

Consultation about 'Local Living and 20 Minute Neighbourhoods'

Local living and 20-minute neighbourhoods are urban planning concepts that aim to create communities where residents can access their daily needs within a 20-minute walk or bicycle ride from their homes (see, for instance, (2022) 212 SPEL 83).

The Scottish Government is currently seeking views by 20 July 2023 about its 'local living and 20-minute neighbourhoods' draft guidance¹ to support the implementation of the 13 February 2023 adopted National Planning Framework ('NPF4').

Given the status of NPF4 as part of the development plan, it is critically important that these national policies are clearly understood, interpretable and capable of application both fairly and consistently across Scotland. NPF4 Policy 15 specifically relates to 'Local Living and 20 Minute Neighbourhoods' and sets out a range of services and amenities that support sustainable living and which should be considered by development proposals in contributing to local living.

The purpose of this article is to generate 'food for thought' in responding to the current draft guidance consultation. This article explores, from a planning practitioner perspective, the potential delivery challenges of the policy and concept, as well as the importance of the necessary tools and data to facilitate and enable its consistent application across Scotland's spatially diverse geography.

This article:

- considers the principles of NPF4 Policy 15 Local Living and 20 Minute Neighbourhoods in terms of policy intent and outcomes;
- sets out potential issues and challenges to the application and delivery of the said Policy 15;
- reviews the available tools; and

- identifies the data currently available that may assist in the practical application of the policy and concept to assist in the formulation of planning policy at the local level, development management and public service delivery.

The policy principles and background

The policy intent of NPF4 Policy 15 Local Living and 20-minute neighbourhoods is, 'To encourage, promote and facilitate the application of the Place Principle and create connected and compact neighbourhoods where people can meet the **majority** [emphasis added] of their **daily needs** [emphasis added] within a **reasonable distance** [emphasis added] of their home, preferably by walking, wheeling or cycling or using sustainable transport options'.

It should be recognised that 20-minute neighbourhoods is a concept and not a 'target', where the majority (not all) of daily needs (not all needs) are within a reasonable distance (not explicitly 20 minutes) from home preferably by walking, wheeling or cycling. Sustainable transport options were added later at the draft consultation stage. The principle is about encouraging compact, sustainable neighbourhoods and communities, rather than explicitly prescribed 20-minute neighbourhoods.

In order to ensure the success of the 20-minute concept a clear, holistic definition or vision needs embedding in policy. A definition within national policy needs to be sufficiently specific to provide confidence for decision-makers, but also a degree of flexibility to allow its application across a range of places with different context, such as across urban and rural areas.

NPF4 provides clarity on the features of a 20-minute neighbourhood to ensure a consistent place-based approach to their delivery. A strong policy steer will provide planning officers and planning authority members with the confidence to ensure that developments show strong place-making principles and

are in keeping with 20-minute neighbourhood initiatives and to have confidence that any refusals of proposed developments will be upheld in the event of an appeal.

NPF4 also provides an opportunity to start embedding at a policy level, a broader place-based approach in the delivery of public service. However, clarity needs to be balanced with a proportionate application of the principles without losing sight of the wood for the trees.

As stated in the Chief Planner's February 2023 letter on transitional arrangements for NPF4, the 'application of planning judgment to the circumstances of an individual situation remains essential to all decision-making, informed by principles of proportionality and reasonableness'.²

Interestingly, albeit the principle of 'planning judgment' continues, this is made all the more challenging in the context of acknowledged interim policy conflicts and potential incompatibility between a provision of NPF4 and a provision of an LDP. This raises potential issues of 'preparedness'.

The issues and delivery challenges

While there are several benefits associated with the concepts of Local Living and 20-minute neighbourhoods, there can also be some disbenefits. We explore them in more detail below:

Benefits of Local Living and 20-minute neighbourhoods

The benefits may be summarised as

- Increased convenience: living in a 20-minute neighbourhood means that essential services such as grocery stores, schools, healthcare facilities, parks, and public transportation are easily accessible – this convenience saves time and reduces the need for long commutes, leading to a better work-life balance;
- Active and healthier lifestyles: with shorter distances between destinations, residents are more likely to walk or cycle, promoting physical activity and reducing car dependency – this can have positive effects on public health, reducing obesity rates and related diseases and increased physical activity also contributes to improved mental wellbeing;
- Stronger sense of community: compact neighbourhoods with local amenities encourage social interaction and a stronger sense of community – when people live close to their daily destinations, they are more likely to engage in face-to-face interactions with neighbours, fostering social connections, and creating a supportive environment; and
- Environmental sustainability: local living reduces the reliance on private cars and encourages the use of public transportation, walking, or cycling – this leads to a decrease in traffic congestion, lower greenhouse gas emissions, and improved air quality – and compact neighbourhoods also allow for more efficient use of land, preserving open spaces and reducing urban sprawl.

Disbenefits of Local Living and 20-minute neighbourhoods:

An outline of the disbenefits is:

- Higher living costs: areas with convenient amenities and services tend to have higher property prices and rents – the increased demand for housing in these neighbourhoods

- may lead to affordability challenges, making it difficult for lower-income individuals and families to access these areas;
- Limited choices and variety: while local living offers convenience, it may result in a limited range of options for certain services – specialised or niche businesses may struggle to establish themselves in these neighbourhoods due to the smaller customer base, resulting in a narrower selection of goods and services;
- Planning and implementation challenges: transforming existing neighbourhoods into 20-minute neighbourhoods requires careful planning and infrastructure development – it may involve redesigning streets, improving public transportation, and ensuring the availability of necessary amenities and implementing these changes can be complex, time-consuming, and expensive; and
- Potential for increased noise and congestion: concentrating amenities and services in a compact area can lead to increased pedestrian and vehicular traffic, potentially causing noise and congestion issues and, so, proper land-use planning and traffic management strategies are essential to mitigate these concerns.

It is important to note that the benefits and disbenefits can vary depending on the specific context, local policies, and the way these concepts are implemented. Careful consideration of community needs, inclusivity, and long-term land-use planning is crucial to create successful local living environments.

Implementing the 20-minute neighbourhood concept may not be simple, and councils may face several barriers, including differences between urban and rural areas, as well as between new development and existing neighbourhoods. Some of these barriers are not necessarily new, and councils already face them in delivering projects and place-making. Issues that councils may need to consider include:

- Local planning authority resources and capacity: project delivery may be made difficult because of under-resourcing and a lack of skills, as the capacity of many local authorities has been severely eroded by a decade of austerity; and
- Concerns around new neighbourhood measures: several low-traffic neighbourhoods were implemented very quickly in response to the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic, leading to a perceived lack of consultation, which has resulted in some opposition from a vocal minority of residents. To avoid similar opposition, it is important that such measures are communicated simply, clearly and engagingly, so that everyone can understand their benefits and so that residents feel they have a stake in the scheme. Research commissioned by the Department for Transport found that the majority of people are in favour of changes to support more walking and cycling in their local area, and good engagement with communities is key to ensuring that these voices are properly heard.

The tools available in the application of the policy guidance and concept

Several tools and strategies can be employed in the application of Local Living and 20-minute neighbourhood concepts. Several examples are outlined below:

- Mixed-use development: designing neighbourhoods with

- a mix of residential, commercial, and institutional buildings promotes accessibility and convenience – this allows residents to live, work, and access essential services within close proximity, reducing the need for long commutes;
- Pedestrian-friendly infrastructure: creating pedestrian-friendly streets and pathways is crucial to encourage walking and cycling – pavements, bicycle lanes, crosswalks, and well-designed public spaces contribute to a safer and more attractive environment for pedestrians and cyclists;
 - Transit-oriented development: integrating public transportation networks with residential and commercial areas is a key strategy for 20-minute neighbourhoods – locating housing and amenities near transit hubs promotes the use of public transportation and reduces private car dependency;
 - Access to green spaces: incorporating parks, playgrounds, and green spaces within neighbourhoods enhances the quality of life and encourages outdoor activities – access to nature promotes physical and mental wellbeing, contributing to a healthier community;
 - Community engagement and participatory planning: engaging residents, community organisations, and local stakeholders in the planning and decision-making process is essential for successful implementation – including diverse perspectives ensures that the neighbourhood design meets the needs and aspirations of the community;
 - Zoning and land-use regulations: implementing appropriate zoning regulations can help guide the development of 20-minute neighbourhoods – this includes designating areas for mixed-use development, setting density requirements, and ensuring a balance of amenities and services;
 - Smart technologies: utilising technology and data can enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of local living concepts – smart traffic management systems, real-time transportation information, and digital platforms for community engagement can improve accessibility and connectivity within neighbourhoods;
 - Incentives and regulations for developers: local governments can provide incentives such as tax breaks or streamlined permitting processes for developers who incorporate local living principles in their projects – conversely, regulations can be put in place to ensure adherence to the 20-minute neighbourhood concept; and
 - Monitoring and evaluation: continuous monitoring and evaluation of the neighbourhood’s performance are important to assess the effectiveness of the implemented strategies – this includes analysing transportation patterns, gathering community feedback, and making adjustments as needed.

It is worth noting that the specific tools used will depend on the local context, existing infrastructure, and community needs. A comprehensive approach that combines multiple strategies is typically required to create successful local living environments.

The importance of data in providing the evidence-base

Data play a crucial role in the implementation of local living and 20-minute neighbourhood concepts. Here are some ways data can be used:

- Transportation planning: data about transportation patterns, including travel times, traffic flows, and modes of transportation, can inform decisions on improving transportation infrastructure and services – they help identify areas with high demand for transportation options, allowing for the efficient design and placement of transit routes, bicycle lanes, and pedestrian infrastructure;
- Land use and zoning: data analysis can help identify areas with a suitable mix of land uses and amenities to support local living – it can provide insights into the existing distribution of services and help determine where additional facilities or services may be needed. – the data on population density, housing types, and commercial activities can guide zoning decisions and ensure that neighbourhoods are designed with a balanced mix of uses;
- Accessibility assessment: data can be used to evaluate the accessibility of neighbourhoods by measuring the proximity and availability of essential services and amenities – this includes analysing the distance to grocery stores, schools, healthcare facilities, parks, and public transportation – accessibility metrics can help identify gaps and guide the planning and placement of services to ensure equitable access for all residents;
- Community engagement: data-driven approaches can enhance community engagement by providing a platform for residents to express their needs and preferences – surveys, online platforms, and interactive mapping tools can collect data on residents’ travel patterns, preferences for amenities, and feedback on the neighbourhood design – this data can inform decision-making processes and ensure that community voices are considered;
- Performance monitoring: data collection and analysis enable ongoing monitoring of the neighbourhood’s performance in achieving local living goals – metrics such as mode share (for instance, the percentage of trips made by walking, cycling, or public transit), private car ownership rates, and carbon emissions can be tracked over time to evaluate the effectiveness of implemented strategies – this allows for adjustments and refinements to be made as needed;
- Predictive modelling: data analysis can be used to create predictive models that anticipate future changes in demographics, travel patterns, and land use – these models help forecast the demand for services and infrastructure, allowing planners to proactively address potential challenges and design neighbourhoods that can adapt to evolving needs; and
- Smart infrastructure and services: data from sensors, smart meters, and Internet of Things devices can be utilised to optimise the operation of infrastructure and services within neighbourhoods – for example, real-time data on parking availability, energy consumption, or waste management can be used to improve efficiency and responsiveness.

It is important to ensure that data collection and analysis are carried out in a way that respects privacy and confidentiality. Transparent governance and ethical practices should be in place to protect individuals’ data while leveraging their potential benefits in shaping local living environments.

Comments

There is clearly not a vacuum in policy guidance in relation to NPF4 Policy 15 Local Living and 20-minute neighbourhoods.

The 'statement of preparedness' of the Scottish Government is clearly evident in its consultation draft guidance which has the potential for transformational change.

This article has hopefully highlighted some of the issues with regard to the implementation and delivery of Local Living and 20-minute neighbourhood concepts that may lead to further discussion and research. Hopefully, it has also generated some 'food for thought' to assist in responding to the Scottish Government's current consultation draft about 'Local Living and 20 Minute Neighbourhoods' which will support

the implementation of NPF4. NPF4 now forms part of the development plan and is therefore critical in plan-making and development management decisions. This is the opportunity to shape and inform an NPF4 Policy 15 that 'can help to deliver the healthy, sustainable and resilient places required to support a good quality of life and balance our environmental impact'.

Stefano Smith FRTPI FRSA

Stefano Smith Planning

¹ <https://consult.gov.scot/planning-architecture/draft-local-living-and-20-minute-neighbourhoods/>

² <https://www.gov.scot/publications/chief-planner-letter-transitional-arrangements-for-national-planning-framework-4/>