

Scotland's Land Use Strategy – LINK Briefing

Summary

Scottish Environment LINK was hugely supportive of the production of a Scottish Land Use Strategy (LUS) by Scottish Government in 2011. Five years on, we continue to believe that with full political and financial support it can help secure sustainable land use in Scotland, delivering benefits for the environment, society and the economy. Since its publication, significant progress has been made in a number of areas and other UK countries are following Scotland's lead with this innovative approach. As we await the publication of a revised strategy, it is important that the LUS maintains momentum and overcomes the remaining obstacles to delivery in order to translate recommendations into action. The LUS is particularly relevant to the current Land Reform debate. Unsustainable land use practices in Scotland, often resulting from tax and subsidy regimes, are inextricably linked to land ownership. However, a change of ownership model will not necessarily deliver the positive changes required to secure sustainable land use without a clear steer from the LUS. A coordinated approach to LUS revision and development of the Land Reform Bill would give a real opportunity to improve land use while also tackling other issues, and we believe the debate around the proposed rights and responsibilities statement is a welcome opportunity to recognise and uphold the public interest in land.

Scotland's Land Use Strategy

The Scottish LUS was published in the Scottish Government and laid in Parliament on 17th March 2011, with the following objectives:

1. Land based businesses working with nature to contribute more to Scotland's prosperity
2. Responsible stewardship of Scotland's natural resources delivering more benefits to Scotland's people
3. Urban and rural communities better connected to the land, with more people enjoying the land and positively influencing land use

Progress

Over the last five years, significant progress has been made in some areas, particularly on production of guidance, research to identify data gaps and information sharing. Valuable lessons have also been learned from the two regional land use pilots and we now have greater understanding of the importance of public engagement, quality data and consideration of multiple benefits in land use decisions. However, there are still a number of obstacles to successful delivery of the LUS Objectives. The revised LUS must identify and develop the mechanisms to overcome these barriers and progress on Objectives in the revised LUS must be measured base on quality of outcomes, rather than on inputs. We have identified some key barriers, presented below, and look forward to working with Scottish Government to help secure successful delivery of the revised LUS.

Barriers to delivery

- **Policy alignment:** The LUS currently sits alongside several other key policies such as: the National Planning Framework, National Marine Plan, Low Carbon Scotland, Biodiversity Strategy, Forestry Strategy, Soil Framework, Transport Strategy, River Basin Planning Strategy, Rural Development Programme and others, each of which influence land management in Scotland. However, most of these policies have been drafted independently of the LUS and are not sufficiently aligned to deliver the LUS Objectives.

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- **Data availability:** Lack of good quality data makes it difficult to predict and measure the impacts that land use or management changes will have. Data deficiencies also limit the ability of decision makers to carry out integrated land use planning as per the LUS Principles.
- **Spatial scales:** The Land Use Strategy sets objectives at a national scale and does not set out to define how land can be used at a local level. It claims to provide a framework for local decision making and relies on the National Planning Framework and Scottish Planning Policy to provide a platform for drafting of development plans¹. However, Scottish Environment LINK does not believe that the LUS is currently being translated effectively at regional or local scales
- **Timescales:** The LUS sets a vision for Scotland to 2050 and the benefits of many land use interventions will take time to be realised. Therefore, policy and land use decisions must reflect these long timescales. However this can be challenging, particularly given the difficulties of balancing priorities across sectors, and consequently opportunities may be missed
- **Wider awareness:** The LUS is a national strategy and as such is far removed from many of the people “on the ground” who are responsible for management of the land. There is also a gap in understanding the links between land management practices and their environmental impacts, collectively by land managers, users of land-based products and decision makers

Recommendations

- Land use and land ownership are inextricably linked and there is a real opportunity for the LUS to help secure meaningful land reform if the two processes are adequately coordinated.
- The Land Use Strategy must be fully integrated and aligned with the National Planning Framework and National Marine Plan; and sit *above* all other policies concerning land, setting the agenda for policy revision, development and implementation.
- Guidance, and a framework for decision making on land use at a *national* level, must come from the LUS but this must be coupled with a *regional* and *local* approach to delivery across Scotland, which takes account of specific conflicts, pressures and solutions.
- Guidance, incentives and regulative tools must be fully aligned to secure buy-in from land managers and deliver multiple benefits, ensuring most efficient investment of public money.
- LUS Objectives must be SMART, *outcome* focused and aligned with the targets in supporting strategies. Progress reviews must comprehensively report on progress towards targets, identify and find solutions to barriers to delivery.
- The revised LUS must provide a clear long term vision clearly define the *short-term* and *long-term* steps required to achieve its objectives and this must be used to guide future decision making on public and government policy influencing land use, providing continuity to 2050 and beyond.
- The LUS should be the mechanism for ‘climate-proofing’ land use decision-making, ensuring that all land use-related policies contribute to climate change mitigation and adaptation.
- Five year review cycles across all strategies regarding land use, for example Scottish Forestry Strategy and Scottish Land Use Strategy, must be aligned in order to streamline the review process

¹ Scottish Government (2011). Getting the best from our land: A land use strategy for Scotland. Scottish Government. UK.