2011 as a consequence of the change of date for local government elections in May 2012 – an issue outside the control of the SDPA. However, this was done in such a way as to still enable submission of a proposed plan within four years of ministerial approval of the structure plan (the future statutory target). |
| KM | The introduction of four new strategic planning authorities has made development planning more complex. | While this may be the case in some areas (where arrangements are different from those which existed under the previous legislative context – i.e. for SESplan and TAYplan), this is not the case for Aberdeen City and Shire SDPA. |
| 38 | A key aim of modernisation was to have a plan-led system, where development plans set the context for all planning activities and decisions. The purpose of the SDPAs is clear – to produce strategic development plans for the four city regions. However, the changes in roles and responsibilities in the strategic planning process have made development planning more complex and risks placing an increased burden on already stretched resources. | This has not been the case in Aberdeen City and Shire. |
| 39 | Each SDPA operates with a small core staff and relies on input from staff from each constituent council. Glasgow and Clyde Valley, and TAYplan have formal arrangements for arranging staff support. Aberdeen City and Shire, and SESplan do not have formal arrangements and staff support is negotiated on an informal basis. This does not provide certainty or enable effective business planning for either of the SDPAs or their constituent councils. | The SDP Team in Aberdeen City and Shire was established on the basis that it would have the capacity to undertake most of the work of the SDPA without the need to call on much external support. With recent budget constraints it has been recognised that there is a need to make more flexible use of staff and other resources. Work is already underway to formalise that arrangement. |

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| 41 | <p>Joint committees, made up of elected members from each constituent council, are responsible for making decisions about priorities for development and new plans. In each SDPA, reports and plans are presented to the joint committee as well as relevant committees within each constituent council. This adds to the workload of committees but also affects the time taken to progress SDPA reports, as all committees must ratify these and meeting cycles can be lengthy. For example, in Fife Council seven area committees and a Fife-wide planning committee consider and ratify outputs from two SDPAs (TAYplan and SESplan) and this adds time to the process.</p> | <p>This is particularly applicable to SESplan and TAYplan. Aberdeen City and Shire does not take the same approach to ratification at the early stages of plan preparation. The publication of the Main Issues report did not require ratification and consultation commenced two weeks after it was agreed by the SDPA. The structure plan is a good example of a case where both councils held special meetings to agree its submission to Scottish Ministers just two weeks after a document had been agreed by the SDPA.</p> |
| 44 | <p>There have been delays in producing main issues reports and proposed strategic development plans. TAYplan and Glasgow and Clyde Valley report that they will submit their proposed plan in line with original timescales but Aberdeen City and Shire reports that it will do this six months later than originally anticipated and SESplan three months later than anticipated.</p> | <p>The original timetable for the preparation of the strategic development plan was set in March 2009, more than two years before the main issues report was due to be published and almost four years before the plan was due to be submitted to Scottish Ministers. The re-profiling of the timetable was required as a consequence of the changes to the date of local government elections brought about by a change to primary legislation. This was identified well in advance through the development plan scheme, with the timetable amended accordingly.</p> |
| 48 | <p>Delays in the strategic development plan and local development plan processes will mean that, in most planning authorities, planning decisions are being informed by out-of-date structure and local plans. This presents a risk for both planning authorities and the Scottish Government and makes it more difficult for planning authorities and key agencies to make informed decisions about development proposals. To achieve a plan-led system, there must be better progress in producing strategic and local development plans.</p> | <p>The re-profiling of the timetable was done within the target of submitting a proposed plan to Scottish Ministers within four years of the previous plan's approval. As a consequence, this will not mean that planning decisions will be informed by an out-of-date structure plan.</p> |

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| R1 | Strategic development planning authorities should monitor progress against key milestones and ensure any delays are minimised. | This has and will continue to be done. |
| R2 | Strategic development planning authorities should agree resource requirements with constituent councils and put in place formal arrangements or protocols to support this. | The strategic development plan team was established on the basis of being big enough to enable it to function without significant resource implications on the workload of the two councils. With recent budget constraints it has been recognised that there is a need to make more flexible use of staff and other resources. Work is already underway to formalise that arrangement. This will be achieved by having a detailed work programme which specifies inputs and timescales for each stage in the plan process so that both Councils and the SDP team can plan their workloads accordingly. This is consistent with the approach taken by other SDPAs. |
| R3 | Strategic development planning authorities should work with key agencies to develop a shared understanding of roles, responsibilities and expectations. | The SDPA will continue to work with the key agencies during the preparation of the strategic development plan, building on the engagement which has taken place to date. The four SDP Managers are examining the potential for a joint event to help further facilitate engagement. |
| R4 | Strategic development planning authorities should ensure processes are in place to enable and support better and more creative engagement with community councils and the wider community. | The four SDP Managers have been working together on this issue for some time and have published a leaflet and are in the latter stages of preparing a short video for distribution on the various websites which explains the importance of strategic planning to individuals and communities. These projects have been taken forward with the Scottish Government and Architecture and Design Scotland. There is a commitment to continue this joint work and build upon it locally. The use of Plain English accreditation and the Scottish Award for Quality in Planning for the last structure plan process would suggest that the Aberdeen City and Shire SDPA is already addressing this important issue. |