



Professor Alister Scott delivering evidence to the Environmental Audit Committee

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National planning reforms shaped by Northumbria expert

A leading expert in planning policy at Northumbria University has delivered evidence to help shape the future reform of the National Planning Policy Framework.

[Alister Scott](#), Professor of Environmental Geography and Planning, gave evidence and recommendations to the [Environment Audit Committee's hearing](#) in Westminster on the government's proposed planning reforms and their effect on the natural environment.

With the UK desperately needing more homes, the Environmental Audit Committee examined how proposed reforms to the planning system through the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) will promote housing growth and the effects such growth may have on the natural environment.

Professor Scott, who is also a chartered member of the Royal Town Planning Institute, outlined some key concerns to the future success of the new policy based on his extensive research into planning and green infrastructure. He said there was a need to remove silo thinking and disintegrated policy across different government departments to bring together disparate policy areas to work strategically on spatial planning.

In particular, he highlighted that the Departments of Health, Culture, Media and Sport, Transport, Science and Innovation and HM Treasury need to be more actively engaged, and that land use planning was not solely an issue for Defra and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

“The current priority in planning is stated as economic development and most of the consultation is taken up with issues of housing and economic development,” says Professor Scott. “While I agree this is a priority, having separate governance regimes for urban and rural space puts the emphasis on first establishing the number of houses or jobs before bolting on other considerations afterwards. The economic imperative alone does not make the most effective use of land.”

Professor Scott also said there was a need for much stronger wording within policy for nature to avoid it being trumped by economic factors, with trade-offs between economic, social and environmental priorities needing to be fully assessed. He said it was notable that the NPPF had had major amendments in sections relating to housing and green belt, but the natural environment chapter had remained the same despite major policy changes and ongoing declines in nature.

Another of his key concerns was the need to rethink how we value nature. Drawing on the [HM Treasury 2021 Dasgupta review](#), he highlighted how the multiple values of nature demand transformative thinking in how prosperity is viewed and measured.

Professor Scott also called on the government to review its default answer of ‘yes’ on questions around the development of brownfield sites and said that

the policy could not be successfully developed without the active involvement of many government departments, given their major influences and impacts on land use.

“In the question of a default ‘yes’ for brownfield development, for example, the default answer should instead always be evidence based. Brownfield sites can have significant biodiversity interest and can also be very costly to develop,” he said. “Before assuming these are preferred development sites, I believe there should be an accurate assessment of their multifunctional potential, and a decision made from there based on the evidence obtained.”

In terms of actions to help address these problems Professor Scott recommended that the planning system is rebalanced to ensure that nature, the economy and community are treated equally.

“Primacy is given to economic growth with nature, community and equity issues lagging. The planning system has a key role in alleviating poverty and social exclusion as well as providing decent housing. I have called strongly for the policy to explicitly incorporate the UN Sustainable Development Goals to ensure that environmental and equity considerations are not simply bolted on but are incorporated from the start.

“If we fundamentally reshape how planning is done it would lead to better spaces where economic, environmental and social limits and opportunities work together. I believe it is important to focus on placemaking and placekeeping, rather than setting targets for having a certain number of houses or trees. These quantity metrics can distort planning practices and lead to outcomes we might not have chosen had we planned more strategically,” he said.

Professor Scott, who is based in Northumbria's Department of [Geography and Environmental Sciences](#), has played a key role in national conversations on land use in recent years. He was appointed as the sole special adviser to the House of Lords Select Committee inquiry on [how we respond to increasing demands on land in England](#) and he was awarded a Fellowship by the Academy of Social Sciences in recognition of his work to find new ways to improve policy and decision-making across built and natural environments.

The Environment Audit Committee hearing is [available to view online](#) on the Parliament Live TV channel. Transcripts of the oral evidence and further

written evidence provided by Professor Scott are [available to download](#).

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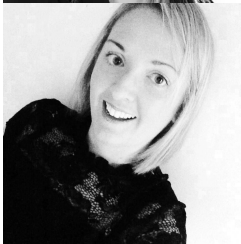


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