Evaluation of the Regional Land Use Framework Pilots

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In 2013, the Scottish Government established two regional land use pilot projects - in Aberdeenshire and the Scottish Borders - to test innovative approaches to land use decision making. CAG Consultants were appointed to undertake an external evaluation of the pilots, looking at the processes of developing and managing the projects, as well as the final outputs. Findings from the evalution are being used to inform the 2016 review of Scotland's Land Use Strategy.

Introduction

Scotland's first Land Use Strategy[1] (LUS) was published in March 2011. The Strategy sets the agenda for sustainable land use in Scotland and aims to guide and support decision-making. A second LUS (2016 – 2021) is due to be published in 2016.

In 2013, the Scottish Government established two local authority led Regional Land Use Framework Pilot Projects, one in Aberdeenshire and one in the Scottish Borders. The pilots were intended to test regional scale approaches for translating the LUS at local level. The development of the pilots was guided by a three stage programme specification, but each was allowed the flexibility to develop an approach which reflected their local circumstances. The pilots concluded in March 2015.

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[1] Scottish Government (2011) Getting the best from our land - A land use strategy for Scotland http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2011/03/17091927/0

The aims and objectives of the pilots were:

- To trial a mechanism that considers existing and future land uses in a collective and integrated way, with a view to optimising land use.

- To establish a mechanism to prioritise or guide decisions about possible competing or conflicting uses.

- To produce a regional land use framework in each pilot area, which would guide decision-making so as to optimise land use, whilst reconciling potential conflicts and competition.

Evaluation

An external evaluation was undertaken to assess the processes followed in the development and management of the pilots, and the final project outputs, against a set of criteria provided by the Scottish Government. The aim of the evaluation was to learn how the two pilots, with different local circumstances, approached the challenges of regional land use decision making. The evaluation focused on six key research themes (see below).

The evaluation primarily used qualitative research approaches, including a series of facilitated workshops and semi-structured interviews with project managers, project teams and wider stakeholders. These were complemented by desk based analysis of project documents and outputs. Findings from the evaluation will be used to inform the forthcoming review of the LUS.

Main Findings

1. Process of establishing and managing the pilots

- Both pilots were local authority led and involved external stakeholders in project governance. Both also involved extensive collaboration with expert partners in project development and delivery - the James Hutton Institute in Aberdeenshire and the Tweed Forum, University of Dundee and Environment Systems (GIS support) in Scottish Borders.

- Both pilots involved wider stakeholder engagement, although there were differences in the nature and scale of activity and the role this played in shaping the projects. Aberdeenshire were concerned to keep the project to schedule so ran a tightly defined programme of stakeholder workshops, whilst the Scottish Borders appointed a dedicated staff member to lead a broader programme of stakeholder engagement.

- The lighter touch approach adopted by Aberdeenshire allowed for a rapid deployment of resources, but was criticised for not involving a wider range of stakeholders in the early, developmental stages of the work. The more intensive Scottish Borders approach was enabled by strong, existing local networks, but proved far more resource intensive than anticipated.

- The pilots and/or their stakeholders expressed concerns about a perceived low level of engagement from some groups, including tourism, recreation/leisure, health, farming and non-land management rural businesses. However, this was not thought to be a result of a lack of effort on behalf of the pilots.

- It was suggested that a lack of a clear incentive to participate, the theoretical nature of the exercise and the language used (e.g. relating to the ecosystems approach), might have deterred some individuals and organisations from becoming involved in the process. From the perspective of the project teams, stakeholder engagement was noted as being time and resource intensive.

- The project teams and wider stakeholders regarded the pilot objectives and requirements to be extremely challenging. Issues identified included tight project timescales, the challenges associated with managing different sectoral interests, the complexity of land use decisions and the broader sensitivities associated with the agenda (given the land reform debate and private sector concerns about a more regulatory approach).

2. Extent to which the pilots met their requirements

- Both pilots were found to have operated, and delivered their outputs, in a manner broadly consistent with the Scottish Government's requirements.

- For the most part, the two pilots' approaches were in line with an ecosystems approach. However, arguably Aberdeenshire's approach to stakeholder engagement did not allow sufficient involvement in the development of the project and its outputs as would be expected under an ecosystem approach.

- A desk based assessment of project documents from both pilots found that the key messages, theoretical approach and recommendations were consistent with eight of the ten LUS Principles for Sustainable Land Use. Regulation (Principle b) and the use of derelict or vacant land (Principle g) were not clearly reflected within the documents.

- Both pilots' written documents took account of Scottish Government policy and local/regional policies. They both considered a wide range of land uses, but chose to exclude or limit their focus on certain issues. For example, the Aberdeenshire pilot did not address coastal issues, due to concerns about over-complicating the project. The Scottish Borders pilot largely excluded statutory issues such as development and renewables, in order to avoid confusion amongst stakeholders.

- Both pilots produced a written document (Aberdeenshire's 'Issues and Opportunities' document and Scottish Borders' 'Framework' document), complemented by a GIS decision support tool. The written documents differed in tone and intention, but both focused on developing decision support mechanisms (as opposed to strategy).

- Stakeholders felt that these outputs were of value, but were uncertain about whether or not these would provide a meaningful mechanism for guiding future land use decision making. They suggested that this could only be determined through practical application and that this would be largely dependent on future government policy.

3. Potential impact on land use decision making in local areas

- The pilots were supportive of the concept of regional frameworks as a mechanism for guiding land use decisions. Overall, however, stakeholders felt that the framework approach needed to evolve in order to realise its potential.

- Both pilots identified several practical applications for the materials that had been produced. These included informing strategic development planning, biodiversity offsetting and targeting, flood risk management planning, and the development of a new forestry and woodland management strategy.

- There was support from both pilots for using their GIS tools to guide the strategic targeting of funding, although it was acknowledged that this would be constrained by the limitations of the tools (e.g. data availability, quality and resolution of maps).

4. How stakeholders perceive the frameworks

- Stakeholders from both areas were positive about the pilot projects, the project management teams and lines of communication. They felt that the pilots had taken an effective and reasonable approach to the development and management of what was seen as a highly challenging project.

- Some stakeholder criticism was recorded (in Aberdeenshire). This focused on the narrow programme of stakeholder engagement, an overly academic approach and a perceived over-emphasis on data collection in the early stages. The pilot acknowledged these as lessons learnt.

- Stakeholders from both pilots noted that they would have liked to seen more engagement from private land owner / managers.

5. Do the benefits justify the costs and resources?

- Participants in the end of project evaluation workshops felt that the pilots had been useful and had provided a firm basis for future activity. Both pilots identified a range of benefits associated with their activities and identified a range of expected follow-up work.

- Benefits included improved and new stakeholder relations, the opportunity to pursue an ecosystems approach, and the development of spin-off projects (e.g. to assess historic land use value). The GIS tool, associated datasets and maps were seen as a useful legacy and foundation for future work.

6. Role of a regional land use mechanism

- Both Aberdeenshire and the Scottish Borders were supportive of a mechanism to guide land use decision-making. The issue of scale was regarded as important but complex. Both pilots endorsed the regional approach, but noted the need to accommodate a multi-scale approach.

- A multi-scale approach was seen as necessary to accommodate some stakeholders' preference to consider land use at a more detailed, localised level than the region (e.g. cultural services) and also to accommodate the fact that ecosystems services do not recognise administrative boundaries (e.g. for flood management a larger scale approach might sometimes be appropriate).

- The Scottish Borders pilot reported that the sub-catchment area was the most effective level at which to engage people.

- It was suggested that if, in the future, local areas were required to develop local frameworks, there would need to be an effective mechanism for ensuring that they took appropriate account of regional and national priorities, as well as local priorities.

Summary and Conclusions

The two land use pilots were established to test the practicality of preparing regional land use frameworks, to inform the review of the Scottish Government's Land Use Strategy. The pilots had flexibility to develop their own approach, but were expected to comply with a set of criteria provided in a project brief provided by the Scottish Government.

The project teams and stakeholders regarded the pilot's objectives and requirements as challenging, due to timescales, complexity of land use, potential for tension between those with different interests and the sensitivity of the agenda. These issues played a significant role in dictating the pilots' approaches to the

different aspects of delivery (e.g. project governance, stakeholder engagement, development of GIS tool and supporting documents).

Generally speaking, the stakeholders involved in the evaluation held positive views on the pilots. They felt that they had taken an effective and reasonable approach to the development and management of a challenging project. There was evidence from both pilots of benefits that had been generated through the development process and some evidence of future potential benefits. These included improved stakeholder relationships and practical applications of the materials that had been produced.

Overall, stakeholders were optimistic yet cautious about the pilots' potential to have a positive impact on local land use decision making. They felt that more work was required to develop the pilot outputs and noted the need to accommodate a multi-scale approach to guide land use decision making.

How to access background or source data

The data collected for this social research publication:

☒ may be made available on request, subject to consideration of legal and ethical factors. Please contact landusestrategy@gov.scot for further information.