

Confor response to Crown Estate Scotland Rural Assets Strategy Consultation

Confor is the not-for-profit organisation for sustainable forestry and wood-using businesses in the UK. We have more than 1,500 member companies representing the whole forestry and wood supply chain. Confor focuses on the strategic issues that are vital to the success and sustainable future of the sector. These include helping to build the market for wood and forest products, creating a supportive policy environment and helping members to become more competitive and successful.

Question 1: Do you think the proposed principles are appropriate for the rural assets strategy? Please give reasons for your answer.

Yes. The proposed principles provide a strong 'bottom line' of financial, environmental and social sustainability, combined with a pragmatic, long-term and evidence-based approach to weighing the costs and benefits of management decisions.

Question 2: From the principles listed above, please choose the three you think are the highest priority and rank them 1 (very high priority) to 3 (lower priority).

No answer.

Question 3: Please identify any additional guiding principles you think Crown Estate Scotland should include in the rural strategy.

No answer.

Question 4: Above we outline some of what we consider to be strategic considerations. What do you think are the key external considerations that should be addressed by the rural assets strategy?

Climate change: the strategy should include an assessment of the current and future impacts of climate change on the Estate.

The role of the land to Scotland as a whole should be a consideration. On the one hand, the Scottish landscape is a vital asset in Scotland's identity in the world, and the Crown Estate has a unique role in the strength and heritage of the 'Crown' as a global brand, and in its management of some of the most distinctive features of Scottish landscape – salmon, coasts and gold. On the other hand, there are concerns about a growing cultural gulf between town and country in Scotland, with conflicts between recreational, environmental and economic interests. The Crown Estate can play an important role in helping to build bridges of understanding about our shared land.

Question 5: What should the main objectives be for this strategy? In answering this, please consider, who should benefit from Crown Estate Scotland managing rural assets?

Carbon Zero: Across all its activities, the Estate should aim to become carbon neutral, or a carbon sink. The range of its activities and management decisions required will provide a very important example for others to follow.

Climate resilience: The strategy should include a plan for mitigating the risks posed to its activities from climate change.

Question 6: Should Crown Estate Scotland continue to be a significant provider of agricultural tenancies, whatever the cost, or should there be a rebalancing of the assets for financial sustainability?

Agricultural tenancies should only be provided if there is a clearly demonstrable benefit. The report notes that at present this activity does not generate significant revenue profits (and therefore represents an opportunity cost to the public purse), and that the estate has little influence over the activities of the tenants. This suggests that, at present, tenancies are merely providing a significantly subsidised lifestyle to a relatively small number of people, for no public return.

There seems little benefit in restructuring tenancies to encourage new or younger entrants to farming, for example, if it merely trains people for a profession in which there are few opportunities to progress.

However, interesting proposals are being developed by the NFU for shared venture tenancies. These would enable tenants to be partners in long-term management objectives, such as forestry or natural capital enhancement. If new land management partnerships such as this can be developed and demonstrated, within the principle of long-term financial sustainability, this could be a valuable way to revive tenancies for the twenty-first century as a means to engage more people, in more diverse ways, to manage the land.

Question 7: Assuming Crown Estate Scotland continues to be a long-term manager of let agricultural land, what should be the priorities that a future strategy should address?

No answer.

Question 8: How can Crown Estate Scotland best fund the extensive capital investment requirements on the agricultural estate without reducing public benefit investment in other sectors?

Any capital investments should be underpinning a strategy which will lead to the agricultural estate becoming financially viable, whether this is through larger holdings or diversification into farm-forestry, or other strategies. No investments should be made which only prop up an ultimately loss-making activity.

Question 9: How should a future strategy inform decisions regarding which assets might be sold and which should be retained in the longer-term?

No answer.

Question 10: What do you consider to be the key opportunities to involve local communities in the work of Crown Estate Scotland?

Involving local communities should be regarded as integral to economic activity, rather than separate or conflicting with it. For example, developing community understanding of how timber production provides the economic basis for good forest management and provision of amenities such as paths and car parks, as well as supporting the wider rural economy through wood-processing businesses.

Question 11: How can we remove barriers to communities being able to input into decision-making?

Confor's Stakeholder Engagement guidance emphasises that one size does not fit all in engaging communities.

Good practice includes engaging communities early on in any decision-making processes, developing genuine listening skills, holding site visits, good on-site signage including contact details, and cultivating human relationships and personal trust through face-to-face meetings with community leaders.

Things to be avoided include presenting a 'corporate' front, prolonging difficult debates in written media, or 'town hall' style public meetings.

The guidance applies whether the aim is to develop new activities with community involvement, manage existing activities, or tackle problems.

The guidance is available at:

<https://www.confor.org.uk/media/247211/stakeholder-engagement-2018-wales.pdf>

Question 12: Should Crown Estate Scotland seek to be a long-term investor / manager of new commercial forest areas or are other bodies (such as Forestry and Land Scotland) better placed to manage forests in the public interest?

Crown Estate Scotland should continue to invest in and manage new commercial forest areas. Forestry and Land Scotland is already the largest single forest manager in Scotland. As the forestry sector grows and matures, it is valuable to retain a diversity of owners and managers to ensure a range of strategies are developed and tested both in the public and private sectors.

Question 13: What are the key factors / priorities that should be taken into account in the management of Scottish Crown Estate woodland and forest assets?

The value of the timber production both as revenue for the Estate and to the Scottish economy as a whole.

The contribution of forestry activities to Scotland's climate change targets.

The opportunity to develop patterns of integrated land use, in collaboration with tenant farmers or with the Estate's residential or fishing interests, which can feed in to wider government policy.



Question 14: Should a different approach be taken to invest in new woodlands on the Estate to help integrate forestry into wider land use? E.g. through the sale of existing woodland to support investment in new planting elsewhere.

Where forestry could be managed just as well by a private owner, yes, consideration should be given to the sale of forestry assets to support investment in new planting. This may be appropriate if there are outlying blocks of woodland which are not delivering the specific aims of the estate's forests as well as the rest.

Or if there was a decision to sell tenanted farms to the sitting tenant, and there are woodlands within the logical farm boundary, then the estate could consider including those woodlands in the sale to encourage a continuance of integrated land use.

It would be wise for the Estate to maintain the commercial core of the forestry asset portfolio, and seek to achieve a balanced range of age-classes across it, to ensure a steady income from timber sales for the estate.

Question 15: What factors should be taken into account when we decide to retain, sell and / or buy residential property assets?

No answer.

Question 16: What are the key factors that should be taken into account in the strategy regarding the future residential portfolio?

No answer.

Question 17: Are there any specific issues relating to mineral workings on the Scottish Crown Estate that should be addressed in a future strategy?

No answer.

Question 18: Should Crown Estate Scotland actively seek mineral development opportunities (e.g sand and gravel extraction) where these exist within the current portfolio and elsewhere, through the purchase of new sites?

It would be better for the Crown Estate to support the development of a Scottish bioeconomy by promoting the development of renewable and biobased alternatives to mineral extraction.

Question 19: Should Crown Estate Scotland be managing these rights in a different way? If so, please explain.

No answer.

Question 20: Should Crown Estate Scotland continue to provide support through financial rebates to local angling clubs and tenants of beats in category three conservation rivers to allow them to continue to manage the rights locally? If not, please suggest an alternative approach.

No answer.

Question 21: Should Crown Estate Scotland consider selling some salmon fishing rights to fund investment?

No answer.

Question 22: Bearing in mind that in most cases Crown Estate Scotland do not own the river bank or river bed, do you believe they should be investing in their salmon fishing interests and if so in what way?

No answer.

Question 23: What should the priorities be for built development on the existing rural assets?

No answer.

Question 24: Should Crown Estate Scotland actively seek new built development opportunities through the purchase of new areas of land?

No answer.

Question 25: Should Crown Estate Scotland seek to promote/support the development of renewable energy schemes (wind, solar, hydro, biomass) on the rural assets in line with relevant strategic planning guidance/priorities and working with relevant stakeholders? If so, how high a priority should be given to renewable energy development in the future strategy?

No answer.

Question 26: How should a rural strategy address the requirement to enhance and protect natural capital and promote more sustainable use of natural resources?

The strategy should endeavour to ensure that economic and environmental activity on the estate support one another: so that greater economic activity results in in greater investment in natural capital.

Question 27: What should be the key priority for the strategy in relation to biodiversity and wildlife management?

The Estate should seek to develop a metric to measure biodiversity and wildlife, so as to develop strategies which result in net biodiversity gain across the Estate's activities, akin to strategies to become a net carbon sink.

Developing a workable biodiversity metric is challenging, but would have widespread value in land management across the UK.

The Woodland Wildlife Toolkit developed recently by a wide range of stakeholders provides a practical method for measuring biodiversity condition of woodland. The assessments and checklist could be adapted as a Farmland Wildlife Toolkit or for other land uses.

<https://woodlandwildlifetoolkit.sylva.org.uk/>

Question 28: Are there other strategic natural capital or environmental issues or opportunities that the strategy should address and if so what are these?

No answer.

Question 29: How should the strategy prioritise investment in projects that enhance cultural and natural heritage infrastructure of most benefit to local communities and visitors to the Scottish Crown Estate?

No answer.

Question 30: What should the priorities be for future acquisitions of property be and what benefits should Crown Estate Scotland focus on delivering in a future purchasing strategy?

No answer.

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