



Summary briefing: Future of strategic land use planning

March 2025

Key points:

- Regional Land Use Partnerships (RLUPs) bring together the public sector, land-based industry and community representatives. They have the potential to link national policy with delivery on the ground and can be tailored to the opportunities in different parts of Scotland through the creation of regional frameworks for land use objectives.
- RLUPs have the potential to improve delivery of environmental and other objectives through a stronger role in facilitating both public and private funding in line with the region's agreed priorities and opportunities.
- The Scottish Government must build on the pilot RLUPs to capitalise on the considerable opportunities offered by this approach.

Strategic land use planning

Our land is a finite resource and we rely on it for a wide range of objectives: for its economic role in food production, forestry and development, and for the wider ecosystem services it provides. In line with government ambitions, land use change is also necessary to tackle climate change and to restore nature. Meeting these multiple objectives fairly and sustainably requires a strategic approach to land use planning.

Land in Scotland is owned, managed and inhabited by a wide range of different actors and communities. To be effective, land use planning must therefore be collaborative and should ideally involve participatory co-creation.

Background: Regional Land Use Partnerships

The Climate Change Act 2009 requires the Scottish Government to produce a Land Use Strategy every 5 years, which sets out the high-level principles that shape the government's vision for land use change. This strategic vision sits alongside national targets for climate mitigation and planned statutory targets for nature restoration.

The second Land Use Strategy (2016) announced the rollout of Regional Land Use Partnerships (RLUPs). Intended to link the national strategy with action on the ground, these Partnerships were planned to be steered by a board composed of government, land-based industry and community representatives, who would co-create land use objectives for the region, with each Partnership developing a Framework (RLUF) for their region.

RLUPs have been piloted in 5 areas of Scotland, covering the South of Scotland, the Northwest Highlands, Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park, Cairngorms National Park and Northeast Scotland (although the Northeast Scotland pilot was withdrawn).

LINK vision for Regional Land Use Partnerships

LINK members believe that RLUPs can play a significant role in delivering land use change that is effective, locally sensitive and ecologically coherent. In simple terms, we envisage land use planning as follows:

- National targets and strategy are set by the Scottish Government;
- RLUPs outline how these national goals relate to existing and potential land use at a regional level, identifying regional priorities and opportunities for investment;
- Frameworks developed at regional level then influence the distribution of public funding and through opportunity mapping act as a prospectus for philanthropic or responsible private investment.

Public Funding

At present, public funding related to land use is generally distributed through national schemes or competitive funding pots. This approach does not necessarily encourage landscape-scale cooperation or targeted investment in a way that will build ecological connectivity at scale. RLUPs could improve this situation by identifying key habitat networks or other areas of opportunity for collaborating stakeholders.

For this collaboration to be most effective, however, RLUPs should have the ability to inform the distribution of public funding streams (including conditional agricultural payments, forestry grants, NRF and other funds). This could be achieved by ensuring that funding applications receive additional points or are fast-tracked where they are aligned with the agreed outcomes in their respective Regional Land Use Frameworks (RLUF). Significant proportions of enhanced conditionality funding within new rural support (Tiers 2 and 3) could also be earmarked specifically for collaborative schemes with outcomes that support RLUF outcomes.

RLUPs could also play an important role in pulling together large-scale projects that do not fit squarely into other public funding streams, but which could be suitable for capital investment from the Scottish National Investment Bank.

Private Funding

Through opportunity mapping, RLUPs can also help realise the Scottish Government's vision of high-integrity, values-led private investment into Scotland's nature.

These partnerships can identify hotspots where projects could have cross-cutting impacts for carbon sequestration and nature restoration, as well as helping to achieve the scale of projects required by some larger institutional investors. They are also important in delivering a just transition as they capture the key priorities of local communities regarding what would improve their quality of life or the local economy, including improving local natural capital assets. These are the most important underlying conditions which determine the feasibility and success of natural capital projects.

Working with Landscape Enterprise Networks, for example, RLUPs could play roles as coordinators and bring together stakeholders to co-design packages of measures that deliver for the environment, communities, landowners and investors.

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.

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