

Comments and Suggestions: Scottish Land Commission Workshop Discussion Paper on Rural Land Use Partnerships

Bruce Wilson | bwilson@scottishwildlifetrust.org.uk

Summary

- A transition to a just and sustainable system for spatial, economic, and land use planning is essential to meet stated Scottish Government ambition.
- Regional Land Use Partnerships (RLUPs) must be part of the step-change necessary in planning and economic strategy to tackle climate, nature, and social issues. Delivery of Nature Based Solutions and helping develop a new regional approach to wellbeing must be at the heart of their work.
- It is essential there is join up between the National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) and the RLUPs. This will be vital in achieving a green recovery for Scotland in the wake of COVID 19.
- The key function of RLUPs should be to deliver key targets under the Scottish Government's National Performance Framework, particularly those for climate and biodiversity. Important elements of this will be engaging local communities and delivering the Scottish Nature Network.
- RLUPs must recognise that the nature and climate emergencies are inextricably linked, and that the two must be tackled together. A fundamental function of the RLUPs must be tackling the worsening declines in nature and the climate emergency. The Ecosystems Approach and Place Principle are fundamental to the approach that RLUPs should take. Communities of place and communities of practice are invaluable for values and knowledge sharing, while community involvement helps democratise planning.
- Green and blue infrastructure should feature as a key sector within Scotland's Infrastructure Investment Plan (as advised by the Infrastructure Commission). RLUPs must be integral to delivering this natural infrastructure investment at the regional level.
- Legislative backing, sufficient resources and buy in from all aspects of the community and government are vital ingredients for success.

Introductory comments

The Scottish Wildlife Trust welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Scottish Land Commission's Discussion Paper for Regional Land Use Partnerships (RLUPs). The Trust notes that in parallel the Scottish Government is advancing discussions on the National Planning Framework 4

(NPF4). It is essential there is join up between the two processes and that the NPF4 process is not seen as an exclusively urban focused document and the RLUPs as exclusively rural.

We are keen to emphasise the need to ensure Scotland is maximising this opportunity for a step change in our land use planning. The Scottish Wildlife Trust is concerned by the lack of any mentions of nature, biodiversity, or substantive environmental issues such as pollution in the Discussion Paper. If, as stated in the discussion paper the principal driver behind the Scottish Government's commitment to establish RLUPs is to drive delivery of climate targets then to achieve this they must place Nature-Based Solutions¹ at the heart of their work. The First Minister has recognised that:

"Biodiversity loss and the climate crisis are intimately bound together: nature plays a key role in defining and regulating our climate and climate is key in shaping the state of nature."

NBS help address the climate and biodiversity crises as well as provide wider benefits in terms of health and wellbeing and new opportunities for sustainable development. International, [expert advice](#) as referred to by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) is that NBS can provide "37% of cost-effective mitigation needed between now and 2030 to hold global warming below 2°C".

We cannot justify reproducing business-as-usual because of institutional inertia – the climate and nature emergencies, in a context of worsening inequality, is the key context. We need to ensure we are all changing how we work to adapt to that, including in how we visualise a liveable future given the long life of this framework. Because of that, we need to ensure *placemaking, wellbeing, sustainability, and inclusivity* are not simply buzzwords, but are fundamental to our approach and are understood in a way that promotes substantive, community-engaged action for nature restoration and climate breakdown.

It is also essential that RLUPs are framed as a positive solutions focused exercise that can open the door to multiple opportunities not only for the environment and communities but also sustainable economic activity. When the Trust refers to sustainable in this context, we refer to the Brundtland definitionⁱⁱ:

"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

This definition is the underpinning for the UNs Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and by extension the Scottish Governments National Performance Framework. This definition of sustainability should be referenced in the planned further documentation from the Land Commission too often sustainability is selectively used to represent very short term economic benefit for a small group of stakeholders rather than overall sustainability which must balance social, economic and environmental interests.

Here, we initially provide brief answers for each of the discussion questions, and then some key background information that should be incorporated in a new vision. We see this as very much a first

step and look forward to refining our thinking in partnership with the Land Commission and other stakeholders.

Discussion questions

1) What are the key functions you think regional partnerships should be able to deliver?

- Delivery of key objectives and targets under the Scottish Government’s National Performance Framework, particularly those relating to climate and biodiversity.
- Pioneering a new approach to decision making that puts wellbeing at the centre, and takes us beyond the traditional narrow focus on GDP.
- Nature regeneration by providing a coordinated approach to delivery of new green and blue infrastructure (and regional implementation of this element of the national Infrastructure Investment Plan), restoration of existing habitat, coordinating the needs of nature connections, the provision of native, biodiverse woodland, deer and sheep controls, and the restoration and protection of key ecosystems, such as peatlands. In effect providing a bottom up solution to delivering the Scottish Nature Network.ⁱⁱⁱ
- Prioritisation and distribution of future land management funding and rural support. Currently this would cover payments made under the CAP, structural funds and LEADER but in the future this could help channel schemes that are devised out with the EU framework.
- Just climate action by providing a regional framework for place-based natural solutions.
- Engaging people from across the community in land use decisions by providing a space for discussion for communities of place and communities of practice/interest^{iv}, encouraging knowledge and values sharing.
- RLUPs must help centralise environmental and biodiversity concerns in all aspects of land management. It is insufficient to package these as ‘environmental issues’ when sustainability interacts with *all* land use and *all* socio-economic activity, while species and habitat diversity are fundamental to our livelihoods.
- If RLUPs are to articulate the public interest priorities in land use at a regional level, then a definition of public interest must be agreed that is acceptable to all stakeholders. This cannot simply be an assessment of concentration of ownership and must recognise that managing land to achieve climate and biodiversity objectives is in the public interest.
- A mechanism for coordinating and sending knowledge throughout the planning and land use system, rather than being simply a vehicle for top-down policy delivery.

2) How best should regional land use partnerships connect to existing and proposed regional spatial and economic planning?

RLUPs should form an integral part of the multilevel governance structure of regional spatial and economic planning. They should not be reduced to regional delivery vehicles for top-down policy. Instead, it is best that RLUPs have sovereignty in this system, encouraging deliberative involvement in

them. This way, place-based approaches and RLUPs inform policy throughout the spatial and economic planning system. This helps meet the needs in the NPF4 for placemaking and more local control over planning and provides more democratic participation in identifying and resolving local planning and land use needs.

Historically, there has not been sufficient resources allocated to development and implementation of the Land Use Strategy (LUS) and it should be given far greater prominence in decision making. This would require legislative backing rather than continued existence as a strategy. This would give the RLUPs firmer legislative grounding and ensure they are statutory parts of planning and land use decisions and ensure the LUS is given substantive attention.

RLUPs could connect with existing regional and economic planning by taking a catchment scale approach to decision making, helping to breakdown traditional boundaries that arise from local authority or other regional definitions. This is also vital if they are to achieve their objectives on climate change because decisions must be treated across whole catchment areas to the benefit of the wider environment and not local or regional interests.

3) What is going to be needed to ensure partnerships can operate effectively and have sufficient impact?

- Legislative grounding for RLUPs and the Land Use Strategy, so that the historic situation with the Land Use Strategy highlighted above is not repeated.
- Sufficient resources. RLUPs have the ability to deliver against key objectives but only if given the resource to do so.
- Sufficient buy-in from all parts of the community and government including Scottish Government Rural Payments and Inspectorate Division
- An underpinning of the “ecosystems approach” throughout the RLUP process. The ecosystems approach underpinned the Land Use Strategy and the Scottish Government have usefully produced an information note on the approach in relation to land use.^v
- Transparent and accountable decision making and good communication.
- A clear and transparent dispute settlement mechanism.
- A strong degree of sovereignty, ensuring its decisions carry weight according to the principle of subsidiarity.
- A period of meaningful consultation with diverse stakeholders to ensure appeal beyond the “usual suspects” and wide stakeholder engagement. This period should establish agreed definitions of *placemaking* and *wellbeing*.

Background – building a new vision

The Regional Land Use Plans (RLUPs) are not being developed in a vacuum. At the same time as work is done towards these, Scotland is creating a new National Planning Framework, will be updating the

Land Use Strategy, and is increasingly seeking to embed the principles of wellbeing, placemaking, inclusivity, and sustainability in the overall economic and planning strategies. At the same, UK withdrawal from the EU has kickstarted debates about the future of agriculture and rural support after Scotland comes out of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) – a scheme of some £600 million.

Business-as-usual has not worked

Agriculture and related land uses remain key factors in Scotland’s GHG emissions and the net-decline in biodiversity, as well as in both source and diffuse pollution. The most recent [report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) (IPCC) warns that in order to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius significant changes in the way land is used must be made. The report also highlights the importance of reducing more than just carbon dioxide. Limiting global warming will require a 35% reduction in methane by 2050, relative to 2010, and significant reductions in nitrous oxide and black carbon. Agriculture and related land uses account for 68% of methane and 79% of nitrous oxide emissions in Scotland - there’s no way to keep the planet on a sustainable footing without a major change in the way that our land is managed.

In terms of greenhouse gas emissions, while Scotland’s agricultural greenhouse gas emissions have declined since the 1990s, these declines ‘[are often associated with reduced production rather than increased efficiency](#)’^{vi}, and agricultural systems continue to contribute over a quarter of Scotland’s emissions – the second largest contributor nationally.

Scotland’s [ecological footprint](#) already exceeds ‘three-planet living’ as recognised recently by SEPA, and reducing our ecological footprint nationally and internationally is essential for any long-term viability of the economy. In particular, ‘[one-planet prosperity](#)’^{vii} requires an urgent, systemic transition in our food production. This correlates with Scotland’s existing commitments under [Sustainable Development Goal 12](#)^{viii} to ‘ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns’ with ‘developed countries taking the lead’. The RISE Foundation recently concluded in an [analysis of all EU member states’ safe operating space](#) for livestock that the UK has no room for further expansion, and that reductions in livestock and intensity are necessary to comply with existing climate targets and remain within planetary boundaries^{ix}.

In the wider context, the latest [Living Planet Report](#) highlights (referencing [Tittensor et al](#)) that most of the Aichi targets are unlikely to be met, while ‘...the main drivers of biodiversity decline continue to be the overexploitation of species, agriculture and land conversion’. Citing research in the journal *Nature*, the authors point out that “of all the plant, amphibian, reptile, bird and mammal species that have gone extinct since AD 1500, 75% were harmed by overexploitation or agricultural activity or both”^x. The Report warns, overall, that the we’ve witnessed a decline of 60% in population sizes between 1970 and 2014.

In the social context, quality food remains unaffordable for many in Scotland: The poorest 10% in Scotland would need to spend 70% of their income after housing costs to follow the [Eatwell Plate](#)^{xi}. A tenth of children in Scotland are raised in food insecurity, while two thirds of adults are overweight or obese. Obesity is even set to overtake smoking as a [leading cause of female cancers](#)^{xii}. The current

food system does not work, it relies on a high investment of subsidies to break even economically, is environmentally unsustainable, and is contributing to a growing diet-related health crisis.

In addition to this, Scotland's farmers and crofters often report a lack of clear understanding around the objectives of the current SRDP schemes. RLUP offer the potential to better connect and engage land managers with public spending objectives and lead to more positive, potentially outcome based, results.

A new approach

The RLUPs have a role to play as part of a wider step-change in land use, land use change, spatial planning, and, crucially, place-based approaches. The Scottish Wildlife Trust welcomes the holistic and ambitious approach to the National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4). In particular, we welcome the call that NPF4 will 'provide a spatial planning response to the Global climate emergency'. This must also underpin the RLUPs and the Land Use Strategy. We reiterate past comments that the nature emergency and climate emergency are inextricably interlinked, and RLUPs should additionally ensure that ambitious actions for inclusive, place-appropriate nature restoration are included. This ambition must be reflected and built on throughout the multilevel system of governance.

We believe the RLUPs have a key role to play in transitioning to a connected, resilient, and inclusive framework for nature, green and blue spaces and infrastructure, and just climate action, whilst supporting diverse and inclusive local economies.

Wellbeing

We note comments recently by the First Minister that transitioning to a Wellbeing Economy is at the heart of economic thinking. This can and should include the environment and biodiversity. Health, wellbeing, and equitable access to nature are mutually reinforcing, yet the distributions of benefits and burdens of environmental issues are unjust and insufficiently addressed. The RLUPs should have a key function of identifying these issues, whilst having regard to inter-regional inequalities. As NPF4 builds on and contributes to new ways of judging the success of an economy, it must include the quantity, quality, distribution, and centrality of nature in our everyday lives. This again points to a key role of the RLUPs in spatial and economic planning. We propose that, as wellbeing has a deserved and central place in the narrative of NPF4, it must be reflected too in the principles and functions of the RLUPs. This should, in time, be realised with concrete actions, clear and accountable indicators, and a compelling vision for a sustainable, just transition.

Indicators must go further than existing economic metrics. As the First Minister has also outlined, we need a new way of looking at our economy that takes us beyond the traditional narrow focus on GDP. We believe a key step in this process should be a wide, meaningful consultation on what wellbeing means in a socioeconomic and environmental context, and how it can be realised spatially. This must be an inclusive process encompassing the diversity of Scottish civil society and reflecting the deep intersections that cut across environmental, nature, climate, social, and economic issues, and how they interact in planning and economic strategy.

Placemaking

We welcome the inclusion of the Place Principle as an approach to place-appropriate planning. Nevertheless, as an approach we need a wider civil society discussion as to what this means in practice and how it can, if done properly, contribute to the democratisation of planning at local and regional scales. Planning and land needs must be based on the needs of local communities while adhering to our duty to reversing nature degradation and taking just climate action. The emphasis on placemaking in proposals for NPF4 are encouraging. It is imperative that this reflects a substantial approach embedded at multiple levels, and a central principle of deliberation in the planning system. This also needs reflecting in the RLUPs.

The Land Use Strategy, the RLUPs, and NPF4 will have to incorporate place-based approaches to locating, defining, and resolving infrastructure, land, and planning needs. The Trust has outlined a place-based approach to natural solutions to help realise this for nature restoration and just climate action: Because *place* is a co-production of a space and its social use, it can be an important means of involving communities democratically. The behavioural changes that have been shown to emerge as a result have wide benefits for nature. This can be a means of channelling increasing environmental awareness in a more democratic, community-based way.

This should include recognising and mitigating social inequalities in access to green spaces. The Scottish Government's and COSLA's [Place Principle](#)^{xiii} should define this approach which "helps partners and local communities unlock the National Performance Framework and make it applicable to where and how they live and work".

Nature-based solutions and climate action

The Scottish Wildlife Trust has outlined [elsewhere](#) its approach to place-based nature-based solutions that offer wide benefits, including just climate action.

A fundamental function of the RLUPs must be tackling the worsening declines in nature and the climate emergency. Whilst we welcome the prominence of climate action in the Discussion Paper, occluding nature declines and other environmental issues risks reducing planetary sustainability to a question of greenhouse gas emissions. The Trust has been clear that radical decarbonisation of the economy, in every sector, is essential. Moreover, this effort *cannot be substituted* by nature-based solutions: both actions are necessary and desirable in their own right.

There is a risk that RLUPs, in aiming to tackle climate breakdown, worsen both GHG emissions and biodiversity, if the right information is not available. For example, as ambitions increase across Scotland for greater tree-planting to sequester carbon, these actions must demonstrate that they adhere to a strong biodiversity test and ensure that the focus is on allowing permanent woodland, as the public has indicated it would prefer to see as a climate action. Non-native commercial forestry does not deliver significant, long-term carbon storage, yet this is not reflected in the strategy. Because the vast majority of commercial forestry in Scotland is harvested to produce short-lived timber products, such as pulp and fence posts, the majority of the carbon stored is released back into the atmosphere within 15 years, while carbon dioxide has an atmospheric lifespan of centuries or

millennia. It is crucial that RLUPs do not become a facilitator of compromised carbon markets based on non-native commercial forestry: this would undermine both biodiversity and climate action by presenting a false solution to both.

Connecting policies and reconnecting nature

Nature restoration, ecosystem benefits, and climate breakdown actions are maximised with greater spatial connectivity. At the national level, therefore, the emphasis should be on ensuring policy and planning is coordinated, consistent, and coherent across sectors, which should be the role of the Land Use Strategy. Historically, however, this has been poorly consulted as other related policies have been developed, such as the Forestry Strategy. The Trust believes the LUS should be given far greater prominence and enter legislation as an act to ensure it is given due regard. The approach so far has failed to ensure the Strategy performs its function of informing and coordinating land use across space and over time. This act should incorporate the creation of RLUPs to ensure a coherent and resilient policy framework to this crucial decade of action on climate and nature emergencies.

National Planning Framework 4, the Regional Land Use Frameworks, the Land Use Strategy, and sector-specific policies such as the Forestry Strategy need to be better integrated to ensure the necessary coherence.

There is also a need for the RLUPs to provide coherence for green and blue infrastructure investment, which the Infrastructure Commission has advised should be included in the Infrastructure Investment Plan. Otherwise there is a risk of this being ad hoc and not providing as much benefit as it might without strategic delivery.

This framework, including the RLUPs, should be informed by the needs for greater habitat connectivity and more sustainable transport routes for people and goods. Whereas grey infrastructure, such as roads and railway lines, fragment habitats and lead to significant impacts on nature, green and blue infrastructure deploy natural and naturalistic principles to minimise impacts, mimic natural processes, and maximise connectivity of green spaces, in both urban and rural contexts. RLUPs have a key role to play in regionalising this strategy of green corridors for people and nature, and in engaging communities of space and practice in identifying needs and solutions.

Suggestions for the discussion paper

We agree in broad terms with the paper's inclusions, but we believe there are areas where it can and should go further.

The key omission in the paper is any mention of nature or biodiversity, or specific environmental issues beyond climate breakdown. We welcome the prominence given to the climate emergency, but stress that other environmental crises must be visible to avoid shifting environmental indicators – for instance, reducing carbon emissions but increasing impacts on biodiversity.

We recommend the adoption of a Scottish Nature Network ⁱⁱⁱ as a high level deliverable in the NPF4 with local delivery managed through RLUPs.

Two related spatial planning concepts are key to this.

Nature connectivity and habitat fragmentation

Human-caused habitat fragmentation occurs when infrastructure, such as a fence, road or trainline, cuts through a contiguous habitat or habitat mosaic. From an area perspective, the infrastructure may only be a very small portion of overall land conversion, but by splitting habitats can have a substantial impact on the species' range. Over time, this impacts on the genetic diversity of fragmented species which can make those species less resilient to shocks, such as disease.

Moreover, the ability to pass through habitats is important for avoiding severe weather events and adapting to climate change.

Even relatively flat infrastructure, such as a road, will be impassable to species which are sensitive to changes in microclimates, such as leaving a cooler, damper green area for an area of tarmac. Species sensitive to shelter may also avoid exposure and keep only to areas offering shelter. This can impact on those species' ranges with implications throughout the food web.

Scotland's policy landscape is poorly equipped to recognise these problems. NPF4 needs to make these problems visible so that they can be avoided and, where this isn't possible, mitigated.

Beyond this, however, the RLUPs need to proactively reconnect nature, both in terms of the movement of species and our own connections to nature. NPF3 included provisions for a *national ecological network*, but in practice this has not been applied and suffered from being poorly embedded in implementation strategies and from being poorly communicated politically and to stakeholders. The RLUPs and NPF4 need to increase this ambition to help reverse the declines of species and habitats on which all activity ultimately relies. The primary means for doing this will be through opportunity mapping and RLUPs will help pull in invaluable stakeholder expertise to inform this.

We urge NPF4 to adopt nature connectivity as a basic principle of nature restoration. Large efforts, such as Cairngorms Connect, are of substantial importance, but connectivity, and restoration in general, cannot be limited to protected areas. Infrastructure has a key role to play in ensuring this, both in terms of sensitivity to the environment and in the incorporation of natural and naturalistic features into the design of buildings, materials, provision and waste utilities, and places.

Green and blue infrastructure

Green and blue infrastructure is defined in the Planning Bill as "green and blue infrastructure means features of the natural and built environments (including water) that provide a range of ecosystem and social benefits,". The European Commission defines green infrastructure as "a strategically planned network of high quality natural and semi-natural areas with other environmental features, which is designed and managed to deliver a wide range of ecosystem services and protect biodiversity in both rural and urban settings." Implemented holistically, reconnecting habitats can also incorporate

less impactful ways of moving through our own environments. This requires joined-up thinking across city planning, land use, communities, and environmental strategies.

The Infrastructure Commission for Scotland has already advised that green and blue infrastructure should feature as a key sector within the Infrastructure Investment Plan. If this advice is heeded by Scottish Government then RLUPs must be integral to delivering on natural infrastructure investment at the regional level.

The RLUPs should help coordinate the needs of local communities, facilitate the knowledge and values exchanges among communities of practice, and feed this information into the broader system to help in the allocation of resources and contribute to the co-production of national planning and land use management.

ⁱ Nature-based Solutions (NbS) are 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”.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.un-documents.net/our-common-future.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ [The Scottish Nature Network has previously been referred to as the National Ecological Network in Scotland. The name is unimportant but the principle of providing “strategic coordination for our green and blue infrastructure so it provides greater overall benefit” is important. This briefing from Scottish Environment LINK: <https://www.scotlink.org/publication/nature-networks/> and this document from the Landscape Scale Conservation Group give excellent overviews of the network: <https://www.scotlink.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Scotlands-NEN-LSC-Working-Group-Paper-Oct-2019.pdf> we would like the Land commission to read both of these documents in relation to our submission.](#)

^{iv} A community of place is taken to mean the immediate local community by geography, a community of practice is a group of people who engage in collective learning in a common area of interest and a community of interest is a group of people who share a common interest or passion. Land management issues often involve all three.

^v <https://www.gov.scot/publications/applying-ecosystems-approach-land-use-information-note/>

^{vi} <https://www.gov.scot/Resource/0052/00523863.pdf> p.2

^{vii} <https://www.sepa.org.uk/media/219427/one-planet-prosperity-our-regulatory-strategy.pdf>

^{viii} <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-consumption-production/>

^{ix} http://www.risefoundation.eu/images/files/2018/2018_RISE_LIVESTOCK_FULL.pdf

^x https://www.wwf.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-10/wwfintl_livingplanet_full.pdf p.28, see also Ch.3

^{xi} https://foodfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Affordability-of-the-Eatwell-Guide_Final_Web-Version.pdf

^{xii} <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/16894996.obesity-set-to-overtake-smoking-a-leading-cause-of-female-cancers/>

^{xiii} <https://www.gov.scot/publications/place-principle-introduction/>