OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee

Tuesday 9 January 2024

Session 6

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Tuesday 9 January 2024

CONTENTS

NET ZERO, ENERGY AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE
1st Meeting 2024, Session 6

CONVENER

*Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP)
*Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP)
*Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab)
*Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con)
*Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Dr Caroline Brown (Royal Town Planning Institute)
Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)
Sarah Cowie (National Farmers Union Scotland)
Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
Ailsa Raeburn (Community Land Scotland)
Dr Paul Walton (RSPB Scotland)
Bruce Wilson (Scottish Wildlife Trust)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Peter McGrath

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee

Tuesday 9 January 2024

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:15]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Edward Mountain): Good morning, and welcome to the first meeting in 2024 of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee. I suppose that this is probably the last time that I will get a chance to say this: I hope that everyone has a very happy new year and that it brings everything that they want.

Agenda item 1 is a decision on whether to take items 3 and 4 in private. Item 3 is to consider the evidence that we will hear today on the biodiversity delivery plans, and item 4 is to consider our work programme. Are we happy to take those items in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Scottish Biodiversity Strategy (Draft Delivery Plan)

09:16

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is an evidence session on the draft delivery plan to accompany the Scottish Government's new biodiversity strategy. The committee is continuing work that we started in late 2022, when we took evidence on the draft strategy. On 12 December, we discussed the delivery plan with a panel of experts on marine biodiversity. This morning, we will hear from a panel of experts and stakeholders on the terrestrial aspects of the plan.

I am pleased to welcome Dr Caroline Brown, director for Scotland, Ireland and English regions at the Royal Town Planning Institute; Sarah Cowie, policy manager for the National Farmers Union Scotland; Dr Paul Walton, head of habitats and species for RSPB Scotland; and Bruce Wilson, head of policy advocacy for the Scottish Wildlife Trust. Joining us remotely is Ailsa Raeburn, chairperson for Community Land Scotland.

I point out to those watching and to committee members that Dr Hannah Rudman, who was down to attend as a witness, has been unable to attend. Thank you to all those who have attended. I am pleased to welcome Finlay Carson MSP and Rhoda Grant MSP from the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee, who are in attendance for today's evidence session. You will both get a chance to ask questions nearer to the end of the evidence session.

We will spend about 90 minutes on this session and move straight into committee members' questions. Before we do, because the evidence is on the biodiversity strategy on land, I will make a voluntary declaration of interest and remind members that my entry in the register of members' interests shows that I am a member of a family farming partnership—we farm land—and that I am also involved in a wild salmon fishery, where I am a partner. Both of those have possible relevance to what we are discussing this morning. Full details can be found in my entry in the register of members' interests.

On that note, I turn to the first questions, which come from Douglas Lumsden.

Douglas Lumsden (North East Scotland) (Con): My first question is in two parts. First, do you feel that you have been engaged in the development of the plan and has it been meaningful engagement? Secondly, do you feel that the plan takes into account the potential socioeconomic impacts of the proposed actions? I

will ask Caroline Brown to go first, because she is nearest to me, and then we will probably move around the table.

The Convener: Before we head off on the question, as there are quite a lot of people—there is a panel of five, as it were—if somebody says something that you would say, it is absolutely acceptable for you to say, "I agree", and not to repeat it all. Otherwise, we will not get through all the questions. If you do not agree and you want to come in and you have not been brought in, just raise your hand.

Dr Caroline Brown (Royal Town Planning Institute): Thank you for the opportunity to be here. To my knowledge, the RTPI has not been involved in the preparation of the delivery plan, but we have been involved in some of the specific actions that are part of the plan. For example, we are part of the technical advice group that is co-ordinated by the planning team in the Scottish Government and that has just produced its draft biodiversity guidance on policy 3 in national planning framework 4. The short answer to the question of whether we have been engaged with this particular document is no, but we are engaged in activities on some of the actions that are in it.

The second part of your question was about socioeconomic impacts. One of the things that strikes us about the delivery plan at the moment is that it does not say much about areas that are very deficient in nature. Other places have used that policy approach. For example, in London, nature-deficient places have been mapped, which is a starting point for interventions. We are concerned that some urban environments that are currently very deficient in nature, and where the poorest or most marginalised communities might be living, are not represented in the action plan. There is a great opportunity there for intervention and action on biodiversity, because there is very little there at the moment. That is missing from the plan. I could expand on that, but I do not want to use up too much time.

Sarah Cowie (National Farmers Union Scotland): Thank you for inviting NFUS to the committee. The answer to the question about engagement is both yes and no. NFUS is quite well engaged with NatureScot and the Scottish Government on the development of the plan and farmers and crofters are obviously crucial to solving the biodiversity crisis, so it is essential that we have that engagement. In that respect, we are engaged, but I do not think that the breadth and depth of the engagement has been enough. Agriculture is a broad sector: we have many different farm types, sizes and practices in Scotland and full engagement with the whole sector needed to be a bit better.

I lead our environment and land use committee, which is made up of farmers from across Scotland and represents different types of farm. That committee led on our response to the consultation and I engaged with them on that. We did our own engagement. We spoke with our environment and land use committee and delivered the results of that to NatureScot and the Scottish Government to say what we would like to see in the future.

That process did not stop when the consultation closed: we will continue that into this year. In the first half of this year, we will look further at the delivery plan actions. We will undertake focus groups with our members across Scotland and will feed the results back to NatureScot to see what more can be done to engage on the plan. We would be very happy to share the results of those focus groups with the committee.

Farmers are involved, and NFUS has been involved in the engagement on this plan, but we think that that could go much further in order to take into account the depth and breadth of farming practices and experiences.

We think that the timeline for consultation was very short. The 12 or 14 or however many weeks it was at the end of last year was just not long enough for organisations to fully engage on all of the 150 or so actions in the delivery plan. The timelines are challenging. We think that it is crucial that the Scottish Government and NatureScot do not close the door at the end of the consultation period but instead keep up their engagement. If that is not forthcoming, NFUS as an organisation will do that ourselves to ensure that our members are heard.

The socioeconomic impacts are also a concern. Farmers in rural communities are under a lot of pressure at the moment. We are being asked to deliver on climate, nature, food, biodiversity and the needs of rural communities. Farmers are being asked to deliver a lot and we want to ensure that the socioeconomic impacts are well understood so that we can mitigate those in future.

Dr Paul Walton (RSPB Scotland): Thank you for having me here and for that good question. The previous Scottish biodiversity strategy ran until 2020, so we are almost three years late with this one. The previous strategy had a Scottish biodiversity committee that was chaired by the cabinet secretary and included representatives from NFUS, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and from environmental non-governmental organisations such as Scottish Environment LINK, RSPB Scotland and the Scottish Wildlife Trust.

It was a very collegiate approach and that was the top table of biodiversity in this country. Since then, there has been an absolute sea change in

the engagement of non-governmental stakeholders in the development of the plan. To begin with, for a lengthy initial period of the development of the plan, there was very little direct engagement with environmental NGOs. That is problematic on several fronts: we have expertise in our employees and our volunteers and we are bound to be quite important delivery partners for all this, because we can access funding that Government bodies cannot and we have delivery capacity on the ground—the Scottish Wildlife Trust and the RSPB have people out there, employed in Scotland, in the right areas for biodiversity.

It is a long-running issue; we have been trying to make the point to Government that our engagement has not been sufficient. Indeed, we are told by external funders, such as the National Lottery Heritage Fund, that they really need Government and NGOs to come together with an agreed plan to make sure that our priorities align and then come to them with a coherent ask—the NLHF is very explicit about that—but the lack of engagement makes that quite difficult.

I suspect that there has been a serious attempt to mainstream biodiversity across Government in the development of the plan. An awful lot of that engagement has been within the Government family. We are told by NatureScot that that is why it has been difficult to engage the non-governmental family. Maybe we will come on to talk about that, but the success in that endeavour has been a bit patchy. As an environmental NGO, we have been held rather at arm's length until the latter stages, when there was a series of constructive workshops, which we were very grateful for.

Therefore, we had a chance to input latterly but, broadly speaking, the plan is not the co-designed delivery plan that we anticipated and looked forward to. Maybe there will be some teething troubles and some things to address in response to that.

The second point about socioeconomic impacts is a massive question. Biodiversity loss is a global crisis and Scotland is part of it. The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, IPBES, which is the biodiversity equivalent of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, has said that we are losing biodiversity at a faster rate than ever before in human history. It has been crystal clear that that is an emergency in terms of the welfare of the living world but also in terms of human welfare and the economy. In order to address that, changes will have to be made, and those will have socioeconomic impacts. Arguably, one could say that one expects the strategy to have socioeconomic impacts. If those impacts are not there, the strategy probably is not working.

It remains to be seen what those impacts will be, because implementation will be everything. The previous strategy that I talked about was actually pretty good, in our view; the problem was that it just was not implemented. Therefore, we have a situation in which we are continuing to lose biodiversity in this country. Since 1994, there has been a 24 per cent decline in average abundance of recorded wildlife species. That is a decline of a quarter since 1994, which is hugely significant. There is on-going biodiversity decline, which we know from the "State of Nature 2023" report, which was published just a few weeks ago. We can expect socioeconomic impacts but, in our view, those can be positive.

Douglas Lumsden: Before we move on, Paul, you mentioned that the engagement was not there at the start of the process but that it has improved. Is that now fixed or could the Government do more to improve engagement as we go through the process?

Dr Walton: The delivery plan points to a governance structure that involves a strategic biodiversity council, but it is not clear who will be on that. Another body—an operational delivery board—is also proposed. It seems that non-governmental actors and delivery partners will be part of the operational delivery board but not the strategic biodiversity council. I might be wrong about that, but that is our reading of it.

It would be much better to have non-governmental senior representatives on the strategic biodiversity council, so that we can make sure that our organisational priorities and the Government's priorities for biodiversity align in the same places on the same actions, and so that we agree that the same ecosystems and species are the priorities for Scotland.

That is partly under way. The species at risk initiative that NatureScot is running has been good, and it has been very collegiate. A cross-sectoral group is agreeing on what the species that most need conservation in Scotland are, and we are doing quite well. There is a bit of a way to go in more general governance, but NGO membership and wider non-governmental membership of the strategic biodiversity council is a way in which that could be fixed.

09:30

Bruce Wilson (Scottish Wildlife Trust): I take your point, convener: I agree with everything that Paul Walton said. Also, there are two things to say about engagement, as Sarah Cowie highlighted. The first relates to member engagement. Beyond the policy level—which applies to the staff of

RSPB, NFUS, Scottish Wildlife Trust and others—there has been very little filter through to the general public. We need to address that. We have seen that in relation to highly protected marine areas and we need to get better at direct engagement.

Secondly, I completely agree with Sarah Cowie about the timeframe to deal with the—I cannot remember how long it ended up being—105-page consultation. Our response to the Government ran to more than 65 pages. I would be amazed if anyone in the Government had enough time to read all that, but we felt that we really needed to make our points. We need to get better at condensing some things and at getting public feedback. However, as Paul Walton said, engagement did improve. I particularly want to mention Sue Haysom, at NatureScot, who did a load of work to get feedback from a range of stakeholders and compile that into the final document.

The difference between what has happened in this process compared with the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill is that there was a structured way for people from the agriculture industry to feed into the development of the bill, but we did not have the same process for the biodiversity framework, which includes the natural environment bill. I would like to move towards that. I agree with what Paul Walton said about NGOs and other delivery partners needing to be on the oversight board.

Socioeconomic impacts go both ways. We also need to be aware of the massive potential benefits of investing in biodiversity. At the lower end, the estimate is that we would get about £1.35 return on investment in the natural world, and at the higher end the estimate is that we would get about £15 return on such investment. As well as potential negative socioeconomic impacts—such as costs to businesses in the short term—we need to look at the long-term benefits.

The primary benefit is the continuation of life on earth. It may sound like I am overstating that, but Paul Walton is right that the IPBES report is not glowing; we are 25th from the bottom on the biodiversity intactness index. We need to turn that around and bear that in mind. It is crucial for us to see the biodiversity investment plan that is promised in the document and I want to see a timeframe for it. I was slightly worried that the consultation document seemed to make reference to the biodiversity investment plan being only about the use of the nature restoration fund, which is public money that NatureScot administers and uses for projects. To my mind, the biodiversity investment plan needs to include the whole range of potential funding sources so that we can be aware of where those might come from and see how they might play their part. The Scottish Government signalled strongly that it wants a range of sources to pay for some of the actions in the plan.

Douglas Lumsden: Ailsa, do you have anything to add? [*Interruption*.]

The Convener: Ailsa, you are on mute at the moment.

Ailsa Raeburn (Community Land Scotland): Can you hear me?

The Convener: We can now, but we missed the first part, and I would hate it if you did not get your most salient point across.

Ailsa Raeburn: It always take me about a minute to get to the salient point, so you are fine.

Thanks for the opportunity to contribute today. I want to pick up on some of the points that Bruce Wilson made around that element of direct engagement. From a community landowner's perspective, we have not had any detailed engagement on either the strategy or the delivery plan. I cannot really speak for wider community engagement, but as far as I am aware, that has not happened.

Of course, so much of the successful delivery of the strategy will be done at a local level. There is quite a bit of work to be done on the thinking around how delivery can happen and how it will be successful. I really appreciate the opportunity to input further on delivery at either strategic board level or other levels. There are lots of great examples of how community organisations are delivering on habitat and species work at a local level, and I am really happy to talk about some of those today.

There are existing mechanisms that do work, which need to be highlighted in any delivery strategy because, coming to Douglas Lumsden's second point, they address some of the socioeconomic impacts that you and others have mentioned in terms of getting the balance right between ensuring that we protect and enhance Scotland's biodiversity and maximising the local socioeconomic impacts.

We know that the Scottish Government has a number of priorities around community wealth building, land reform and community empowerment. Getting the balance between all of those elements will be really critical. At the moment, the delivery plan does not necessarily look in detail at how that can be delivered; however, there are mechanisms for doing that. It will be interesting to have the opportunity to talk about what some of those mechanisms are and how they can be scaled up with the resources that we have available.

The Convener: Douglas, just before you go on to the next question, I will float this point. I am concerned that it took quite a lot of time to get in all the answers to the first question. I have worked out that we have three hours of answers to come back, but we do not have three hours of time. Therefore, I will push you all continually during the meeting to be as brief as possible. I have started off 2024 on a sharp note on that.

Douglas Lumsden: I am sure that the first question always takes the longest, convener.

When we heard from the marine stakeholders, there were mixed views, including that many of the targets and actions are not SMART—specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time bound—and that the plan lacks significant new commitments in the light of the Government's commitment to a step change. Are there significant new commitments in the plan relating to terrestrial biodiversity and does it set out SMART targets?

Sarah Cowie: I completely agree with the witnesses in the marine session that the actions in the plan are not SMART. We think that a lot of detail is missing in the delivery plan. How will they be SMART? How will they work in practice? What will they actually mean for active farming businesses? There is also missing detail around what funding will be allocated to each action, and from which budget, as well as, crucially, around who is responsible for leading on each action to ensure that it is achieved, on timelines—it is not just about an end date; it is about the pathway of how we get there—and on how policies will tie in with other policies, strategies, commitments and legislation that is coming down the line, not least the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill). We completely echo what has been said before about the lack of detail in that.

On the question whether the plan will create a step change, we struggle to see how a change will be made without that detail. When we are engaging our farmers—our members—the main thing that they want to know is what it will mean for them and how it will affect how they farm. We do not feel that that detail is there. I really struggle to understand how we can make the change that needs to be made to address biodiversity loss and restore nature without that detail.

Douglas Lumsden: Dr Walton, I will come to you on the same question, because you mentioned that the previous strategy maybe did not have a set of SMART targets.

Dr Walton: I agree with Sarah Cowie. You will get this as a uniform response, and I think that NatureScot is aware that there is a lack of SMART targets. In our view, there is too much reference to having another plan and developing another strategy, which is simply too vague. There are no specifics that people can work with.

There is a lack of a spatial element to the delivery plan; it is not really clear what and where the priorities are and which parts of Scotland will be important for which ecosystems and which species. That exercise needs to be undertaken; we know that it can be done quite quickly—indeed, that is known across the sector—but it needs to be done urgently. Again, though, we hit the issue of an effort being made to mainstream biodiversity across Government, but it being quite problematic to get other bits of Government that are not directly involved in that to get involved.

The great hope for mainstreaming must be the legally-binding targets for nature that have been signalled for the natural environment bill, which is due later this year. That will present a real opportunity to mainstream biodiversity across Government and to develop some of the specifics. However, from our point of view, the delivery plan looks rather like what the strategy should be, and we think that the real meat of the detail—which, to be honest, the minister did say in response to the committee's letter back in September or October would be in the plan—is not quite there yet.

Douglas Lumsden: Would anyone else like to add anything?

Dr Brown: Perhaps I can come in with a little example. You asked whether there are any new commitments in the plan, but the fact is that it is very hard to judge that, because the plan does not map itself on to existing actions in a coherent or consistent way. For example, the plan mentions new guidance for developers on protection of soils. The RTPI supports that, but I would point out that that is already a policy in national planning framework 4—it is policy number 5, I believe, which relates to soils. The question, then, is this: is the action in the delivery plan additional to the work that should be happening around policy 5 in NPF4, or is it the same thing?

As someone with knowledge of this work and this world—and looking at this across the board—I know that there are some things in the plan that are already happening and, indeed, have already been delivered and published. It is therefore very hard to judge these things, because the delivery plan itself does not map what already exists and what is new. I think that it should.

Bruce Wilson: I agree with all that. I think that, after mapping out which commitments are new and which already exist and taking all that into account, we need to work out whether the plan will take us to where we need to be to meet the 2030 target for reversing declines. It is not apparent from that list of actions whether that work has been carried out and whether we know that we are

going to get to a place where the declines will be reversed.

I think that, in the interests of time, I will leave it there.

Douglas Lumsden: My last question is on mainstreaming, which has been mentioned already. “The People’s Plan for Nature” calls for more mainstreaming of nature into decision making, more leadership and more Government accountability. Does the draft delivery plan provide for more mainstreaming of biodiversity, and what would successful mainstreaming look like? Do you want to pick that up, Bruce?

Bruce Wilson: This relates to your previous question, in that the delivery organisations are not easily identifiable when mapped against the actions. Therefore, it is hard to say who would take a lead or engage on those specific topics. It is very difficult to say whether this has been properly mainstreamed and, because of that, I suspect that we will face a real uphill struggle in trying to mainstream this stuff across Government.

Looking at the SMART target for, say, agriculture, I would say that a lot of the stuff that is in the Scottish Government’s vision for agriculture statement has just been mapped across into the actions. That does not suggest that there has been any back-and-forth dialogue between colleagues on the biodiversity side of the house and agriculture colleagues. Instead, it looks as though those on the environment side of things have just taken the environmental ambitions within the existing strategy, and I would therefore question whether that has had much of an impact.

Douglas Lumsden: So, you think that we still have a good way to go with mainstreaming.

Bruce Wilson: I certainly do.

Dr Walton: I want to make one quite important point. The delivery plan is part of a huge biodiversity framework that goes well beyond it; indeed, the consultation, which ended in December, was massive. It is not all bad.

There are some bits of the delivery plan that are quite specific; for example, it is very specific about deer numbers and, broadly speaking, the places where those numbers should be. It is ambitious and we welcome it.

09:45

The difficulty is in mainstreaming, which is challenging to achieve because, to date, biodiversity has been completely siloed. It has been seen as a specialist area that a little branch of Government does alongside NatureScot, with a “leave it to them” approach. However, it really needs to be integrated. Most of Scotland’s land is farmed; biodiversity has to integrate with agricultural policy. As Bruce Wilson said, the delivery plan rehashes what has already been committed to and what is about to be committed to. That is a problem—it will not deliver added value.

The Convener: We need to move on. I am sorry—I need to be quite tight on the questions. I will go to Jackie Dunbar for the next questions.

Jackie Dunbar (Aberdeen Donside) (SNP): Thank you, convener. Would it be helpful if I asked people to raise their hands if they want to answer?

The Convener: I get the feeling that all the members of this panel will raise their hands. [*Laughter.*] You can certainly try that, if you want to.

Jackie Dunbar: Grand. Good morning, panel, and thank you for coming.

The objective of the draft strategy is to accelerate restoration and regeneration of the ecosystem. Does the draft plan set out a clear prioritised pathway for that through the key actions? What do you think needs to happen on the ground to support its delivery?

I will go first to Bruce Wilson, as he has caught my eye.

Bruce Wilson: A prioritisation exercise needs to be done. We can look at this from the perspective of someone on the ground, such as someone in a local authority. Take the nature networks element of the plan: I would find it very difficult to know what had to be done by when, what my reporting duties are and whether they are more important than my deer management responsibilities. It would be very hard for me to interpret those things.

I understand that prioritisation has been difficult because of the timeframe in which the framework has been developed. As Paul Walton said, it is no, by any means, all bad. I want to support the overall ambition; we are trying to help, with suggestions. One major improvement that could be made is prioritisation, with provision of appropriate guidance for delivery partners so that they can help to work out what needs to be done and by when.

Ailsa Raeburn: It will be interesting for communities to have a much clearer idea of prioritisation and, as Bruce Wilson said, how it can be delivered. Our members have a huge interest in engaging more on the matter. Local people who are at the sharp end of habitat and species loss really want to engage, but—as we said in response to the first question—there has not been much consultation and engagement at the local level. Opportunities in the delivery plan for

community-led action to contribute would be very helpful.

Dr Brown: National planning framework 4 has done a good job of mainstreaming biodiversity and the nature crisis in the planning system, which is clear in policy 1. However, the biodiversity plan does not interact with it in a coherent or consistent way.

For example, there are questions about local place and development plans. Should they be doing more? What should they be doing and how does the delivery plan interact with the guidance that is emerging on the preparation of strategies, such as those on the nature networks and the 30 by 30 protections, so that planning can do its part in protecting existing biodiversity and enhancing and providing for spatial networks? There are also questions about creating and building. Where should we put new nature and where should we build biodiversity? Many of our members and practitioners want answers to those questions.

The plan's lack of interaction does not help. We need more on the spatial side of things and on the timeline. What are the priorities? Where are interventions needed and who should do them? We need to go back to the SMART objectives and the need for extra detail on the actions. Who is leading? When are they doing it? What is the timeline? What are the priorities? Where are the resources?

Jackie Dunbar: Does the planning system need more power to its elbow, when it comes to that?

Dr Brown: Definitely—and the planning system certainly needs more funding and resource. We published an assessment of resourcing in the planning system in December. The number of local authority planners in Scotland is the lowest it has been for five years, and budgets are being cut at the same time as we have extra duties under the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 and NPF4. Supporting biodiversity on top of that is very hard, in a sector that is under pressure.

We know that there is also a skills issue. Our members know about biodiversity net gain from England—

Jackie Dunbar: I am gonnae stop you there, because I asked whether the system needs more power to its elbow, and we have heard from you previously. I am sorry if I sound rude, but I am trying to get everybody in.

Dr Brown: No problem.

Sarah Cowie: We completely agree that that prioritisation exercise is needed and that the plan needs to go a lot further, but it is also important that it is not prescriptive.

We think that there should be two elements to nature restoration. In relation to farming and crofting, every farm has the potential to deliver for the climate and nature, but what each farm does could be different. We want farmers to be empowered and to be able to choose what is right for their farm. That is an important part of designing the action plan and designing measures in the agriculture bill. Every farmer should be able to play their part, but what that part is might differ.

At landscape and catchment scale we need a wider picture in order that we can ensure that there are no knock-on impacts or unintended consequences. We need dual levels—what is right for the individual farm and what is happening at the wider holistic scale, but that is missing. We need more strategic land use planning in Scotland to ensure that that is the case.

It is also important to mention, when we talk about taking action and moving forward, that farmers are already doing good things. A lot of work has already been done in the area, so we are not starting from zero. WE need to encourage, empower and inspire people to go further in that.

I will comment on mainstreaming, which is tied into the question. Mainstreaming shows that it is not just farmers and crofters who are responsible for solving the issue—a whole-society approach is required. We need local authorities, members of the public and other bodies to play their parts in that, which plays into the importance of taking holistic landscape-scale approach.

Jackie Dunbar: I am gonnae move on to the next question, but I am gonnae be fair and come to Dr Walton first—Paul, if you want to add anything on the first question, please feel free to do so.

The plan highlights the progress that has been made with woodland and peatland restoration programmes, but we know that there are still challenges in meeting targets and spending the committed budgets. What needs to happen in the coming five years to accelerate progress so that we can get things going?

Dr Walton: Do you mean for peatland specifically, or across the board for biodiversity?

Jackie Dunbar: I meant for woodland and peatland, but if you would like to answer across the board, feel free to do so.

Dr Walton: This relates to your first question. Biodiversity comprises species, and species come together to form ecosystems, which are dynamic living systems. All those systems in Scotland have some sort of human element. Indeed some of them are made by farming—the machair grasslands in the Western Isles, for example—so

they are profoundly linked to our society and economy.

The plan signals a programme of ecosystem restoration and a programme of species recovery for species that need targeted individual action. We called for that right from the start, and it was included fairly late in the process. It is merely mentioned in the strategy—there is a list of ecosystems only in a footnote on one of the pages, so that is not properly developed.

As other witnesses have said, the specifics need a lot more thought, and the plan needs to be geographically specific, which goes with Sarah Cowie's point that farmers and crofters in different parts of Scotland need to know what they can deliver and what can be their input to that process.

Jackie Dunbar: Do you mean that what they do is dependent on where they live?

Dr Walton: Absolutely. One example is that there could not be a machair programme on the east coast of Scotland, because there is no machair on the east coast of Scotland. It is the same for all other ecosystems. We need to figure out what and where the broad priorities are. That is what we are looking for in the delivery plan, but have not really got yet. However, we are on the way.

I want to underscore the fact that there are opportunities for society and the economy. The Government has multiple initiatives on training, which could work to deliver biodiversity. We could, for example, have training of land management advisers who help farmers and crofters to do the right thing for the priorities in their area. We could have training for new deer stalkers, so that the money that is spent on fencing woodland is instead put into training young people as high-welfare-standard deer stalkers. We could have training for ecosystem restoration contractors, invasive non-native species control contractors and experts, and for biodiversity monitoring. Those could all be integrated into Government training programmes, which could really help to deliver that stuff and deliver the green jobs that the country so badly needs, especially in rural areas. There is great scope for that, but it is not signalled in the delivery plan.

Jackie Dunbar: What I am hearing is that you would like geographic factors to be added to key sectors and groups.

Dr Walton: The two automatically go hand in hand. Scotland is a very varied country.

Jackie Dunbar: Everybody is agreeing with that comment. Would anybody like to add anything? I think that Paul Walton has just answered my third question, too.

The Convener: Are you happy that you have asked your questions?

Jackie Dunbar: I am, because I know that you will ask a few supplementary questions.

The Convener: I have just one broad supplementary question. The panel has talked about targets and achieving them, and about zoning, and I understand that. However, since 2018, not one of the woodland targets has been met by the Government. In fact, if you tot it all up, we have reached only 80 per cent. If you tot up all the figures from before the targets were adjusted downwards, the Government reached probably only about 65 per cent of the woodland that should have been created in Scotland. Furthermore, we have just seen that there will be a 45 per cent cut in woodland grant scheme moneys, in the budget.

We also know that we are not spending the money that we need to spend on peatland, because we cannot get contractors to do the work. There is not enough money and there are not enough contractors. There are great ambitions, but no delivery. How are we going to get round that?

Sarah Cowie: Everything that you have said is absolutely correct, and I think that all of our members would agree. Tree planting and peatland are really good examples of things for which there are nationwide targets. That is ambition, which is good. However, at the risk of repeating myself, I say that it is for individual farms to decide what is relevant and appropriate for them.

A large part of what is missing from the plan and from land use decisions in Scotland generally is about where things happen. We can have targets, but where will they be met? What knock-on impacts will they have? We need to move past the idea of farming versus forestry. That debate has been rumbling on for quite some time, and we have difficult questions that need to be answered. That relates to the socioeconomic impact. We have to be conscious that there will be changes to land use in Scotland because of the difficult decisions that must be made.

Another reason why we are not meeting the targets, as we would like to do, is uncertainty around certain policies. We have many different things coming down the line. A new agriculture bill will be enacted in the next few years; perhaps people are waiting to see what that will look like in full before they make decisions. There is a lot of risk in asking people to do something before all the detail is realised. For a start, funding and grant schemes could be better. There needs to be more de-risking of some activities for farmers and crofters so that they are incentivised to undertake activities.

That is a roundabout way of saying that we need all those things. We need funding, we need appropriate grant schemes and we need incentives, but we also need policy clarity and certainty about policy detail.

The Convener: RSPB Scotland is a big landowner in Scotland; it has huge tracts of land. Does the organisation need de-risking so that it can do the right thing, or will it get on and create more woodlands on its reserves?

10:00

Dr Walton: We are actively involved in that—not just on our reserves but beyond them. For example, we have a project in Morvern that is about re-establishing Scotland's rainforest on the entire peninsula. We are focusing on the peninsula because it is ecologically defendable, so that we can clear it of rhododendron and have a good chance of achieving biosecurity.

We have had biodiversity targets since 1992, but we have failed to meet any of them, so failure to meet targets is very familiar to people in our sector. I guess that that is why we are talking about mainstreaming and integration of targets.

There is a bit of a rush at the moment to achieve planting and harvesting targets for trees, which is leading to intensification of forestry practice and sometimes, we fear, to having the wrong trees in the wrong place, which might have negative outcomes for biodiversity. We also have plantations in ancient woodlands, which are not entirely protected.

There is a huge distance to go, which is why we keep coming back to mainstreaming. Until there is a widely recognised political imperative across all parts of Government, including agriculture, forestry, marine and so on, we will not have a meaningful biodiversity strategy that can meet the targets. Biodiversity is extremely complex and far reaching, and it touches people's lives. When we talk about how land is managed, that affects businesses and industries. That is the challenge; frankly, we have not yet managed to meet it. I am not saying that it will be easy. There is a way to go with the delivery plan.

The Convener: I will bring in Bruce Wilson briefly. It seems to me that both of you are saying that, although we have not reached the targets, the old scheme of local biodiversity action plans, if they had been properly implemented, might have been the way forward.

Bruce Wilson: There is definitely an important place for BAPs, which are a very important tool.

On national targets, a step change that we have seen is the move to put climate and nature on the same pedestal. Previously, mistakes have been made—for example, in the rush to plant a certain type of tree just to meet carbon targets without considering biodiversity impacts. Although it is difficult and will be much harder, we need to consider both climate and nature, because otherwise we will not do things properly and we will not meet our long-term targets.

The Convener: Thank you. I am sure that, somewhere in there, we will consider what we are going to eat, as well.

The next questions come from Mark Ruskell.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): I want to ask about meeting the 30 by 30 target, which is the big overreaching international target. In the strategy, is there enough clarity on the pathway to meeting that target?

It has been reflected in some of your answers, to summarise what I have been hearing, that the non-governmental organisations on the panel feel that there is not enough detail in the strategy. We have a high-level strategy and a high-level delivery plan, but detail is lacking. Sarah Cowie's organisation's members feel that we cannot be too prescriptive, at this point. What is needed for delivery of the 30 by 30 target, and is there enough in the delivery plan to give certainty?

Sarah Cowie: We are not at all clear on the 30 by 30 target; the framework in the biodiversity consultation was not at all clear about what it will mean. It is not clear where the protected areas—the 30 per cent—will be and, if a proportion of that is to be on farmland, what that will mean for farmers and crofters and how it will impact on active farming. That is a brief response to say that it is not clear.

I understand that this might be contradictory, but although we need stronger definitions, we do not want the approach to be too prescriptive. We might need stronger definitions of things such as what "protecting" and "restoring" will mean in practice, for farmers. On the flipside, as I mentioned, we do not want the approach to be too prescriptive and to say that people must do certain things and meet certain targets.

We are hearing more and more that biodiversity in nature is very complex; we want to focus more on the actions than on the outcomes. A farmer, crofter or whoever can do all the right things and, if there is evidence that creating a specific type of habitat helps a certain species, of course that should be supported. However, with all the will in the world, that might not lead to biodiversity increase or to a specific species increasing on that land. We think that that should not be punished. If farmers are taking the right actions, that should be rewarded. There should be a dual approach.

We need more clarity on what the 30 by 30 target means and what it will mean for farmers. It should not be rigid or prescriptive, but should be flexible enough to empower farmers to choose what is right for their farm. We need much more detail on that.

Mark Ruskell: Yes—but is the danger that nothing will happen, as a result? At the end of the day, somebody on the ground needs to look at a particular catchment in the Cairngorms, Fife or wherever, and make decisions about what they are going to invest in and what the targets are.

Sarah Cowie: Absolutely.

Mark Ruskell: How do we meet the 30 by 30 target on the ground to the satisfaction of your members and give them the clarity that you are asking for without being too prescriptive about what they need to invest in?

Sarah Cowie: That is why we need to take a holistic, landscape-scale view of who is doing what in the landscape and whether it meets the broader picture. At an individual level, people do what is best for their farm.

It will never be perfect. Nature is not perfect and biodiversity is complex by its nature. Having prescriptive targets and getting every farm to put aside X amount of its land might not be suitable for every farm. It is about getting the individual to do what is right for them.

I do not agree that that means that nothing will change and that we will stay with the status quo. People are already doing good things for nature, such as in our less favoured areas in the west, where people are undertaking traditional grazing management and good farming techniques. We have our combinable crops and our arable farmers are doing good things with integrated pest management. Things are already happening and I do not think that we will go backwards or stall because we are not setting down prescriptive outcomes. Things are moving forward.

We also need to make it clear that, when farmers undertake actions that are good for nature, they are also good for the business, the climate and rural communities. Highlighting those combined benefits is a positive.

I do not think that things will stay the same. Farmers know that things are changing and we are moving forward.

Mark Ruskell: Who else would like to come in on the 30 by 30 target and how we deliver that on the ground?

Dr Walton: Positive things are happening on the ground, but we are still losing nature at a completely unacceptable rate, as we know from the “State of Nature 2023” report. Species and habitat loss continue, and the majority of Scotland is farmed. There is undoubtedly a link there. A level of prescription is completely unavoidable. I am afraid that it will be needed if we are to make the kind of progress that is about halting biodiversity loss.

I am glad that you signalled that the 30 by 30 target is a global initiative of which Scotland is just one part. There is hope for the kind of approach that Sarah Cowie is calling for.

On protected areas, the first point that I want to make is that they do not mean an end to all human activity. Indeed, in the machair special areas of conservation that I talked about, the definition of machair has agriculture front and centre. Without extensive cattle-based crofting systems, there would be no machair. We have 70 per cent of the world’s complement of machair in Scotland, which is significant. Protected areas allow forestry and farming to continue, as long as they do not damage the features for which the area is designated.

Another approach that will be brought in with the 30 by 30 target involves what are called OECMs, which means other effective land-based conservation measures. Those can be different and involve much more engagement with communities and land managers on the ground on where and how they are designated and what their important features will be. They cannot be weaker on the delivery of biodiversity.

The delivery plan requires real progress on species and habitats. It is not just about saying, “Oh, we can do some stuff that looks good and that will tick the box”—I do not think that it does that. We need to halt biodiversity loss, but we can do it through a more creative way of approaching the 30 by 30 target. That is signalled in the biodiversity framework, which is encouraging. I look forward to seeing how the OECMs are developed and how much they can contribute to Scotland playing its part in the global 30 by 30 initiative.

Mark Ruskell: Are you saying that you would expect to see all that detail in this delivery plan, or are there other plans, be they regional or species specific, that should come out of the delivery plan to provide that clarity? It feels as if you want to see everything—every action and target—in the plan right now, but I wonder what level of detail it would be appropriate to see in the plan at this point.

Dr Walton: Sarah Cowie made a point about the land use strategy. That initiative stalled, but it was a really positive move forward, in the view of RSPB Scotland and across the Scottish Environment LINK NGOs, with regard to setting out what is important where, and how we can combine the imperative for food security, planting

for carbon offsetting and the priorities for biodiversity. It was a real opportunity to do that, and I agree with NFUS that we need to revisit it.

Mark Ruskell: Do Bruce Wilson, Caroline Brown or Ailsa Raeburn want to come in on that?

Bruce Wilson: I agree with all that—we need to get on top of the plethora of land use planning tools. We have local nature networks and an aspiration for a national nature network; regional land use partnerships and the overall land use strategy; and river basin management plans, but something is needed to bring all those together. I suggest that a national ecological or nature network to set priorities would help in that regard, and then we can get help to deliver that from the bottom up. That needs to happen.

It is pretty obvious that, as we are at the start of 2024 and with 30 by 30 in the title, there is not a lot of time for us to get there, so the urgency cannot be understated. I know that that presents problems, but we need to get on and do this, and set up the governance structures so that we can understand how the approach is going to be rolled out.

The Convener: Caroline Brown wants to come in. As a supplementary to the previous question, do you want to see a map-based approach, or should it all be in documents?

Dr Brown: A map-based approach would be fantastic, because we can then move into the digital side of things, where we could do sieve mapping and look at where opportunities for interventions might be, and get a better sense of where those things might be happening. I agree that we need all those things to line up. I would also add local place plans and development plans, green infrastructure strategies and open-space strategies and all the other things that intersect and interface with that biodiversity work.

Mark Ruskell: While we are drawing lines on a map, I will briefly raise the topic of national parks. I would like to hear your reflections on the proposal for the designation of at least one new national park, and how that could contribute to the targets. In addition, I would like your reflections on how national parks are currently working. Are they delivering effectively for the biodiversity agenda? If not, what needs to change? Some brief reflections on that would be useful. Perhaps Ailsa Raeburn would like to come in on that, or we can go to other panel members.

Ailsa Raeburn: To be brief, there are some really good examples of work in the Cairngorms and Loch Lomond national parks where communities are being engaged at a local level with regard to how they can contribute to the biodiversity agenda. The national park authorities are investing small pots of money in enabling that to happen. If there was to be a third national park, the lessons on what has worked would need to be transferred to ensure that local people can engage and intervene meaningfully in the process, rather than—as we talked about at the beginning of the session—being the last to be considered.

Mark Ruskell: Does anyone else want to come in?

Sarah Cowie: I will come in on that briefly. NFU Scotland's position on national parks is clear: we believe that food production and farming are integral to Scotland's rural economy, and that should not be forgotten or ignored—in fact, it should be central to existing, and to any new, national parks.

Many of our members do not feel that the two existing national parks have made a positive contribution for farming, and they are therefore sceptical about the creation of new ones. However, we realise that the policy is being pursued and we are likely to see a new national park, so we want meaningful and positive local engagement with the local community—not just with specific sectors, but with all sectors—to ensure success.

10:15

Dr Walton: We would like national parks to deliver better for nature. As Ailsa Raeburn said, there are great examples of positive action and positive community engagement in the Cairngorms and Loch Lomond national parks, but their approach is not entirely what we would expect of national parks. The restoration of ecosystems has to be given serious priority in national parks. I think that that is what people expect. Let us not forget that the "Wild Isles" TV series, in which Scotland was the star, attracted 10.7 million viewers. I would argue that this is quite a big deal for the public in terms of national mental wellbeing and that our national parks really need to deliver on that.

To touch on Caroline Brown's point about mapping, I totally agree that mapping is the right approach to the spatial element, but I want to make a plea that we do not undertake a new five-year mapping exercise, because it could easily swallow up so much time. We need to find a streamlined route to putting down on paper what we already know—because we do already know it. I just make that plea.

Bruce Wilson: The maps exist, basically. They are ready to be rolled out. I hear so much agreement around the room that that is the way forward, so it would be nice to see that.

There is also a proposal in here for six priority woodland areas of between 10,000 and 50,000 hectares—

Mark Ruskell: Sorry, but is that in national parks?

Bruce Wilson: Sorry—it is in the framework.

It is interesting to see the comparisons from the people who I have talked to in relation to the pros and cons, from a community perspective, of those woodland areas—which would probably focus on deer management—versus national park designation. We purposely decided not to put forward areas for consideration on national parks, because we think that that really has to come from communities if they are to be successful.

Mark Ruskell: Caroline, do you have any thoughts on that?

Dr Brown: We do not have a strong position on the extra national park.

Mark Ruskell: Okay. Bob—I know that you want to come in on nature networks. Do you want to come in now?

Bob Doris (Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn) (SNP): You go first.

Mark Ruskell: Bob Doris and I both have an interest in nature networks, which has already been touched on a little. I will go to Bruce Wilson first to ask him how he sees them being rolled out. The responsibility is very much on local councils to develop that. Do councils have all the powers and tools to do that? Initially, the Scottish Wildlife Trust pushed for a big overarching national network rather than 32 local networks. What is the state of play in terms of nature networks being the real driver?

Bruce Wilson: In the mists of time, the Scottish Wildlife Trust—along with others, including RSPB Scotland and Scottish Environment LINK—was really pushing for a national approach that was not in any way completely top down but which would help to provide that prioritisation that we have talked about for nature, which is important. There were commitments to that in previous strategies and planning frameworks, but it has never happened. We are at a stage now where I think that it will happen. It has just taken 10 years to get to this stage.

The top-down approach is important for allowing an overview to let people know what the priorities are. We are completely supportive of the networks being delivered from the bottom up, but we think that we need an overall spatial strategy. An analogy that I have used a lot is that, with a broadband or road network, we would not just start putting in cable or roundabouts and roads and expect a coherent network. It is exactly the same with nature. We have to strategically plan where this stuff will be if we want to see not only ecosystem restoration but the benefits that it can provide to us.

For example, for pollinators, we cannot just have the odd little patch of habitat here and there; there needs to be a coherent network so that species can move around and have the interactions that we would expect. Therefore, we think that that overall strategic approach is important.

You asked whether local authorities are equipped to deliver the nature networks. It will be very difficult. Biodiversity expertise, which is very important for delivering that, is patchy within local authorities. Funding will be a colossal issue. Also, there is still a lack of guidance on the nature networks and how they are to be delivered, although the situation has hugely improved. There has been a massive step forward with what has been outlined in the draft delivery plan, and I think that we will get there.

The problem is that the requirement from national planning framework 4 is for those things to be delivered through local development plans. If you had to produce a local development plan in the near future, you would be scratching your head as to what you have to do and what a nature network looks like. The big fear is that the temptation will be to just do a very simple map of all the green blobs in the area and say, “Well, that’s vaguely a nature network.” That is not what it is designed to do; it is designed to interact with the 30 by 30 network to deliver large-scale ecosystem restoration.

Bob Doris: I am going to talk about some of the blobs in my local area. We know that local authorities are tasked with expanding and enhancing nature networks by 2030, and there is a specific commitment for urban areas, which is obviously of interest to me as the MSP for Glasgow Maryhill and Springburn. I note that Glasgow is seeking to designate a further 250 hectares of nature reserve within the city. I will talk about two areas in particular, because they are in my constituency. First, the project at Hamiltonhill clay pits has been transformational for the local area, but was also carried out in partnership with wider urban regeneration, which is something that I want to raise with you. Secondly, Cadder Woods, which is also on the Forth and Clyde canal, was a dumping ground for old cars and was used for fly-tipping, but it has real biodiversity merit, as well as potentially being an asset for the local community.

Bruce Wilson and Dr Brown might be best placed to respond to these issues. The nature network commitment can have a dual purpose by boosting biodiversity, in the way that Mr Wilson was talking about, and by enhancing the local

environment for communities. It is not about nature being over there; it is about having corridors for communities to enable them to enjoy the environment. How do we achieve that dual purpose in the strategy? More importantly, how can we monitor to make sure that the strategy is delivered and is not just about the blobs on the map that Mr Wilson talked about?

Bruce Wilson: There are two things there. There is the potential for nature networks to do that, and we have always advocated an opportunity mapping approach that uses geographic information system tools to work out where your biodiverse green spaces are and what opportunities there are to link them up in the easiest way that also provides multiple benefits. Through the Scottish Government's work on CivTech, AECOM has developed a tool to map all that stuff, how it affects different communities and where it is best to situate biodiverse green spaces. That is all achievable, and delivering multiple benefits is absolutely the way that we need to go, particularly in an era of constrained spending. Biodiversity has the answer to so many of the problems that we face.

The health and wellbeing benefits of being close to biodiverse green space have been repeatedly raised, but they are very difficult to monitor. That is the second part of everything that we are trying to achieve. Currently, biodiversity data availability is very poor, so we need to invest in that, not just so that we can tell how many butterflies are in a given area but so that we have the tools to develop the green economy. We cannot have "positive effects for biodiversity"—that is the wording from the national planning framework—from a new development, if we do not know what the baseline biodiversity data for the site is.

You mentioned the site on the Forth and Clyde canal. We need to know baselines, and we need to know what the improvements are and what they are delivering for people. Those are vital tools for us to understand where we are as a nation, not just to understand our ecological position.

Dr Brown: Another thing that is missing from the delivery plan is any discussion or recognition of the excellent work that has been happening on the central Scotland green network. The Glasgow and Clyde valley green network is a great example of a very good strategy built on data, looking at opportunities for interventions and leading directly to the sorts of projects that you are talking about, which are cleaning up polluted environments, providing access to nearby nature for people, providing networks for active travel and providing a health benefit. Those projects are hitting multiple policy targets around climate, resilience, nature, health, wellbeing and biodiversity.

A lot of excellent work has been done, and one of the things that strikes me as being missing from the delivery plan is a sense of learning from those previous activities and examples. What have we learned? What works? How is that reflected in the actions in the delivery plan?

Bob Doris: I have a follow-up question. I see that Glasgow City Council has 37 species action plans, and I know that it is trying to expand its nature networks, but I do not know whether anyone is measuring the impact of those on biodiversity. Clearly, you would expect the impact to be positive, but is anyone measuring the impact using an agreed methodology?

Dr Brown: My understanding is that part of the activity of the central Scotland green network, which involves a collaboration of local authorities across the central belt, is to deliver and measure the outputs of those interventions in biodiversity terms as well as through other measures.

Bob Doris: I am sorry, Dr Brown—I am not seeking to target you in relation to this—but will that be measured in the same way if there is a project in Aberdeenshire or Dumfries, for example? If different methodologies are used and there are different agreed outcomes in each area, how do we have a national strategy and how do we report on the national plan?

Dr Brown: I absolutely agree that we need recognised methodologies for measuring outcomes and consistency in the data that is used and that is available to the people who are doing the measuring, whether that is the local authority or another organisation.

Bob Doris: I have a small follow-up question, if there is time, convener.

The Convener: I am not sure. Mark, do you want to come back in?

Mark Ruskell: No. I would love to have three or four hours on this, but I know that we do not have time.

The Convener: Unfortunately, we are three quarters of the way through our time and probably 50 per cent through the questions, so it will be a balancing act. I do not want to cut anyone out, especially not the deputy convener, so I will come to him next.

Ben Macpherson (Edinburgh Northern and Leith) (SNP): Thank you, convener. Good morning. I thank the witnesses for their time.

Before I ask my question, I want to emphasise the points that my colleague Bob Doris raised about urban Scotland. As someone who represents a densely populated urban constituency, I think that the arguments and narrative about quality of place and health and

wellbeing benefits are often much more compelling than the wider targets and discussions around the Montreal protocol, all of which can seem quite nebulous to people. Therefore, it is important that my colleague asked questions about the benefits of biodiversity in urban Scotland.

I have some questions about objective 3 in the biodiversity strategy, which is to

"Embed nature positive farming, fishing and forestry".

Do you have confidence that agriculture, forestry and other land management policies are aligned with, and will support the delivery of, the biodiversity delivery plan? If so, why? If not, why not?

I will focus again on the questions of implementation, which were rightly raised earlier. What needs to happen in practice to ensure that agriculture, forestry and other land management sectors deliver biodiversity gains and that there is a just transition to a more nature-friendly position for farming as a mainstream approach? Does the draft delivery plan support that?

Sarah Cowie, do you want to go first?

Sarah Cowie: Yes, I can kick off on those questions. There was a lot in them, so come back to me if I miss something out.

Basically, yes, we think that those plans can work together. We think that farming in particular can deliver on biodiversity. It has a crucial role in that, and the final version of the plan will determine how well farming is able to do that.

What is of concern is that there are so many other policies in that sphere. It is a busy policy, strategy and legislation landscape, and the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill is being considered by the Parliament. What is in the final bill will have an impact on the biodiversity delivery plan, and vice versa, so our main concern is that there are different timelines for those. We have a five-year biodiversity delivery plan, but detail is still missing from that. In the bill, there is a stipulation for a five-year rural support plan. The timeline for the progress of the bill through the Parliament means that those two five-year periods will not be the same. Having two different timelines is not an obstacle that cannot be overcome, provided that the plans are compatible, but a lot more work needs to be done to ensure that that is the case.

One of the main elements to making this work relates to budgeting and the finance that comes into the agriculture and rural economy sector. The four outcomes in the bill—climate, nature, rural communities and food production—are all important, but we are asking so much of farmers to deliver them. That is not to say that they cannot or do not want to deliver them—they most definitely do—but they need to be supported.

10:30

The funding that is coming to the sector will be crucial in enabling farmers to deliver. We were disappointed that money has been reallocated from the sector over the past two years. Although we have had assurances that it will be coming back, we are still disappointed that it has not been used to support the sector over the past two years. In addition, we have had a multi-annual financial commitment from the United Kingdom Government since 2019, but that represents a real-terms cut in agricultural and rural economy support. In order to make all the plans and strategies work together to allow farming to deliver, we need a multi-annual funding commitment from the UK Government and from the Scottish Government. We need that support to allow farmers to deliver what they can and should be delivering.

Dr Walton: Agricultural land makes up 70-odd per cent of Scotland's land. A huge amount of public money is put into support. Despite recent reductions, the budget is still huge. Broadly speaking, we believe in public money for public goods, and we see the delivery of nature, biodiversity and climate benefits as a public good for everyone in Scotland.

We need a significant redistribution of funds in order that they can be focused much more on delivering for climate and nature. Specifically, we think that tier 1, which is the basic payment, should account for no more than 25 per cent of the budget, and that 75 per cent of the budget—25 per cent each—should be for the other tiers. Tier 2 is the enhanced tier, tier 3 is the elective one and tier 4 relates to supporting services. In there is some of the targeted work that is required for the important ecosystems and species that should emerge from the delivery planning process. Without a significant shift in how we support agriculture to help farmers and crofters to deliver, we will not be able to halt biodiversity loss in this country.

For far too many years, we have seen a lack of support for the incredibly high-nature-value farming in the west, particularly on the isles, in relation to the extensive cattle-based crofting system, which delivers globally significant biodiversity benefits. On the one hand, it is suffering from intensification, which is the big driver of biodiversity loss across Europe, and, on the other hand, it is suffering from abandonment. Those communities need the proper levels of support that reflect the public benefits that they deliver.

Ailsa Raeburn: I will pick up Dr Walton's point about support for crofting communities in particular and talk about how the whole-scale crofting system is working. Great work is being done by the Crofting Commission, but enabling more land to be brought into the uses that will deliver those benefits is critical, as is the opportunity to look again at some of the subsidy mechanisms, particularly around tree planting and woodland restoration, which could deliver against a lot of the objectives that we are talking about today. At the moment, they are very narrowly focused. It comes back to the point that other colleagues have made that there needs to be a whole-system approach. We need to look at all of the public subsidy and how we use it better to deliver those outcomes.

Ben Macpherson: Before I go to Bruce Wilson, as my question is focused on alignment and delivery, I will mention the discussion at the beginning of the session about engagement between Government and stakeholders and about the challenges relating to co-ordination across Government, as well as the welcome challenge of broadening biodiversity as a cross-Government objective. If witnesses want to follow up with the committee on that, either in their answers to come or afterwards, that would be useful.

Bruce Wilson: On the budget side of things, we have not been used to the agriculture budget changing that much in previous years, for obvious reasons. There will be more and more pressure on agriculture budgets to compete—for want of a better word—with other public spending priorities. It is essential that we articulate well why we need to maintain the budgets for the rural portfolio. Given that delivery on nature and climate is such a vital part of that, we must ensure that it is well understood that farming, although it already does much to deliver on those huge priorities, can do much more in that respect, as well as producing food.

An alignment exercise is needed. There needs to be greater read-across between the ambition in the biodiversity framework that we are talking about and the agriculture vision.

There is another point that I could make, but I will leave it for the time being and save it for the next question, bearing in mind the convener's advice.

Ben Macpherson: Unless colleagues have any supplementaries on objective 3, I will move on to objective 4.

The Convener: Go for it.

Ben Macpherson: Objective 4, which is related to objective 3, is to

"Protect and support the recovery of vulnerable and important species and habitats".

What should the priorities be in developing an effective species recovery, reintroduction and reinforcement programme? When it comes to restoring our native wildlife, what does that look like? Are we keeping pace with the rest of Europe in our approach to species recovery and reintroduction? What key lessons have we learned to date through, for example, our experience in supporting the reintroduction and translocation of eagles and beavers, particularly when there has been a need to manage tensions or there have been competing land management objectives? The reintroduction of beavers is a really interesting example.

Who would like to come in first on that?

Dr Walton: Our view on species recovery is pretty clear. We need a national programme of ecosystem restoration. When I say "ecosystem", I am referring to quite specific things such as kelp beds, species-rich grassland, Scotland's rainforest and Caledonian pinewood. Those are recognisable ecosystems. It is very hard to draw an absolute line around them, but scientists know what they are. Over the past three centuries and possibly longer, those ecosystems have suffered massive losses, which is why Scotland is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world. It is certainly among the most nature-depleted countries in the G20.

On top of that, targeted species recovery work needs to be done for those species that will not be captured by the more general work. For example, there could be a programme of Caledonian pinewood restoration that did a brilliant job and which resulted in the expansion of beautiful Caledonian pinewoods. However, when it comes to a species called the twinflower, which is a very beautiful type of plant that grows in that habitat, the stands of twinflower are now too far apart for the pollinators to move between them, so they are dying out. Therefore, a programme of translocation is required to ensure that the density of stands of twinflower is sufficient for that species to continue. That is an example of an area where targeted species work is needed.

According to the recent census that reported in December, 70 per cent of our seabird species are in decline. That is really staggering and extremely worrying, because our seabird species are among our most globally significant wildlife populations. What those birds need is the eradication of invasive non-native predators that have been introduced by people so that their breeding sites are safe for them. It is as simple as that. That is an example of the targeted species work that is needed on top of the ecosystem recovery work in the marine environment. I want to be absolutely clear that those two things are essential.

There is insufficient detail on ecosystem recovery programmes in the current plan, as we discussed earlier.

There are some good signs that NatureScot and the NGOs are aligning and getting agreement on which of the species require targeted work. The process, which is called species at risk, is not finished yet. It is being led by NatureScot but it is very collegiate. That is going in the right direction, but we have a long way to go. The "State of Nature 2023" report shows that, on average, we are still losing wildlife in this country.

Translocation is simply one conservation tool that can be used to achieve the ends. There are a number of other conservation tools that one can use in tackling invasive non-native species, for example. There is a signal in the delivery plan that there will be a new plan for invasive non-native species in Scotland, which we welcome—we look forward to working with the Government on that. However, again, there is no meat on the bones yet—we do not have the detail.

Ben Macpherson: It sounds as if that is quite an important plan to develop at a good pace.

Dr Walton: It is a very important plan to develop. We have clear ideas in the NGO sector as to how we might work together with the Government on that.

Ben Macpherson: Dr Brown, I noticed that you were reacting positively to some of the comments that have been made. Do you want to add anything?

Dr Brown: No. The institute is much more concerned with planning and the operation of the planning system, so I will leave the issues of species, habitats and ecosystems to my colleagues on the panel.

Ben Macpherson: Sure. Mr Wilson, do you have anything to add?

Bruce Wilson: You mentioned the impacts of beaver and your previous question was about alignment with agriculture. When the secondary legislation comes through and specific schemes are developed, there absolutely needs to be a space for helping and rewarding farmers for working with beavers, which provide massive natural flood management benefits.

We also need to look at the potential for schemes for other species programmes that we want to develop. I try to talk about benefits wherever I can. One species programme that we are closely involved in is the saving Scotland's red squirrels programme. There are all sorts of important ecological and moral reasons why we should try to preserve species in Scotland. The control of grey squirrels that we have taken on with the other partners in saving Scotland's red squirrels has helped with the roll-out of native woodland and forest. A lot of people do not appreciate that grey squirrels are a real threat to the establishment of woodlands and so in turn impact on our native woodland targets and our goals on climate. All sorts of other things benefit from species-specific programmes.

Sarah Cowie: We agree that the recovery of species is important, especially our important native species. Efforts to do that are admirable, and we completely support them.

I did not get a chance to give our views on the nature networks, so I will do so quickly. Nature networks provide a real opportunity to link up good things that are happening in Scotland, especially on farms. The networks can be an opportunity for farmers to showcase the good work that they are doing. When it comes to species abundance and the decline of species, farmers know better than anyone what has declined and what has increased on their farm, and they can tell you about trends over the years in what they have seen and what has changed.

We can learn a lot from the way in which we have reintroduced and managed species in Scotland already. NFU Scotland thinks that we need a review of the current species licensing system. A lack of tools in the toolbox for land managers to manage conflict species is an issue. We would go so far as to say that species mismanagement and a lack of balance can impact biodiversity. It obviously impacts on some farms, but it can impact other species as well. That needs to be relooked at to ensure that farmers and crofters have the tools to manage certain species.

10:45

When it comes to species reintroductions, there will be conflicts in some areas, and I do not think that we can shy away from the problems that some of them will present. More consideration has to be given to those who will be adversely impacted. There will be the right place and the perfect habitat for certain reintroductions, but in other areas, they will have an impact on livelihoods and farming businesses. Sufficient risk assessments need to be undertaken to ensure that the impacts that they will have on rural industries and other species are fully taken into account.

We also need to think about compensation and appropriate management measures for those who are negatively impacted. We hear evidence of crop losses because of beavers or livestock losses as a result of sea eagles. That is a valid and important part of the conversation that we cannot shy away from. That is not to say that we can never have such things in Scotland and that we

should never reintroduce species, but it is about being honest about the negative and positive impacts that they will have.

Ben Macpherson: Ailsa Raeburn, do you want to add anything or are you content?

Ailsa Raeburn: I am fine, thank you.

The Convener: I have a couple of questions, if I may. It was interesting to hear Paul Walton's point about stoat control in Orkney, which will cost us £60 million by the time we get to the end of the project. It is necessary, and I fully accept that, but what I do not understand is who draws the lines. For example, we would probably like to see white storks back in Scotland and across the United Kingdom, and we would probably like to see the return of the common tree frog—two very easy species to manage. We might be a bit more reticent about wild boar. In fact, I do not want to see wild boar ripping up our woodlands in Scotland. They might be able to control ponticum on the west coast, but maybe we do not need them elsewhere.

We are talking about the wolf and the lynx and we already have beaver coming back, but we seem to introduce these things without considering control. The perfect example is Abernethy, which Paul Walton will know very well, and I know very well, and the need to protect the capercaillie—although we seem to allow pine marten to run riot, which definitely affects ground-nesting birds. Does there need to be a more persuasive and clear management plan, which could mean that we have to manage species within zones in the same way as we manage agriculture or trees within zones, and should we not accept that we cannot have everything running around all over the place?

Dr Walton: Those decisions are made collectively. There is a forum on reintroductions in Scotland that considers decisions on white stork, for example. Legally speaking, we can release species that are native to this country.

Strategic control needs to be seen within the context of a wider programme of species recovery. We have to remember that the key point that we are trying to address in a biodiversity delivery plan is how we stop nature losses. Frankly, I find the scientific literature on the wider biodiversity benefits of beaver quite extraordinary. I do not know of anything quite like it. Beavers have a hugely positive impact on a vast range of other biodiversity.

I thought that Sarah Cowie's comments on how we manage reintroductions were measured. The RSPB has made our own land available for the translocation of problem beavers. That kind of approach can work quite well. It is about getting it right and in the right place, which I am afraid brings us back to the spatial element of the strategy that seems to be lacking. We had the germ of it in the land use strategy, but we need to bring it up to the fore again and do it quickly.

A review of species licensing has been signalled in the biodiversity framework consultation, which is due to come later this year. In that process, we will need to consider the detail of which species need to be regulated and where.

I caution the committee against confusing the human introduction of a predator into an island ecosystem—such as the introduction of stoats in Orkney, which has globally significant sites for biodiversity, habitats and species—with the recovery of a native predator such as the pine marten. We would doubt whether we need to knock back pine martens in order for capercaillie to recover. What we really need for capercaillie to be able to recover is for their habitat to be at the right extent. You are smiling, convener, but the Caledonian pinewood is at about 1 per cent of its original extent. It is highly fragmented, which means that there is an edge effect and capercaillie are living at the edge of woodland, instead of at the centre of a woodland habitat. That is happening far more now and we are getting predation issues as a result of that. That needs to be seen in the round, alongside ecosystems.

The Convener: I very much take that point. I have re-established, under grant schemes for people that I work for, more than 800 acres of Caledonian pine in the Cairngorms national park—and protected willow and aspen, which are two of the main species that beavers thrive on—

Dr Walton: They do like aspen.

The Convener: —along woodland edges to protect riparian habitats. I see conflict, however, so I am trying to ask whether we should accept that management should be in the plan.

Sarah Cowie: We accept and believe that management should be part of this. Nature and biodiversity are so complex that increases in one species will have an impact on others, so we must look at this in the round and understand that human activity and involvement will have consequences. We believe that the Government should try to assess what those consequences are, as far as possible, so that it can mitigate them.

A large part of that is about understanding what we want to achieve. The examples cited were valid. There will be different impacts and consequences, but understanding what we want to achieve, which species we want to see thrive and what we want to protect or to improve is key and management is undoubtedly a part of that.

As I said in my previous answer, the risks of not managing species are great and could have a

detrimental impact on biodiversity, so we cannot leave species management out of this. That is not black and white either; it is not a case of having all of one thing and nothing of something else. Management is about control and balance.

The Convener: Please do not get me wrong. I am all for stoats being wiped out of Orkney because they should never have been there in the first place. Perhaps we should be doing something about controlling how they got there to ensure that that never happens again.

Dr Walton: Please do not get me wrong either. I am not anti the management of species. The RSPB manages species; we manage deer at very large scale. There is no disagreement on the principle here; it is all about the detail.

The Convener: I could spend all day talking about this, but I am not allowed to because I must turn to Monica Lennon. Monica, the questions are yours.

Monica Lennon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I am really enjoying this meeting. It is nice to be back in the Parliament. If I reflect on the early questions about engagement, I think that you have all demonstrated why we need early engagement and genuine and meaningful co-production.

My question is about objective 5, which is to "Invest in nature". The biodiversity investment plan was mentioned earlier and the draft plan commits to developing a biodiversity investment plan that will, or should, set out strategic priorities for public investment. I am keen to understand what has been learned to date about the effective public funding of nature restoration. Where does investment need to be prioritised? Perhaps you could also say a word or two about whether current funding commitments reflect the urgency of the nature crisis that has been articulated today.

My question is for Bruce Wilson first.

Bruce Wilson: I thought that the investment plan would come up again, so I did not elaborate on it earlier. You are right to say that the wording in the draft talks about how public money might be invested. That concerns me a little, because I think everyone is well aware that the Scottish Government has said that this is about not only public funding, but roles for the private sector, blended finance and all sorts of other approaches too. If we consider only public money here, we will be missing part of the picture, given that we are being told that this relates to private investments, too.

The second part of your question is almost covered by that answer, because this has to be about spatial prioritisation. It is very hard to look at that investment plan without also having the spatial prioritisation in front of you. With beavers, for example, could there be a shout for certain catchments to have riparian management zones in order to really prioritise riverside woodlands or zones within 5m to 10m of the watercourse, to keep beavers within that area and to effectively manage the problem? We cannot really know the level of investment needed in that respect until the spatial prioritisation aspect has been dealt with.

Monica Lennon: Other witnesses should indicate if they wish to come in. Paul, do you want to say something?

Dr Walton: I agree with Bruce Wilson, but I think that we need to face reality. There are markets emerging in biodiversity, but there is also a long history of speculation with regard to Scottish land which, personally speaking, I have found a bit of a concern.

One of the big challenges facing the Scottish Government is, I think, the need to try to regulate those markets. In my view, the function of such regulation is to achieve integrity and to ensure that, when private finance comes in to fund biodiversity—which, as the Scottish Government has made clear and as I agree, will be essential—standards are maintained and the investment delivers real nature gain in terms of ecosystems and species. I am an ecologist, not an economist, but it strikes me that there is the potential for greenwashing here, with people saying, "We're doing all this, and it's great for nature" when in fact what you get might be the equivalent of those regimented rows of Sitka that we have seen.

There is massive potential for real gain here, and we have to grasp it. However, that has to be done with great care, or we might end up with something that was intended to be delivered ostensibly for biodiversity purposes doing the reverse. That is my feeling.

Monica Lennon: I am keen to bring in others, but I want to build on that by touching on the role of private investment. Bruce Wilson is right to say that that is the reality, but stakeholders have raised concerns about an apparent reliance in the draft plan on private investment approaches. Paul Walton's points about regulation and the need for integrity are obviously key in that respect. Do you agree with the Government's strategy of promoting responsible investment in natural capital, and what would that look like?

Moreover, the Government is, as you know, looking to expand the use of woodland and peatland codes and exploring biodiversity credits. We have also heard about some fears with regard to potential greenwashing, particularly with some of the big polluters. I know that Sarah Cowie wants to come in, but I also want to come back to Bruce Wilson on that question and, indeed, am keen to hear a range of views, if there are any.

Sarah Cowie: I completely agree with everything that Paul Walton has said about regulating the market and ensuring that it is robust and that there is no greenwashing.

We would also agree with the Government's intention to create a responsible market, but we are sceptical of the overreliance on private finance. We know that public finance is not going to plug the gap to allow us to achieve everything that we want to achieve, so private finance will be required, but we should not be overreliant on it.

I cannot speak in a very technical way about the nature market side of things, but I do know what our members have been telling us about these emerging markets. Some see opportunities, and we think that there could be opportunities down the line, but a lot of people feel that, at present, they are just too underdeveloped and risky for them to have confidence in them.

We also have quite a complicated pattern of land ownership in Scotland, and the way in which farming operates can, as a result, be complicated, too. You have not only landowners and farmers who own the land that they farm but tenant farmers and crofters, and there are a lot of unanswered questions about how private finance will work with the different individuals and how the relationships will interact. People are therefore very hesitant about tying themselves into a potential 10 to 20-year scheme that might come back to bite them. Retailers have a role to play here, too, and the fact that they are asking more and more of the people who supply to them might also come into the mix. As I have said, there are just a lot of unanswered questions about what this will mean in the long term.

Of course, science and evidence will change, and we might be going down in a path that, in five years' time, we might think is no longer appropriate. If people are tied into contracts, how will that impact on their business? How will they get out of those contracts if the approach is no longer relevant? Essentially, then, a lot of unanswered things need to be ironed out, and I do not think that we can look at the issue only from a Scottish perspective. We have to look at it at a UK level and internationally; that will bring with it added complications, but it is necessary to look at things in the round.

11:00

Monica Lennon: I will bring in Ailsa Raeburn, but I want to stick with Sarah Cowie for a moment. You have made it clear that there are many unknowns, but from a farming and crofting perspective, what would you say are the main risks and opportunities of pursuing private investment in Scotland's natural capital?

Sarah Cowie: As I have said, farmers are already doing a lot of great things for nature, but there is massive opportunity and potential in their getting paid for those great things—for increasing the use of natural capital, say, or putting in place nature-based solutions—and in private companies, the public and society as a whole recognising that work. The risks, on the other hand, include greenwashing, farmers being taken advantage of and being tied to contracts that they cannot get out of or stipulations changing somewhere down the line and farmers finding themselves stuck in something that they were not aware of at the beginning of the process. We just do not know enough about how such markets will work, and their robustness and integrity need to be ensured before we move forward.

As I have mentioned, agricultural reform is coming. However, even though the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill is making its way through the Parliament, there is still uncertainty in that respect and we still lack some details. People might well be hesitant in committing to those markets before the full detail is realised, and the same goes for the delivery plan, too. We need to know the full details before we can commit to it.

Monica Lennon: Thank you. Ailsa Raeburn has been waiting patiently to come in.

Ailsa Raeburn: This is an area of particular concern to communities for all sorts of reasons. To go back to the earlier question about why we are not meeting our woodland and peatland restoration targets, I can point to several reasons: the finance is quite complicated; landowners do not understand it; it seems very speculative; there is a lack of transparency; and the regulation is not working. I think, therefore, that we can learn lessons from the approaches to woodland and peatland, particularly the impact of the carbon rush on land markets and land values. As we all know, it has meant that, in effect, only the very wealthy can trade in Scotland's land, with most farmers, crofters, individuals and communities being priced out of the market.

There are lots of lessons that we can learn from how the carbon markets have been and are working. The Scottish Government is doing some really interesting work on responsible investment in natural capital, but that needs to be hugely strengthened with regard to the regulatory mechanism that will be put in place for carbon and biodiversity credits when they come to the market and impact on Scotland.

Linked to that are some of the proposals on land reform, including land management plans and public interest tests and how they will work, and the strengthening of land rights and responsibilities statements. I think that there are

quite a lot of mechanisms that will address some of the concerns that Paul Walton and Sarah Cowie have outlined, so we are not starting from scratch but building on ideas that are already being developed.

I am equally very sceptical of the reliance on private finance in the market, and I think that the Scottish Government needs to do quite a lot of thinking about the long-term impacts of introducing private finance at scale for biodiversity credits. Again, we need to look at what is happening globally and with carbon and review those impacts before we go down the line of thinking that private finance is the route to resolving things. It will have some part to play, but we are at the very early stages of understanding its impacts, and there is a real need for the Scottish Government to do a big piece of work on that and on the implications, particularly for farmers, crofters, communities and the organisations and individuals that want to engage in owning Scottish land and delivering the broad range of objectives that the Scottish Government has for that land.

Monica Lennon: Thank you, Ailsa. You packed a lot in there, and I am grateful that you have put that on the record.

I will squeeze in a final question, if that is okay with the convener, because I want to cover objective 6, which is to

"Take action on the indirect drivers of biodiversity loss".

The draft plan states that action will be taken to

"strengthen the connection between people and nature"

through

"Nature positive developments and stewardship of public, community and private land".

I am keen to hear what nature-positive development looks like in practice, and whether we have a blueprint for that in Scotland. I see that Caroline Brown wants to come in.

Dr Brown: A small question! There are lots of good examples of how that can be done. We need to think about the design of nature-positive developments and what that will look like. We also need to think about the post-occupancy phase, which is the technical way to say what happens when people take over the houses or occupy the buildings and what those people do. The planning and designing stage is just a few years compared to the lifetime of a building or place. We need to think about that place-keeping part; there is a huge potential around that.

I once had a conversation with a taxi driver about sustainable urban drainage systems in Sheffield. He said, "Why would you plant things in the middle of the road?" and I said, "Because it's about flooding". We had an amazing conversation, and he said, "Okay—I get it". He understood that investing in that type of planting, such as rain gardens in a street, could help to alleviate flood problems and save money in the long term.

We need to have those conversations. Best practice is out there, but it has to be shared. Going back to the action plan, the top line is about communicating and engaging with communities. The questions are, who will do that, who will they talk to and who will lead on that activity? There is huge potential to get communities on board with this.

I come back to the point that things such as local place plans might be a way to help do that place-keeping, because we need to think not just about new development but about how we steward the existing developments.

Monica Lennon: I love the anecdote about chatting to the taxi driver about SUDS. That is the kind of thing that I would do, as a planner at heart.

"The People's Plan for Nature" calls for more locally managed green spaces, which might fit with the point that you made about what happens after sites are built out and occupied. The community stewardship role is really important.

Ailsa Raeburn might want to come back in, but does anyone else want to say anything briefly on this theme before I hand back to the convener?

Bruce Wilson: Local authorities need to take advantage of the nature networks tools to help plan those places and connect communities with things that they want to do.

The nature networks side of things might be quite technical, but the projects that are delivered on the ground under them do not need to have a nature networks tag associated with them—they can just be community-led projects. However, local authorities need to use the opportunity mapping tool to work out the best places to connect communities with land that they might want to try to restore.

Monica Lennon: We are getting the message that mapping is very important.

The Convener: Ailsa Raeburn wanted to come in; Paul Walton is waving as well. I do not know whether you have already picked a hand, Monica.

Monica Lennon: If there is time, I will take Ailsa and then Paul.

Ailsa Raeburn: On the previous point about opportunities for communities to engage with rural land, those are getting fewer and fewer for the reasons that we have outlined. However, there are some really interesting examples of engagement in urban communities; Ben Macpherson touched on some of them already. At Viewpark, just by the M8, the community has 160-odd acres that is

being completely turned over to a lot of the types of work that we are talking about here.

That is on quite a big scale, but on a very small scale, there are a lot of little pocket parks, community gardens, small parks et cetera that communities are very much engaged in. Anything that the biodiversity strategy and delivery plan can do to encourage that, at a very small and local scale, will not only contribute to meeting the objectives of the strategy and delivery plan but will deliver all the other benefits that we talk about, such as health and wellbeing and regeneration. It will also address such things as vacant and derelict land, which are huge issues in Glasgow and Dundee in particular.

The work of the nature networks is really interesting, but we need to get it down to that very local level by making the delivery mechanisms easy to understand and accessible for local people.

Dr Walton: I think that education has a key role here. I live in Glasgow and, just last weekend, I was cycling at the clay pits that Bob Doris was talking about earlier. It is an absolutely amazing example of best practice. Caroline Brown was referring to examples of good practice from which lessons can be learned, and that is a fantastic example.

However, I recently met a general practitioner who has a practice right next to Pollok park, which won European park of the year a few years back. She says that most of the people she works with in the housing scheme that is next to Pollok park do not go to the park because they think that it is not for them. There is a social effect where nature is seen as something that is not for ordinary folk, but for experts. Although all of us here, including the NGOs, can play a part in changing that, I suspect that the real answer lies in education and making sure that, as part of our education system, we put children in touch with nature so that they feel that it is quite a normal part of their lives.

The original function of local nature reserves, after the second world war, was as an educational resource. I think that local green spaces should be formally utilised as educational resources to break down some of those barriers.

Monica Lennon: I agree. Back to you, convener.

The Convener: Perfect. I will bring in Rhoda Grant next. Rhoda, if you could try to direct your questions at just a couple of people, as we are pushed for time—as always, on this committee.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): Thank you, convener. I have a couple of quick finance-related questions. I will direct the first one to Paul Walton because he talked about funding for biodiversity and how it was often insufficient in the crofting and small farming areas, which could lead to abandonment.

The previous schemes tended to reward farms and the like that had the greatest number of features or habitats that could be restored or protected. That meant that smallholdings were left out. What can we do with the new scheme to ensure that that does not happen and that places that have the best practices are rewarded and encouraged to keep their features?

Dr Walton: We need to take a spatial approach. You cannot just invent a piece of biodiversity and put it somewhere randomly—it has to have a biogeographic sense. If we have that spatial element to our biodiversity delivery plan, that should direct the funding to the right places. Some work at small scale can be hugely valuable. We would really like to see a re-energising of the idea of collaboration and co-operation between different land managers via the agricultural and land management support system. Delivery has been patchy to date but that collaboration is really important, particularly for smaller holdings.

Rhoda Grant: I will direct my second question, which is about private finance and investment, to Ailsa Raeburn, although I know that several people on the panel had something to say about that. What does private finance have to gain by investment in natural capital? The fear is, as was stated before, that it will cause greenwashing and inflation in land prices. Therefore, it looks as though land is being sold on to make profits for private financiers, for example. The other concern is that selling things on could tie the hands of land managers. We all know that things change very quickly and when we see different actions taking place, that could have a negative impact.

Where are the benefits for biodiversity and for the private financiers? What is there that will mean that they get involved in this kind of finance?

The Convener: We will go to Ailsa first. I noticed that Paul Walton was nodding and wanting to come in, as well as Bruce Wilson, so I will bring them in next.

11:15

Ailsa Raeburn: We can look at what has happened in the carbon markets and read over to what might happen in an emerging biodiversity credit market in Scotland. At the moment, it is hard to see how that is going to generate sufficient income in the short term to repay private investment. A lot more work is required on the thinking around that, because much of it is very speculative. In relation to the carbon market, there is an anticipation that there will be carbon taxes at some point, and people are trying to get

themselves on the front foot in order to be able to offset their carbon emissions. However, it is more difficult to see that from the point of view of a biodiversity credit as opposed to the English system of biodiversity net gain. Colleagues will probably have more to contribute on that.

There is a lot of socialising risk but privatising reward. We anticipate that a lot of public finance will be going in at the front end to enable some of the biodiversity work to happen, but we need to think about where the financial reward is coming from. That speaks to having a much stronger system of regulation and a better understanding of how such markets work. I am not convinced that we understand how they will work for Scotland's land and Scotland's people. That is a big piece of work that the Scottish Government needs to do.

There are huge issues around transparency and opaqueness and the financialisation of land. Who owns the credits? Who can enforce them? At the moment, we do not really have legal mechanisms to enable that long-term enforcement, particularly when assets transfer. You mentioned permanence, which is a huge issue for us at the moment. However, in 10, 15 or 20 years, there will be another huge issue, and we need to question whether we are we tying up our land resources and assets for a very long period of time for a particular issue when what we need is more flexibility. There are so many unanswered questions.

Sarah Cowie, speaking from the farmers' and crofters' perspective, picked up on a lot of the nervousness around why communities and landowners are not engaging and why we are not meeting the woodland and peatland targets. It is because we do not have clarity. The owners, crofters and communities all understand the issue of permanence in a way that financial markets might not.

Bruce Wilson: Ailsa Raeburn has done a great job of outlining those risks. I share her concerns, and others are nodding, too.

Ailsa has also done a great job in trying to articulate the difference between carbon credits and nature markets. As complicated as carbon credits are, they are relatively easy compared to nature markets. Nature means dealing with a completely non-fungible thing, whereas a tonne of carbon is the same in any part of the world. Nature is different if you move it 15m further away, so nature markets are very difficult to work with. We also start to see confusion between things such as biodiversity net gain and carbon credits. It becomes incredibly complicated very quickly.

One practical thing that we can do straight away is try to move the interim principles that we have mentioned on to a far firmer footing, and, to my mind, the place to do that is the natural environment bill. I have seen some investors follow the current voluntary principles, and that is great. During the summer, I was lucky enough to be with Finlay Carson at one of our reserves where there is an awful lot of woodland planting going on. In a lot of people's minds, that is natural capital investment, and they are certainly not following any principles for those investments. Whether something is a natural capital investment or a straight-up forestry investment, the perception is that they are now natural capital investments. We need to move quite quickly to put those on to a statutory footing.

The Convener: There is a huge catch-up process for politicians and Government in relation to what is happening on the ground, which seems to be well ahead of them.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): I had a resolution to be positive in the new year. Sadly—this is no reflection on the fantastic evidence from our witnesses today—when I look at the strategy, I find it as depressing as a Christmas turkey on boxing day. It really has no meat on the bones whatsoever, and that worries me.

We hear Màiri McAllan talk daily about the nature crisis and how we need to go faster and further, but the strategy does not do any of that. You have really struggled to touch on the strategy's positives, while the negatives—what is not in the strategy—are staring us in the face. One of the positives that is mentioned relates to non-native invasive species. However, I have been in the Scottish Parliament since 2016 and we have been talking about it for the past eight years, yet you are still saying that you need more detail.

On river catchment policies, we have a land use strategy that has sat on the shelf for goodness knows how many years. Moreover, we are at the business end of the agriculture bill, but, even though it is supposed to be a joint effort, one organisation is saying that 80 per cent of funding should be in tier 1 of the support package while another is saying that only 25 per cent should be. We are only weeks away from putting in place those laws, yet we are still not there.

I am disappointed to hear that people felt that there was no realistic engagement on the plan, because we need to be able to communicate the significant impacts of the policies that we will need to meet the huge task of reversing biodiversity loss. Again, though, we are still not there.

Has there been genuine co-production of the strategy, given some of the issues that you have raised? As Sarah Cowie has said, it will empower farmers and people to accelerate biodiversity restoration, but it appears that we are not there at

the moment. The 17.6 per cent cut in the agri-environment budget does not send a very good signal to farmers that their work is valued or, indeed, that biodiversity should play a huge role in future food production. Has there been genuine co-production, or do we need to do a lot more to get a far better joined-up approach to biodiversity?

The Convener: I am tempted to ask the witnesses to give a yes or no answer, but I know that that is not going to work—you will all have views on the matter. However, I ask you to keep your answers short.

If you are happy, Finlay, I will just work along the line from Bruce Wilson to Caroline Brown and then to Ailsa Raeburn.

Bruce Wilson: I am afraid to say that, as far as the majority of the plan is concerned, it has not felt like there has been genuine co-production. There is definitely work to be done to engage wider stakeholder groups, particularly delivery partners on the ground. What will be crucial is the governance as we move forward, so it is important that we start work on that and get it right.

Dr Walton: We need non-Government leaders on the strategic biodiversity council. I acknowledge that efforts were made to develop co-design across Government, but, although that work took an awful lot of time and effort, the outputs in the end were quite patchy.

The real hope for securing proper mainstreaming across Government centres on the legally binding targets for nature in the natural environment bill, and there is absolutely everything to play for in that respect. To have ministers and cabinet secretaries talk about the nature emergency is huge progress, because previously the Government narrative has been "Scotland's great for nature. Look outside your window—it's beautiful. There's no problem." Acknowledging the issue is the first step to doing the right thing.

I actually think that there is a bit more meat on Finlay Carson's boxing day turkey and that the direction of travel signalled by the whole biodiversity framework is very positive.

Sarah Cowie: We, too, do not think that there has been enough co-design or engagement with our environment and land use committee on the list of actions. There was disappointment that there was no engagement with farmers to come up with the list. They were just given a list and asked for their opinions when, in fact, they could have used their creativity, experience and expertise to influence the list itself. We just hope that, even though the consultation deadline has passed, there will be a chance to have an input on the final action plan. Crucially, although a lot of the actions in the plan are existing commitments, they do not really address why some things have not yet reached their potential, and there has been no engagement with industry or the sector on lessons that can be learned. Those would be my two main points.

Dr Brown: I completely agree—the plan was definitely not co-produced, and there is lots of potential for more co-production to happen as it goes forward. There are a lot of very useful things in it, but, as we have all said, we need more detail on who will lead, who will deliver, what the timescales and priorities will be, what the spatial context is and how it interacts with other work programmes such as NatureScot's and the Scottish Government's work programme on NPF4 and planning, with economic strategies and with all of those other things. There is potential here—we all see it.

I also agree with the point about the changing narrative. That is really valuable, and it is happening at a high level. We are seeing in national planning policy, in this plan and in lots of other places a recognition of the dual crises of the climate and nature emergencies. That, in itself, is a change, but, as far as delivery is concerned, there is still more meat to be put on those turkey bones.

Ailsa Raeburn: I agree with colleagues that wider community stakeholder groups have not been consulted—at least, I am not aware of any such consultation. We know from previous policies, particularly the one for highly protected marine areas, that, without consultation, you immediately get a defensive reaction that undermines all the good objectives that everyone is trying to achieve. There is more work to be done in that respect, and there is also more work to do on how communities can, at a very local level, contribute effectively and appropriately at a local scale. That can be very easily done by looking at projects that are already under way and that have been successful, but such broader community and public engagement needs to happen in order to avoid any immediate defensive reactions.

The Convener: The one part of Finlay Carson's question that none of you answered was whether there was enough money to achieve all of this and where that money might come from. Perhaps that question should be left hanging at the end of the session, given that we are now out of time.

I thank the witnesses very much for coming here and giving evidence this morning, and I thank Ailsa Raeburn for doing that so well online. I knew exactly when she had finished and when it was appropriate to bring the next person in.

The committee will now consider the evidence that has been given. Later this month, we will hear from the Scottish Government in relation to the plan.

11:26

Meeting continued in private until 12:19.

Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

All documents are available on
the Scottish Parliament website at:

www.parliament.scot

Information on non-endorsed print suppliers
is available here:

www.parliament.scot/documents

For information on the Scottish Parliament contact
Public Information on:

Telephone: 0131 348 5000
Textphone: 0800 092 7100
Email: sp.info@parliament.scot

The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba