

Aberdeenshire Council response to the ‘Scoping a Strategic Vision for the Uplands’ consultation

What follows is Aberdeenshire Council's response to the Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) consultation 'Scoping a Strategic Vision for the Uplands'. This document provides the Council's response to some key questions asked by SNH as part of the consultation process.

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Where are the uplands?

1. What broad characteristics should we use to define the uplands? Some possible approaches are summarised in the annex to this note.

Based on the annex supplied as part of the consultation, we would support classification based on non-enclosed farmland. While using purely altitude is attractive due to its simplicity, creating a single cut-off altitude for the whole of Scotland will be difficult due to the different conditions across the country as the annex indicates. Using existing administrative boundaries would not seem like a way to single out only upland areas. Using vegetation types may be impractical as this will change over time – however others are better placed to assess this.

What benefits do the uplands provide to Scotland?

2. What are the key social, economic and environmental benefits that the uplands provide for Scotland?

Clearly the uplands support a range of communities and interests. Farming, forestry and sporting estates are particularly prevalent land uses. There are examples where these land uses are integrated but also, arguably predominately, there are also instances where they are seen as very separate enterprises. Greater integration should be the focus of any vision.

Conservation and environmental protection are particularly characteristic of many upland areas with both individual landowners and organisations owning and managing land with conservation and environmental benefits in mind. Indeed a large extent of the uplands are designated for environmental interests in some form, much of which derives from European legislation. This could be a consideration of the vision given the UK's future out of Europe.

Recreation and tourism benefits are becoming increasingly important and promoted in upland areas. In this sense, the uplands are a key resource both for the local communities and for those that come to visit.

Renewable energy generation has expanded significantly in upland areas in the last 20 years. This raises opportunities but can also conflict with other interests such as conservation and landscape protection.

The ecosystem services agenda highlights the importance of the uplands in underpinning all of the issues mentioned above and in carbon storage and in flood prevention for example.

3. How can upland land use help to prevent or reduce the impacts of climate change?

Renewable energy generation, carbon storage through soil & water management, water storage & run-off reduction and tree planting could all play a part in climate change mitigation and adaptation. However, all of these things cannot and should not be done everywhere. Finding appropriate places to do them, with adequate incentives to land managers, could be a focus for any vision.

What should an upland vision include?

4. A strategic vision could inform decisions about the balance between different land uses in different parts of the uplands. What are the key choices that an upland vision should address, and why?

Communities in the uplands need to have a strong economic future. The vision should consider how to engender and support this future by promoting and adequately incentivising and redirecting measures which deliver both social and environmental benefits. There needs to be a greater awareness of the benefits the uplands deliver but also the opportunities there are to deliver greater benefits.

5. Are there any other topics or issues that should be included in an upland vision, and if so why?

The various issues identified as key in both questions 2 and 3 all merit inclusion.

6. Are there any topics or issues that should be excluded from an upland vision, and if so why?

It is probably inappropriate for any single stakeholder to identify issues which should be consciously excluded from the process. Such decisions should ideally be agreed based on an initial assessment of the issues.

How should the vision be developed?

7. Which stakeholders do you think it would be particularly important to involve, and how? Would particular approaches be needed, for example, to reach particular groups?

A single vision for Scotland (assuming that is what's proposed) will not be able to involve all communities and stakeholders in the core group creating the vision. Appropriate representation from the various interests in the uplands needs to be brought together to collectively create the vision – be that a stakeholder group or similar. However, regional events which aim to engage

more widely will give the communities of interest a chance to input. The nature of the uplands, with its dispersed populations, will of course make wide engagement challenging.

8. What are your views on the process that might be needed to bring together the key interests and develop a shared vision?

Strong leadership by Scottish Government, supported by its agencies, will be key in gathering support and ensuring the process is taken seriously by all relevant stakeholders. There also needs to be a commitment from government that the vision is a first step rather than an end point in addressing the issues that the process will undoubtedly raise. The process in creating the vision does need to be as inclusive as possible so as to give it meaning across the interest groups. A stakeholder group representing these interests coupled with a regional consultation process is a suggested way forward. As always, if there is an existing process/group that can adequately represent the issue, then this is preferable to creating something new.

9. Who would be best placed to lead this process?

Strong government support and buy-in to the process is key. If it is a single visioning exercise for the whole of Scotland is proposed then Scottish Government, with the support of its agencies, are the obvious lead.

10. What form should a vision for the uplands take (visual or descriptive, maps, diagrams or text)?

Map based visions are effective communication tools but we assume that to create one, there would have to be some form of spatial expression for the priorities for particular areas? If this was the intention then many might welcome it although it would undoubtedly be a complicated process to get to a shared spatial vision for particular areas. We have some experience of this through the Aberdeenshire Land Use Strategy Pilot. A single map based visioning process for the whole of Scotland may be impractical.

The simplest form of vision is likely to be a headline vision statement supported by a number of principals. In many ways, any vision created at this stage would have to be seen as a first step. Undoubtedly the process of creating the vision will raise a number of issues and opportunities that need to be explored fully, with strong support from government, so as to realise the potential economic, social and environmental benefits.

11. Do you have any other comments or suggestions?

Nothing further to the above

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