

The importance of Place

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The Geographers had it right when they identified Place as location with meaning. That isn't only the iconic places, of which Scotland has many, but where we most spend our time, whether to live, work or play. For most of us during Covid-19 where we spend our time has shrunk significantly, creating a different expectation of our immediate places.

Our relationships to neighbourhoods have evolved

This can be seen in the increased demand for homes with gardens; the drive for a reliable home internet connection; in volunteering with the many new community support networks established; or more simply, having a greater awareness of what the stock is like in the local shop. Our neighbourhoods haven't changed physically during this time; instead our relationship and attachment to them has evolved.

'Where' becomes central to our investment decisions

Places are therefore complex and evolving. They also fulfil different needs from their uniqueness, both in terms of the perception or meaning we give them, but also in terms of physical imprint. The Infrastructure Commission's focus on place reflected not only the importance given to it in policy, but more importantly stakeholder's expectation that the context, or "where" becomes more central to our investment decisions. But what does that mean in reality and is it enough to focus on our places in isolation?

Place as a priority for infrastructure investment

The recent [draft Infrastructure Investment Plan](#) established place as a priority for infrastructure investment. For infrastructure, place uniqueness is a rejection of one size fits all investment and of creating areas which replicate each other – there is no single idyll. Instead it puts local people at the heart of policy development, and listening to local needs to create priorities. This isn't new - we have the guidance and frameworks to make that possible, through the Place Principle and other tools. We also have some good practice across the country. Indeed, this is the part of place that we intuitively understand.

Place is about looking outwards

What we often lack however is locating individual places and their relationship within different spatial scales, whether that be the regional or national picture. Without this, we only have part of the context. Places are all located within larger circles of priority and need. For example, building homes without the transport and other infrastructure to access neighbouring areas and beyond can mean an over-reliance on cars, or a poverty of access. Equally, not reflecting on industrial capacity both locally and nationally can see places competing rather than complementing. Place therefore isn't only about looking inwards, but also considering the wider context and looking outwards, locating our places within that whole. This also goes the other way, with the national needing to balance the local, developing clarity on that relationship through industrial, labour and settlement strategies.

This uniqueness therefore also means all areas won't have the same assets or services, as local people have debated and agreed their key priorities. That's why place development also needs a transparent engagement approach, where trade-offs are discussed and understood and not only by a select few. Where communities co-design their areas, from an understanding of the limitations of investment and other national priorities. A grown-up relationship for a grown-up democracy.

A joined-up policy framework is required

Place is an attractive policy area, easy to agree with, however getting the wider parts of the system supporting this agenda is essential. This requires a joined-up policy framework. Looking forward, the new National Planning Framework is one opportunity to address this weakness, within what is expected to be a comprehensive and long-term spatial plan for all of Scotland.

Without this joined-up approach, Place is just another word borrowed from the geographers; and we miss the opportunity to respond to the diversity of place that truly meets the needs of our communities, within a cohesive whole.