

## Land Use Strategy – Towards Regional Land Use Partnerships

### SUMMARY

- The Land Use Strategy is an important tool in ensuring that our land is used sustainably and in a way that helps Scotland respond to the joint climate and nature emergencies.
- A regional approach is required to translate national ambitions into delivery, enabling more detailed conversations about land use priorities and to help target public spending.
- The Scottish Government's intention to establish Regional Partnerships and for these to develop Regional Land Use Frameworks is welcome.
- Scottish Environment LINK believes that in establishing Regional Partnerships it is important that there is clarity about their role and remit and there is appropriate stakeholder and community representation on them with local authorities playing a lead role.
- Partnerships and frameworks must be established by 2023 in order to inform the future rural support regime.

### INTRODUCTION

Land use and management has an increasingly important role to play in helping tackle climate change, both in reducing land use emissions and in increasing carbon sequestration. Scotland's new emissions reduction targets of a 75% reduction by 2030 and net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2045 are very challenging and the Committee on Climate Change suggests that meeting them will require significant land use change<sup>1</sup>. As well as facing a climate emergency, nature is also in crisis with land use and management decisions being a driver of wildlife declines in Scotland<sup>2</sup>. Taking action to help nature can also contribute to tackling climate change through deployment of Nature Based Solutions<sup>3</sup>. Scottish Environment LINK is calling for action to address both climate change and declines in nature as inter-linked challenges; this will require us to make different and better land use choices now and into the future. We believe it is important that land use change is approached strategically so that any benefits of change are maximised and any unintended consequences avoided. The Land Use Strategy (LUS) provides the mechanism through which to help deliver that strategic approach.

The Scottish Government has gradually moved the Land Use Strategy agenda forward and learned – from pilot projects undertaken in 2013-15 – that a regional approach is required. The government has now committed to enable Regional Partnerships (RPs) to emerge by 2021 with each Partnership creating a Regional Land Use Framework (RLUF) by 2023. This is very welcome and Scottish Environment LINK and its members are keen to support and contribute to this process. Given there are no 'ready-made' models to follow for how to operationalise the Land Use Strategy in a meaningful way, there will need to be a process of working out how best to do it in a way that delivers the desired outcomes. We understand the Scottish Land Commission has now been tasked to consider this and provide advice to Ministers regarding options. This briefing sets Scottish Environment LINK's views on some of the issues that will have to be considered to secure regional delivery of the Land Use Strategy.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/net-zero-the-uks-contribution-to-stopping-global-warming/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nature.scot/sites/default/files/2019-10/State-of-nature-Report-2019-Scotland-full-report.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Defined by IUCN as '*actions to protect, sustainably manage, and restore natural or modified ecosystems, that address societal challenges effectively and adaptively, simultaneously providing human well-being and biodiversity benefits*'.

## WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE LAND USE STRATEGY?

Land is a critical asset of the nation and the purpose of the Land Use Strategy is to optimise the benefits that the land can deliver to society. In theory, our land can provide us with a wealth of benefits or services. It can be used to produce food and grow timber, it can sequester and store carbon and be managed in ways that help reduce flooding, and to provide a home for nature. Land can also provide sites for producing renewable energy and for recreation and it can be managed in ways that enhance our wellbeing and the image of Scotland around the world.

Currently, however, it is often managed in a way that focuses only on delivering some of these services, sometimes to the detriment of others. Indeed, in 2018, the Committee on Climate Change published a report on climate and land use in the UK which said that fragmented and incomplete land use policies have resulted in the current unsustainable approach to land use<sup>4</sup>.

At the same time, the Committee has also identified that Scotland can meet emissions reduction targets earlier than the UK as a whole because of the potential we have to use the land differently. The Committee suggests that 20 per cent of agricultural land could be put to another use and it advocates a large increase in afforestation. In parallel, as well as sequestering and storing carbon, the restoration and expansion of habitats such as woodlands, peatlands, saltmarsh and wetlands, for example, will help Scottish wildlife.

Consequently, we need to look again at land use and take a strategic approach to identify the benefits that different pieces of land could possibly deliver and develop a more integrated approach to land use and management. This strategic approach should enable linkages in government policy<sup>5</sup> and inform decisions about targeting public money to optimise the delivery of the services that the land can provide. The Land Use Strategy therefore has an important role to play in re-shaping land use policy.

## A REGIONAL APPROACH IS NEEDED

The first LUS<sup>6</sup> was published in 2011 and included a vision, objectives and a set of principles for land use. This was followed by a series of annual events<sup>7</sup> and Progress Reports<sup>8</sup> that sought to record the work that was going on to take the Strategy forward. At this time, it became apparent that meaningful discussions about land use can only really happen at a more regional level (even if decisions about land use policy have to be made at the national level). To facilitate this the Scottish Government commissioned two regional land use pilot projects in Aberdeenshire<sup>9</sup> and the Scottish Borders<sup>10</sup>, which concluded in March 2015. The aim of these pilots was to explore mechanisms which consider existing and future land uses in a collective and integrated way, and to establish a means to prioritise or guide decisions so as to optimise the use of the land, and to resolve competition or conflicts relating to land use change.

The evaluation of the pilots<sup>11</sup> found that they “*demonstrated a range of possible benefits from developing regional land use frameworks including contributing to climate change objectives by identifying suitable areas for tree planting, peatland restoration, flood risk management, natural flood management measures, and areas most likely to deliver multiple benefits. In this way they can help to ensure that climate change is fully factored into decisions about land use.*”

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theccc.org.uk/publication/land-use-reducing-emissions-and-preparing-for-climate-change/>

<sup>5</sup> Such as to the National Planning Framework and the Biodiversity Route Map.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/getting-best-land-land-use-strategy-scotland/>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Environment/Countryside/Landusestrategy/discussion>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/land-use-strategy-progress-statement-2015/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/environment/energy-conservation/aberdeenshire-land-use-strategy-pilot/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.scotborders.gov.uk/info/20013/environment/723/biodiversity/4>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2016/01/9321>

Further, the Frameworks can “assist in the assessment of how changes in land use and land management may impact on a broad range of ecosystem services; bring stakeholders together and build understanding about competing interests; involve local communities in decisions about their local area; provide context and wider input to a range of local authority responsibilities such as development planning and flood risk planning; and, assist in targeting the use of finite financial resources to where they may have most impact.”

As the government identified in the 2016 Land Use Strategy, the next phase in the development of the LUS is for the expansion of the regional approach beyond the pilots and the government has now said that it wants to see Regional Partnerships emerge by 2021 with each Partnership producing a Regional Land Use Framework by 2023. Whilst we have learned lessons from the pilots, establishing RPs remains innovative and so the government has asked the Scottish Land Commission to develop proposals for these. This preparatory work should consider the potential status, role, remit and function of the Partnerships, as well as the appropriate leadership, stakeholder involvement and spatial coverage. Scottish Environment LINK is supportive of this work and, in what follows, we offer some preliminary thoughts on the key issues.

## DEVELOPING PROPOSALS FOR REGIONAL PARTNERSHIPS AND REGIONAL LAND USE FRAMEWORKS

In developing proposals for the establishment of RPs and RLUFs, Scottish Environment LINK believes there are several important considerations:

1. **Clarity of purpose:** It is vitally important that the government and stakeholders are clear about why the Partnerships and Frameworks are being created so that there is a shared understanding of their role, remit and purpose and what they can deliver or contribute to.

Scottish Environment LINK believes that the Partnerships will require clear Terms of Reference and be given guidance on the process they should follow and the outputs expected of them. This will help to ensure consistency of approach. However, LINK accepts there should be some flexibility for RPs to fine-tune how they operate and the approach they take, recognising regional variation and circumstances. The main purpose of RPs should be to engage with stakeholders and communities of interest and place with the aim of producing RLUFs. The Scottish Government would then use RLUFs in decisions about the allocation and targeting of funding and to help inform future land use policy.

2. **Clarity about role, remit and objectives for the Partnerships:** The Partnerships will require clarity from the Scottish Government about the job they are being asked to do. Scottish Environment LINK believes that the purpose of the RPs should be to produce a RLUF. The Partnership should use their analysis of the region to create a set of recommendations from the Partnership to the Scottish Government about regional priorities for land use and indicative funding needs. The government should then use these recommendations in its decisions about the allocation and targeting of public funds to land management and to help inform future policy. See Figure 1.
3. **Clarity about expected outputs (RLUFs):** Scottish Environment LINK believes that the Framework produced by the Partnership and provided to government should assess existing land use, identify future land use priorities and assess both the opportunities and constraints and likely funding required to deliver against these priorities.

This comprehensive account of land use in the region should provide the basis for a stakeholder engagement process that allows for regionally specific conversations about what the land could deliver and what stakeholders want the land to be delivering in the future. The engagement process should inform the recommendations that RPs make to the government on regional land use priorities and opportunities.

4. **Funding:** Developing RPs and RLUFs will take time and incur costs in terms of staff time, mapping requirements and stakeholder engagement. The government should commit to properly supporting this process financially so that the outputs are useful and robust. The Borders pilot cost £180,000 over two years, but lessons learned in the process would suggest that this cost need not be replicated everywhere.
5. **The role of local authorities and national parks:** Regional Partnerships will have to operate at an appropriate spatial scale. Both pilots were led by local authorities and it could be that local authorities are best placed to have a key role in future because of the representative legitimacy they hold (being democratically elected). Local authorities could also represent the most practical route to develop partnerships because they already have structures and relationships that can be exploited to avoid having to create partnerships from scratch. There are, however, obvious potential problems with local authority leadership given they face budgetary constraints and it is very unlikely there is capacity to carry out this function at present. New, dedicated funding would be needed. There may also be issues associated with the process being led by local authorities because of the existing relationships that these authorities have with land managers. These pre-existing dynamics could influence the process.

The National Park Authorities could also have a key role to play in this process. The Parks have already produced National Park Plans, they have established land manager groups and they have sought to develop integrated land management approaches.

Other alternatives include using already established organisations in the region (like the Tweed Forum, but this sort of organisation is not replicated everywhere), or opening up a tendering process that regional organisations can bid to in order to win funds to establish Regional Partnerships. There are pros and cons of all options and Scottish Environment LINK is open to exploring all possibilities. It is likely however that all Partnerships will require a lead agent (a body, authority or organisation) with the necessary resources, skills, knowledge and credibility to take forward the production of RLUFs and make recommendations to government.

6. **The scale of a region:** Scottish Environment LINK believes that local authorities will have an important role to play, but this is not to say that each local authority should necessarily develop a Partnership. In some places a region could include several authorities or organisations working together and in others a region may be smaller than the local authority. Approximately 12-15 partnerships may be appropriate covering the whole of Scotland. This would result in a budget requirement of approximately £3M (£200,000 x 15). When thinking about the budget it should be borne in mind that the outcome of this process could influence the spending of hundreds of millions annually and that the purpose is to ensure better value for money in relation to that public spending and the degree to which it delivers benefits and services to society as a whole.
7. **Access to spatial data and mapping expertise:** Habitat, land use and ecosystem services mapping was considered an important component of the land use pilots and other projects. Maps and interactive mapping tools make it possible to investigate potential delivery of ecosystem services from different land uses and to develop scenarios depending on land use priorities. The Scottish Government has attempted to signpost appropriate data sources in a Land Use Data Directory, but this is very different from the pilots which benefited from external mapping expertise. Scottish Environment LINK believes that much of the data and mapping tools required at regional level could be provided to RPs from central government sources or through its statutory agencies and the Main Research Providers.

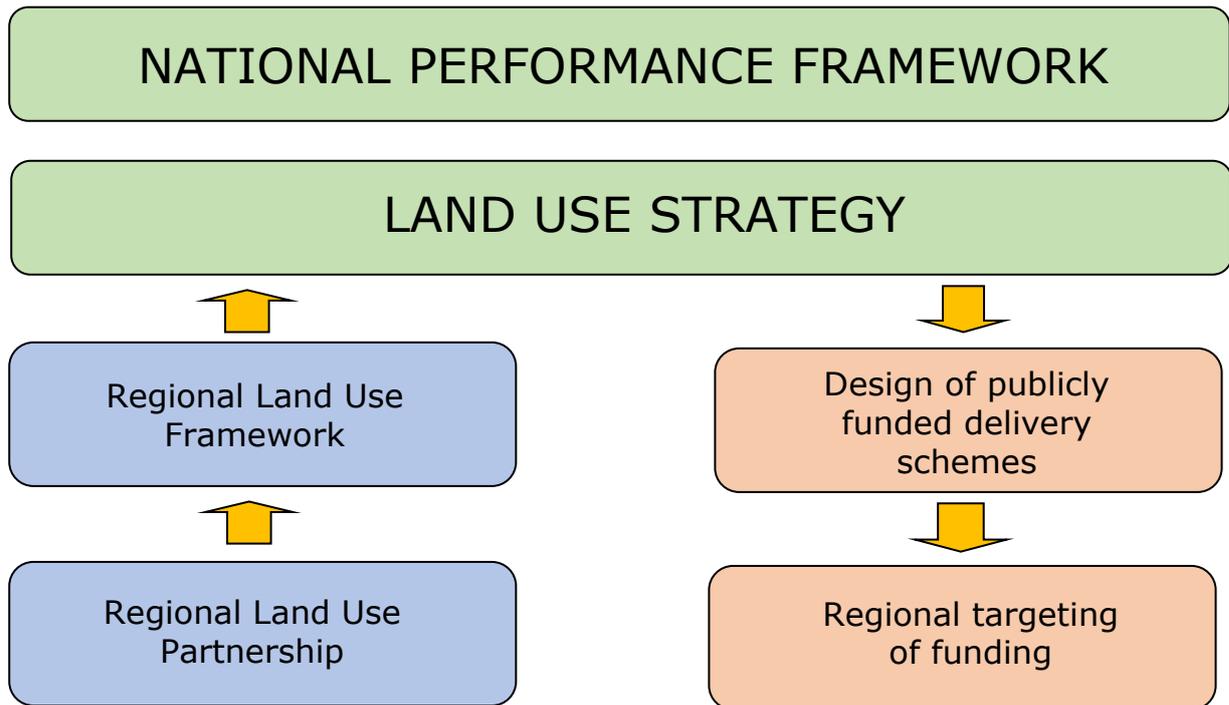


Figure 1: A diagrammatic representation of the relationships between regional partnerships, government and delivery.

## CONCLUSION

Scottish Environment LINK welcomes the government's intention of seeing Regional Land Use Partnerships and Frameworks established. This development of the Land Use Strategy could be extremely important in moving towards a much more focused examination of what goods and services the land can deliver and of how policies should be re-designed to optimise land use. The next phase which involves developing proposals for establishing Regional Land Use Partnerships is critically important and will require constructive dialogue involving all interests.

This briefing represents the collective view of LINK's Land Use & Reform Group.

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