

Scotland's Rural College

“It’s all about money, the environment is secondary”: a case study of public perceptions of the Scottish planning system

Hewlett, Arran

Print publication: 01/12/2022

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Hewlett, A. (2022). “It’s all about money, the environment is secondary”: a case study of public perceptions of the Scottish planning system. (Research Brief; No. 2). SRUC’s Rural Policy Centre.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



December 2022 (RPC RB 2022/02)

“It’s all about money, the environment is secondary”: a case study of public perceptions of the Scottish planning system

Arran Hewlett¹

Key message: There is a gap in existing literature on public perceptions of the Scottish Planning System (SPS), particularly with reference to protecting the natural environment. This project, in aiming to address this, reveals criticism of the decision-making process within the SPS. Most survey respondents felt that the SPS did not seek to protect the natural environment due to a lack of balance in decision making, with the economy seen to be prioritised over social and environmental considerations. Based on this research, recommendations are outlined to help inform future planning and environmental protection policy.

Main Findings

- This project investigated public perceptions of the Scottish Planning System’s (SPS) role in protecting the natural environment and designated sites. Despite a recent increase in planning permission being granted for developments which are known to be damaging to the natural environment, this is a subject on which there is a lack of existing research.
- The study was conducted in North Ayrshire using the Peel Ports development proposal at the Hunterston Port and Resource Campus (Hunterston PARC) site – adjacent to the Southannan Sands Site of Special and Scientific Interest (SSSI) – as a case study to provide context. A mixed method approach was used, including an online survey, in-depth interviews with key stakeholders, and content analysis.
- The survey found that more than a third of respondents had no knowledge of the SPS and how it operates. 41% of respondents felt that their views on – or objections to – specific developments had no weight and that planning decision makers often did not take the views of local people into account..

“Make us feel more included and that our opinions and thoughts actually matter. At the moment it feels as though things have already been passed through and the public consultations are just to tick another box.” – Female survey respondent, aged 18–29

- More than three quarters (78%) of respondents felt that decision makers should take a balanced approach when considering new development proposals, as they believed this would result in more sustainable development. Around half (51%) of respondents felt that the SPS does not protect the natural environment.
- The case study findings showed that 62% of respondents highly valued the environment and 63% of respondents highly valued new employment and training opportunities in North Ayrshire, which reiterates the point that people want balance in the planning process.

¹ This briefing is based on Arran Hewlett’s dissertation research undertaken between August 2021 and May 2022 as part of his BSc (Hons) in Environmental Management degree course.

Introduction

Despite a number of recent high-profile projects like the [Trump International golf course at Menie](#), Aberdeenshire, there is a significant lack of literature on the extent to which the SPS protects the natural environment. This study addresses this gap in understanding and does so at a particularly significant time given the Scottish Government's current work to prepare a new [National Planning Framework 4](#) for Scotland².

The case study work was conducted in North Ayrshire and is based on the major [Peel Ports development proposal](#) at the Hunterston PARC site³, adjacent to the [Southannan Sands SSSI](#). This site provided an appropriate context to explore the balance and potential tensions between economic, social, and environmental considerations in planning proposals close to a designated site.

Methods

Primary data was collected for this project using three methodological approaches. First, an online self-completion survey for people living close to the Peel Ports development in which 105 usable responses were received. This was followed by three in-depth interviews with key stakeholders. A content analysis of key documents produced by the developer in relation to the proposals at the site was also completed. These methods provided a wealth of qualitative and quantitative data which helped understand people's views on the SPS. A thematic approach was taken to analysing and presenting the quantitative and qualitative data.



Southannan Sands © Copyright [Raibeart MacAoidh](#) and licensed for [reuse](#) under this [Creative Commons Licence](#).

Policy/Research Implications

This study has addressed a gap in the literature on understanding the views of the general public on the SPS and the role of planning in balancing different interests in relation to a specific large-scale development proposal in North Ayrshire. It would be interesting to undertake comparative studies in relation to proposed developments elsewhere to see if similar results are produced.

Based on this research, the following recommendations are put forward for future planning and environmental protection policy:

1. Improved accessibility to, and awareness of, public consultation events through increased advertising and the use of surveys.
2. A redesign of the planning system to incorporate increased environmental protections for designated sites and to embed the importance of the natural environment more strongly into planning policy.
3. Implementation of evidence-based decision-making criteria for major/national developments that takes full account of the public's views and understands the need to properly assess impacts and scrutinise planning applications to avoid damage to the environment.
4. Providing the general public with more, appropriate environmental education about the planning system and its role in protecting the environment, and designated sites in particular.

For more information on the work of SRUC's Rural Policy Centre, please contact the team on:

T: 0131 535 4256; E: rpc@sruc.ac.uk; W: www.sruc.ac.uk/ruralpolicycentre

² For more information, see: [What is the National Planning Framework? | Transforming Planning](#)

³ For more information, see: [Hunterston PARC Development Framework 2021](#)