

LINK Consultation Response

Agriculture Support Package Tier 4 informal consultation
29th February 2024



Scottish
Environment
LINK

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Introduction to Scottish Environment LINK

Scottish Environment LINK is the forum for Scotland's voluntary environment community, with over 40 member bodies representing a broad spectrum of environmental interests with the common goal of contributing to a more environmentally sustainable society.

Its member bodies represent a wide community of environmental interest, sharing the common goal of contributing to a more sustainable society. LINK provides a forum for these organisations, enabling informed debate, assisting co-operation within the voluntary sector, and acting as a strong voice for the environment. Acting at local, national and international levels, LINK aims to ensure that the environmental community participates in the development of policy and legislation affecting Scotland.

LINK works mainly through groups of members working together on topics of mutual interest, exploring the issues and developing advocacy to promote sustainable development, respecting environmental limits. This consultation response was written by LINK's Food and Farming Group.

Scottish Environment LINK response to discussion paper

LINK welcomes this discussion about the future of AKIS in Scotland. In this response, we make some general points relating to the role of AKIS in the current agricultural transition before responding to some of the specific questions. As in previous transitions (the 18th century agricultural improvement, the post-war intensification of agriculture) this transition is a response to wider external factors.

First of all, Tier 4 includes but is more than AKIS. Support for co-operation, short food chains, sectoral and supply chain initiatives all belong in Tier 4 as 'horizontal' actions to support agriculture and rural development. These horizontal actions are not generally delivered in the form of cheques to individual farm businesses but are supply-side measures to boost productivity.

These investments are likely to be more cost-effective than other elements of the farm support scheme, in particular Tier 1 which has either no impact or a detrimental impact on productivity and innovation and which is poorly targeted as an income support measure.

It's therefore vital to prioritise Tier 4 investment, rather than as at present seeing it as a 'residual' budget to be set after Tiers 1 and 2 budgets have been allocated.

Publicly-funded AKIS has a key role not just in accelerating the adoption of new practices but in supporting a just transition by assisting businesses facing the greatest challenges and with the fewest private resources.

We see AKIS as one of the four drivers of change, along with changes by individual farms, changes by co-operatives sectors and supply chains, and changes in financial support from government. These four drivers are all necessary.

The purpose of AKIS has to be clearly aligned to delivering the Scottish Government's Vision for Agriculture, in terms of the way it is designed and evaluated. It would benefit from an explicit theory of change.

To some extent, the implicit core theory of change is that farm advice is the core of AKIS, and that change in farming practice is driven by knowledge transmission from individual advisors to individual farmers.



With this mental model in place, discussions often focus on delivery issues – how to organise the advisors in terms of regions, sectors, specialisms etc; one to one or one to many; how to make sure the advisors keep in touch with research findings so they can communicate them to farmers; how to reach the hard to reach.

We would welcome a wider conversation about theory of change before making decisions about delivery methods and structures for farm advice.

It is important to recognise that the customers or beneficiaries of AKIS are not simply farm businesses. The government (and public) are a key customer; AKIS can help deliver public goods in terms of climate and nature, along with more prosperous and vibrant communities.

The implication of this is that AKIS resources should be directed to where they can make the most difference. This is likely to include working more at scale – across farm clusters and landscapes, and across sectors and supply chains. This also makes it easier to align AKIS with other levers for change including responsible private investment, water quality initiatives and species conservation measures.

Other supply chain actors are also beneficiaries – manufacturers and retailers are under pressure to demonstrate reduced greenhouse gas emissions and increased biodiversity from their supply chain. To date the investment in supplier development (especially from most retailers and caterers) has been minimal.

We support retention of the term AKIS, both because it captures the systemic role of knowledge and innovation and because it retains alignment with the EU. We would encourage engagement by Scottish farmers, crofters and institutions in the European CAP network as well as the Horizon programme. The current CAP period 2023-2027 expects to support an increased number of Operational Groups.

Question 1: Should the AKIS in Scotland be one that formally integrates the publicly funded organisations, private advisory services, colleges, universities and main research providers?

We would argue against this for two reasons. First, it's difficult and unhelpful to draw a boundary around AKIS which should operate as an open system, learning from wider knowledge and innovation whether that's technical (sensors, data integration, robotics) or social (community land ownership, sustainable diets, public procurement). There's a danger of agriculture being isolated. Second, a single structure inevitably inhibits innovation and disruption and creates barriers to entry for new actors.

Input and advice from established networks with a wealth of knowledge around Scottish agriculture that has been built over the years by publicly funded organisations, SRUC/SAC Consulting, James Hutton Institute and other main agriculture research providers should be utilised where possible.

Question 2: Should the AKIS be co-ordinated through a governance structure such as a Secretariat and / or an oversight board or similar structure? Please give a reason for your answer.

Yesish



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Question 2a: *If you answered yes, what could this governance structure look like?*

We argue for a published AKIS plan as part of the rural support plan. As well as setting the budget envelope this would describe the elements of the existing system, set (output and outcome) goals for the programme period and establish monitoring and evaluation requirements.

In addition, we support the creation of a new 'head of knowledge' with recognised practical agricultural experience at a senior level working across ARE and ENFOR with overall responsibility for delivery of the AKIS plan.

This post provides a visible link between RESAS/SEFARI research efforts, the providers of agriculture/forestry/land use training and CPD, the farm advisory services, SAC Consulting and SG policy customers.

Question 3: *Should the Scottish Government redirect its financial resources so that it provides subsidised advice to other organisations, whilst recognising the role they play in supporting knowledge and innovation? Please give a reason for your answer.*

Yes, to some extent. There should be a mixed economy within AKIS. So yes, definitely invite proposals from SAOS to do more AKIS through co-ops. Invite the eNGOs to make proposals for advice and facilitation on biodiversity, both at farm and landscape level. See what ScotEID can offer in terms of a benchmarking service. Talk to the Soil Association and SOPA about how they might provide both more handholding to individual businesses in their conversion journey and to the sector as a whole in raising productivity and incomes. Ask the Scottish Crofting Federation and UHI for an AKIS plan for crofting, and ask the views of key farming industry stakeholders such as NFUS, AHDB, QMS, Farm Strong Scotland and NatureScot.

There is a particular role for knowledge exchange and peer-to-peer learning alongside knowledge transfer and other learning methods. There has been a KTIF-funded series of projects on [agroecological knowledge exchange](#), delivered as a partnership across Scotland by Nourish Scotland, Soil Association, Pasture for Life, Nature-Friendly Farming Network, Landworkers Alliance, Propagate and the Scottish Crofting Federation.

Peer-to-peer learning if well facilitated can be impactful not just in the sharing of techniques but in more challenging areas such as values and mindsets. By creating safe spaces for people to disagree, question, listen to and respect each other, this project has supported farmers and crofters to be open to different ideas and try new approaches. We say more about facilitation in questions 9 and 30.

Theme 2: Regionalisation and specialisation

Question 4: *Do you agree that there is a need for a regionalised approach in Scotland, potentially involving additional layers of governance?*



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No. It's possible to ensure that advice is tailored to local conditions without having a local management structure. The FAS website provides a good gateway to a range of services and regional events and this could be enhanced to include other providers and resources.

However, it's clear from the website that there is a significant gap in expertise and resources relating to advice on biodiversity which could be filled through organisations such as NatureScot or the BASE-UK farmer network.

Question 4a: *If so please state your reasoning, together with details of how this could be embedded in the AKIS.*

Question 4b: *Alternatively, do you think that the current approach to recognising regional diversity through the FAS could be improved? If so, please explain.*

No. The FAS use a robust approach for recognising regional diversity.

Question 5: *Given the diverse range of sources that crofters already consult for advice, how can we ensure that they get easy access to the best advice and innovation support?*

We suggested previously that some user research with crofters would be helpful to explore this question. Given that there were over 500 new entrants to crofting in 2022/23, there is a good argument for focusing some design effort here. The utilisation of the Scottish Crofting Federation is important.

Question 6: *What changes if any do you consider should be made to KTIF to encourage more skills support?*
See Q8

Question 7: *What changes do you consider should be made to KTIF to encourage more collaborative development for innovation?*
See Q8

Question 8: *What is KTIF doing well that you would like to see maintained?*

KTIF struggles with an overly narrow definition of both knowledge transfer and innovation; an annual budget cycle with a tight application window; a small budget and a reactive process. We recommend a significant investment in a renewed KTIF, including scope for innovation grants to businesses and sectors as in [England](#); multi-year funding; ability to fund supply chain actions, not just pre-farmgate.

We also suggest that Government and stakeholders jointly identify priorities for innovation over the programming period of the Rural Support Plan. These would be problems which are both significant in scale/impact and in need of innovation – either through entirely new products and processes or through reducing barriers to adoption.

For example, reduction in use of pesticides through alternatives such as integrated pest management, utilising farm nutrient management plans to avoid over-application of fertilisers and diffuse nitrogen and phosphorus losses to the environment and waste reduction are areas which would deliver environmental and societal public goods. The importance of soil testing and avoiding threats to soil health from emerging contaminants are outlined in a recent Fidra report ([Emerging Chemical Contaminants in Agriculture: Soil Health Impacts and Mitigation Measures - Fidra](#)).



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Recommendations for agroecological approaches within this ClimateXChange report and advice from the SRUC and James Hutton Institute authors (and farmer/consultant contributors) should be considered [The potential for an agroecological approach in Scotland: policy brief \(climatexchange.org.uk\)](https://climatexchange.org.uk)

Question 9: *Should support for facilitation be included within the scope of the Fund for example, to include projects with an environmental focus?*

Yes, facilitation should be supported, both in terms of knowledge exchange as described above and in terms of landscape level collaboration.

Landscape-level action is needed to deliver the change required for climate and nature. [Cairngorms National Park](#) is a good example of bringing farmers and land managers together to drive transition.

It's the exception rather than the rule for farmers and land managers to get together and stay together without facilitation. This is a skilled and patient process. It was a major gap in the last SRDP that this element had to be scrapped, and there is now freedom to develop a new programme as part of the Rural Support Plan.

Question 10: *How can we increase the quality and number of applications that we receive under the Fund?*
See Q8. The fund needs a major reboot.

Theme 3: Supporting peer-to-peer learning and farmer collaboration

Question 11: *How can we better support and co-ordinate on-farm demonstrations?*

On-farm demonstrations, trials and visits are all valuable in that they recognize farmers as innovators and researchers. As above, we would encourage the use of innovation grants to stimulate on-farm trials and demonstrations.

In-person visits are expensive in terms of time and money. We suggest that as part of the CPD requirements, farmers are allocated £500 each annually to pay for visits to other farms and/or to host visits to their own farm.

FAS/SRUC/SAC Consulting could have a role in hosting an advertising and booking system, especially through their monitor farm networks.

FAS TV also could have a useful role in curating a searchable video library of on farm demonstrations.

Other key knowledge exchange stakeholders that support on-farm demonstrations and events include Soil Association, NatureScot, James Hutton Institute and AHDB and LEAF monitor farm networks.

Question 12: *How can we encourage an increased use of on-farm demonstrations by a wide range of players throughout the AKIS?*

See Q11

Question 13: *Should funding be available to trial and or demonstrate applied research? 21*

See Q11



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Question 13a: *What elements of these trials and or demonstrations could be funded or supported?*

see Q 11

Question 14: *Should there be support for organised group visits to farms to learn new approaches and see new innovations?*

See Q11

Question 14a: *In what circumstances could these visits be funded and or supported?*

See Q11

Question 15: *How can we increase the uptake of mentoring for new entrants?*

Wrap it up in the new entrants' grant as a requirement. Recruit farmers and crofters and train them as mentors (also as advisors and facilitators) and pay them to be mentors

Theme 4: Promoting diversity and generational renewal

Question 16: *How do we improve access and take up of support for different groups in the AKIS, such as young people, new-entrants, women, crofters and small farmers?*

We found that in the agroecology knowledge exchange project we were able to attract equal numbers of women and men. This was perhaps helped by having women facilitate the groups.

There is a broader question around take-up and who's not engaging with AKIS. There will be a range of different reasons for people not wanting to join in – distrust, anxiety, shame, difficulties with reading, numbers or computers, fear of being non-compliant, physical or sensory disabilities, family disagreements and so on.

A person-centred approach may be needed to adapt what's on offer better to meet people's needs. RSABI could be a valuable strategic partner in this work as they are a highly trusted intermediary.

It is also important to engage with young farmers and crofters through groups such as the Scottish Association of Young Farmers Club and Scottish Crofting Federation.

Question 17: *What new groups might benefit from engagement through the AKIS?*

See above

Question 17a: *How could we support them to engage effectively?*

See above

Question 18: *Is there any scope to better utilise agricultural apprenticeships, including agricultural pre-apprenticeships, to demonstrate competence in agriculture? If so, how?*

Agricultural apprenticeship opportunities such as those available through Scotland's Rural College (SRUC) would be effective mechanisms for demonstrating competence in agriculture and promoting AKIS engagement with trainee farmers.

Question 19: *What further opportunities can be provided to deliver more equitable support to new entrants/the next generation of rural worker?*



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There is a good argument for new models of land tenure outside the crofting counties which allow new entrants to gain secure long-term access to land – including being able to live on it - without having to own it or being able to sell it.

In terms specifically of AKIS we want to see a degree-level course for market gardeners to support a skilled generation of small scale producers both in and around cities/towns and in rural/island areas.

More generally for new entrants, a start-up package should be available including grants and loans; mentoring, being part of a new entrants' network, and CPD.

Question 19a: *What more could be done to support less well represented groups?*

Advice could be requested through advisor experts within SAC Consulting/SRUC and existing Farm Advisory Service farming groups

Question 20: *What new entrant/next generation support is working well and you would like to see maintained?*

Ongoing utilisation of existing apprenticeship schemes and new trainee farmer to farmer support networks and education systems

Question 21: *How can we encourage a greater uptake of succession planning?*

Banks to offer a free service

Theme 5: Digital opportunities and upskilling

Question 22: *Are there gaps in the support to help agricultural businesses develop and uptake digital innovations?*

Question 22a: *If yes, what are they and how could support be improved?*

Question 23: *How can we make better use of the existing and emerging digital opportunities for knowledge exchange and innovation?*

Question 24: *How can we make more use of virtual demonstrations for disseminating knowledge and innovation?*

Question 25: *How can we make better use of social media for knowledge exchange and innovation?*

Farmers appear to use X (formerly twitter), LinkedIn and Facebook social media platforms most, particularly post-Covid. Support groups that aren't currently utilising social media should be supported and encouraged to receive training to use it effectively (e.g. through AKIS or FAS training sessions).

Question 26: *Any other ideas/suggestions?*

Question 27: *How can we encourage greater and better use of benchmarking?*

Interactive data sharing tools managed by Scottish Government or organisations responsible for collecting farm data and social media platforms where farmers can share experiences. The MyHerdStats project by ScotEID is a good example which could be developed to provide benchmarking

Theme 6: AKIS capacity building

Question 28: *Should there be additional networking events across the AKIS? If so, what kind of events, and where and when should they be held?*



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There could be an innovation showcase at RHS and other regional agricultural shows where farmers talk about their innovations. Online networking events could also be organised in the less busy winter periods.

Question 29: *Are there any current examples of networking events that you have found particularly helpful? Farm Advisory Service, Soil Association, AHDB and BASE-UK farmer networks and webinars ([BASE UK – Biodiversity, Agriculture, Soil & Environment \(base-uk.co.uk\)](#))*

Question 30: *How best could accredited training for facilitation be taken forward?*

It would be helpful to look outside agriculture for this. Knowledge transfer can take the form of instruction – ‘this is how you lamb a ewe’ or advice – ‘cut for silage this way to avoid nesting birds’ and it requires expert subject knowledge.

Facilitation is about supporting knowledge exchange, decision-making and co-operation and requires skills in listening, questioning, reframing and encouraging. Expert subject knowledge is not always required or helpful.

So it’s worth looking at what’s available in terms of accredited training (and mentoring) for facilitators is available more broadly outside of agriculture.

Ideas could be taken from the BASIS professional register scheme used by agronomists/farmers [BASIS | Basis Scheme \(basis-reg.co.uk\)](#)

Question 31: *Should the option for training in facilitation be extended to all advisors in Scotland or only specific ones such as those accredited under the Farm Business Adviser Accreditation Scheme for Scotland [FBAASS](#)?*

Training in facilitation should be offered to farmers and crofters who want to add this role to their portfolio.

This response was compiled on behalf of LINK Food and Farming Group and is supported by:

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Soil Association Scotland

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