

Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands
Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity
Scottish Parliament



Scottish
Environment
LINK

12 March 2026

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Dear Cabinet Secretary and Minister

Thank you for your time on 4 March 2026. As you know, the briefing that we produced to support this meeting is a long way from the scale of action we believe is needed, but it does provide a start towards momentum and progress in addressing the challenges faced in order to deliver some progress for climate and biodiversity targets and the Government's vision for sustainable and regenerative agriculture. These challenges are significant: the recent CCC does not support the current trajectory for agriculture in Scotland, noting that, on current trajectories, agriculture is expected to become the highest emitting sector in Scotland between 2026 - 2040 and over relies on NETS and not action; the recent assessment of progress in the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy Delivery Plan includes agriculture as one of the top 5 risks and the Just Transition Commission's recent report identifies lack of progress in all sectors, including agriculture, as a significant and growing risk to achieving a just transition.

Taking the steps we have identified at least starts making some progress and sends a much needed positive message to the many farmers and crofters who are trying to build a sustainable business with nature and climate friendly farming at the heart of that. Feedback we're receiving is that farmers are doing this despite the system, not because of it. This is what we are trying to help you change.

We discussed the 5 proposals we had put to you in the briefing, attached again for ease. We share your vision for sustainable and regenerative agriculture and agree on key outcomes, but we did not pick up much ambition for the scale of changes required given the limitations of funding and operational issues. This is where we think political leadership is now the only option, which in the absence of additional budget for agriculture, includes a willingness to consider modulation or capping.

We summarise below the key points of our discussions.

1. Progress the Whole Farm Plan concept through advice:

Your interest in this is very welcome. The North Highland Farm Cluster model is a good case study and David has kindly supplied the information you were asking for:

North Highland Initiative is currently piloting this exact approach with a small group of 21 farms, using Soil Association Exchange to collect farm data in line with the WFP requirements. NFUS, RSPB, UHI and QMS have all been involved with this project.

Who leads it: Lucy Husband for NHI [Empowering Communities - North Highland Initiative](#)

Who funds it: Funding has come from Sainsbury's, the Royal Countryside Fund and NRS Dounreay with partner orgs including SA Exchange (via SA Scotland), RSPB, NatureScot, NFUS, QMS, UHI, Woodland Trust, ABP, Dunbia, JHI, HIE and UHI having various levels of involvement.



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What were the aims: Supporting sustainable agriculture practices, stronger community ties by fostering a network of local farmers, enhancing productivity and improving market access, developing and showcasing innovative farming practices, supporting access to funding for farmers and strengthening links to Sainsbury's supply chain in the north Highlands.

What were the outcomes: It hasn't ended yet, but the farmers have all their data and have had farm cluster meetings to discuss the results, now moving to 1:1 advice (as the group sessions weren't enough for practice/behaviour change) and are developing individual action plans for each farm. Lucy is currently scoping funding options for a 'phase 2' which will include an overlay of ABP/Dunbia livestock data to start tracking impacts of change.

We also discussed targeting much needed advice effectively, given resources are limited. Our briefing suggests: *Providing this for all c 17,300 farms claiming BPS would cost £52 million. A more targeted approach could be employed, for example, the largest farm businesses at one end and smaller farms and crofts at the other, that would otherwise struggle to complete audits and WFPs.* If, as we suggest, biodiversity and carbon audits are fast tracked as requirements by 2027, the advice for all BPS claimants would amount to between £8.7 million and £17.3 million. We got the impression that you did not see this as achievable in the next 2 years because of funding. However, there was consensus on the goal of ensuring that by 2030 each farm/croft had an individual action plan; and we discussed the scope for a pilot in a particular geographical area or a particular sector.

2. Develop, improve and increase funding for AECS (including organic farming):

We were pleased to hear that a review of payment rates is now underway. The ongoing lack of demand and underspent budget is a result of not making changes that make AECS work better for more people. Delivering some agri environment measures through Tier 2, as a non competitive element, is in theory a workable way forward. This has the potential to deliver improved environmental outcomes, but will require going much further than the current 'greening' requirements. At this stage, we are unclear whether going much further is your longer term plan for Tier 2; we are aware only of further proposals to add grassland requirements in due course. This would be insufficient in our view.

3. Fund 10 landscape-scale collaborative action projects:

This is an area we all agreed was worth reprising, offering as it does a way to reach crofters and small farmers, who are poorly served by the current system, and ways to demonstrate leadership and a way forward.

4. Upscale agroforestry:

We were pleased to hear that you are continuing to look to align agricultural schemes and Forestry Grant Scheme to increase uptake in agroforestry and to continue to promote trees on farms initiatives. We very much welcome these actions and we encourage you to commit to doubling the area of land currently under agroforestry and farm woodland.

5. Replace LFASS with an HNV farming payment;

We understood from the discussion that you are wanting to look at retaining active participants in LFASS and that you are open to HNV schemes but looking for delivery mechanisms. We share the same vision for outcomes and using Naturescot's HNV indicator to define a standard and third party accreditation and then building a farm support payment to underpin HNV farming and crofting would be worth exploring. We would be delighted to discuss this further with you.

Next steps:

We look forward to meeting officials in April to continue to develop progress towards these suggestions. And we will keep in touch with the new Diary Secretary in order to meet the new Cabinet Secretary early in the next Parliament.

We will continue to look for clear commitments along the lines we discussed in a future Programme for Government and we commit to continuing to work with you in a proactive and productive way to help you make the scale of changes that is necessary. Any evidence of progress will be welcomed by us publicly. Our acute concern remains that the can continues to be kicked down the road, which increases the scale and pace of action required and builds increasingly negative impacts on farming over ever shorter periods of time. With clear national targets to deliver and an ambitious vision for transformation, we do not think the only choice is to move at the pace of the most reluctant and slowest. There are plenty of progressive voices in farming who simply want clarity and direction. So with clear leadership, a well communicated plan and trajectory, sensitive implementation and appropriate targeted support, this sector is ripe for meaningful delivery.

Scotland is in danger of running out of time for a sensible, just and planned transition but our hope in working with you, is to ensure this remains achievable.

Finally, given the sometimes fraught relationships across those engaged in farming in Scotland, there remains a case to consider professional mediation in this sphere. We have seen considerable success in this approach with the upland management sector through the [Common Ground Forum](#) and we are beginning to see value in the approach with marine and fishing sectors too. Farming is a third area where relationships are fraught and mediation would provide a mechanism to manage expectations and productive cooperation for all through a new strategic group, which through effective facilitation reaches agreement on the way forward, including budgets and targets; and then monitors high level progress. LINK members would also be delighted to contribute to the more detailed work on scheme design through a different mechanism, where ARIOB has spent most of its time. We would be delighted to support a reboot like this and we recommend this as a precursor to the just transition we all seek and need.

Best wishes

Pete Ritchie, Executive Director Nourish Scotland, Convenor of LINK's Food and Farming Group

Deborah Long CEO, Scottish Environment LINK and Dan Paris, LINK's Director of Policy and Engagement

David McKay, Director Soil Association Scotland, Vice convenor LINK's Food and Farming Group

Vicki Swales, Head of Land Use Policy, RSPB Scotland

Mike Robinson, Chair Farming 1.5