

## ECO-CONGREGATION SCOTLAND - JUST TRANSITION ENGAGEMENT



*Land Use and Agriculture: considering rural housing and the farming workforce in Aberfeldy Parish Church*

Eco-Congregation Scotland welcomed the opportunity to encourage engagement across the three Just Transition sectors of built environment and construction, land use and agriculture, and transport. The charity organised and supported public engagement events, addressing the questions posed in all three Discussion Papers, held online and in locations across Scotland during August and September 2023:

- **6 national events**, hosting 3 physical Saturday meetings with hybrid online participation and 3 online evening consultation events.
- **24 regional online events**, organised through our Local Networks of eco-congregations and volunteers covering regions across all of Scotland. Each focused on at least one Discussion Paper, with all three covered across all Local Networks by areas collaborating in clusters on events:
  - 8 transport
  - 7 built environment and construction
  - 7 land use and agriculture
  - 1 covering all three sectors



*Transport: focus on reducing inequalities and car use, and facilitating viable alternatives to car use in Inverurie West Parish Church*

651 registered eco-congregations were encouraged to respond to at least one Discussion Paper and potentially host smaller community-based engagement. Due to the short timescale, local churches were less likely to respond through their own governance structures and instead encouraged individuals to respond.

We estimate over 1,400 individuals were engaged in some way in the consultation across our movement's activities, either by directly responding, taking part in an event or being involved in considering aspects relating to the process.

All engagement events were open and accessible to all in our communities, and advertised through websites and social media.

Feedback was gathered centrally by Eco-Congregation Scotland using dedicated webpages on each of the three sector Discussion Papers and receiving written responses. While submissions were open for the Scottish Government's own contact points for replies from any interested participants, we encouraged paper-based engagement and responses - with QR codes linking to sector webpages - for local and all physical events, recording proceedings for our own notetaking of regional and national events to gather a wider comprehensive response across our movement.

## Built Environment and Construction



*Built Environment and Construction: factsheets in group discussions at St Peter's Church, Edinburgh and St Bryce Kirk, Kirkcaldy*

Participants supported the outcomes and focus of the consultation, recognising the importance of new jobs and better practice in the construction sector. The emphasis on a fair spread across Scotland's communities for emerging opportunities was welcomed throughout the country. There was a hope that there would be more emphasis on key buildings being recognised and sustained as vital local resources in building resilient communities addressing the challenges of climate change. The need for communities to be able to shape and influence decisions around development and buildings in their area was essential in ensuring Just Transition and welcomed as an outcome.

Churches and other local buildings in smaller towns and villages – as well as disadvantaged communities in larger towns and cities – were often a significant or the only community-run facility. The cost of living challenges and energy volatility demonstrated the importance of affordable housing and sustainable alternatives for heating. Most respondents expected more focus on retrofitting existing buildings in a Just Transition and felt this should be emphasised as much as new builds with enhanced environmental requirements.

Providing accessible services in local buildings was an important outcome but it was felt to be challenging with financial pressures and changing needs in the public sector, with more collaboration required across voluntary and public sector to ensure sustainable and adaptable buildings for communities. It was also felt important to ensure consistency for Just Transition in planning development, to raise standards and build confidence in the process tackling environmental issues fairly across all communities.

### *Theme 1: Procurement as a lever for the transition*

There was significant support for enhanced legislation, policy and guidance bolstering positive change in development and low carbon options in Government spending, recognising it as a key driver for capital investment through construction. Most respondents were keen to see best practice examples showcased and supported in different regions of Scotland, demonstrating best value in both local and central government tackling the climate emergency. It was recognised that procurement costs and quality of materials would need to incorporate more sustainable aspects and this may involve additional costs, particularly at first, that would require to be considered and regarded as significant factors in spending decisions and not an optional add-on.

### *Theme 2: Building a skilled labour force*

Many supported the need to upskill existing workers through a Just Transition and felt support for the college sector was crucial in this regard, ensuring wider community-focused training opportunities through further education across the country. A majority of respondents emphasised the importance of attracting a diverse workforce and demonstrating the potential of well-paid careers in construction and retrofit of existing buildings. The Fair Work Convention's report was seen by most participants as helpful in signposting the way but closer collaboration with education, training and the construction industry with clear support from Government was viewed by some as a key early priority for action in the emerging Plan. It was still felt that challenges in ensuring a more diverse participation in science, technology, engineering and mathematics in school and vocational training opportunities made this another important early focus.

### *Theme 3: An innovative, internationally competitive industry*

Policy direction and practical support from spheres of government were seen as enablers for driving innovation. It was felt by some that a specific "centre of excellence" needs to be created, perhaps through partnership with higher education establishments to develop and showcase from a Scottish perspective. There was a pressure to consider products and services from overseas that was more prudent for the sector at present which would require to be considered in more detail for the new Plan. Identifying and celebrating the best of new approaches and their impact on the climate challenges was a positive aspect of this. However, respondents largely recognised that specific goals would require to be set for a just transition with the sector and Scotland's communities, understanding the need to incentivise more sustainable methods and significantly improve the performance of buildings throughout the country.

#### *Theme 4: Delivering consistent, sustainable standards*

Current practice was considered by almost all respondents to require stronger guidance in supporting improved and consistent design standards addressing the climate challenge fairly.

The importance of including existing buildings in this work was seen as crucial, and some were concerned that the main focus would be on new buildings where legislation, policy and guidance were more straightforward in enforcing as a condition of construction. Some felt embodied carbon accounting was crucial in reporting the impact on climate but others felt this would require a longer term shift to ensure a just transition across the sector and more widely among those responsible for all buildings across Scotland. The need for consistency was recognised as important but some felt that local authority planning responsibilities could enable regional variation compromising a national objective on this theme.

#### *Theme 5: Maximising the manufacturing base in Scotland*

The opportunity for new jobs, businesses and suppliers across our communities was recognised as being of vital importance. It was hoped that areas of the country most affected by economic pressures and threatened by loss of jobs could be supported as early adopters for government support. This was seen as an acute concern for communities reliant on the oil and gas industry in particularly the North East, demanding a Just Transition at significant levels for existing redeployment and potential workforce development. A minority of participants expressed concern that the wider economic impact would emphasise growth to the detriment of adequately addressing climate concerns.

### **Land Use and Agriculture**



*Land Use and Agriculture: Aberdeenshire participants in discussion at King's Church, Aberdeen*

Many participants welcomed the clear focus on local communities for sustainable jobs, providing local food and managing Scotland's land better in addressing climate change. The aspirations in the outcomes around jobs and skills, the importance of communities - and particularly but not exclusively rural communities - and the need to address rural poverty were widely welcomed.

The factsheet and consultation paper were welcomed in focusing on the pressing challenges of aging population and poverty for rural Scotland as key drivers in the Just Transition Plan. There was concern by most participating in the consultation that the environmental outcomes needed to be stronger in supporting biodiversity and nature as a clear outcome – with many feeling this was weaker by being too focused on agriculture and people – and would encourage wider support for Just Transition in this sector. The need to support and sustain Scotland’s natural habitat and species was expressed by most participants as an outcome important for all our communities in celebrating, enjoying and protecting all aspects of life on land across Scotland.

### *Theme 1: Delivering robust land reform*

This proved the most contentious theme, with a fairly even split of those strongly supporting the need for reform and a similar number questioning the assumption that “the way land is owned and managed requires reform”.

The factsheet and discussion paper helped demonstrate the Scottish Government’s position on continuing concerns over ownership and transparency which were troubling for some, but a roughly equal number – largely from positive experience of land owners in their own communities - were concerned at assumptions existing owners should be replaced or required to change due to the nature of ownership.

These consultees felt that there were often good examples at present where they saw effective management of land, respect for communities’ views and owners ensured that environmental issues were addressed.

This more sceptical group felt that the need for another Land Reform Bill was not clear, although others were very troubled by such a small number of land owners being ultimately responsible for so much of Scotland’s land.

Supporters for more radical change expressed concern at a lack of stipulation to either enable community influence or require specific environmental protection by this small group of landowners, hoping that any Bill would tighten community participation and require climate action.

### *Theme 2: Enabling Community Leadership*

Some participants were more aware of community Right to Buy powers and supported recommendations by the Just Transition Commission, but most consultees felt less aware of this issue and appreciated how it was outlined in the consultation paper to help inform their views.

Most participants did express support for additional support and were particularly concerned by a need to develop capacity and continue assistance for community-led initiatives.

Increased finance was clearly helpful but a strong majority of those engaging on this issue were keen for those leading community efforts to be supplemented by more relevant training, technical support and ongoing advice, with mentoring and continuing assistance to sustain community management.

Succession planning was also seen by some as a key factor to ensure successful and longer term leadership for community management.

### *Theme 3: Supporting Greater Climate Action Today*

We benefited from a number of farmers engaging actively in this process, notably in Aberdeenshire, Angus and Dumfriesshire.

It was felt that policies and demands of government needed to align more closely to ensure climate action was incorporated alongside other aspects of farm support in future.

New technology and training needed to be relevant, but the importance of rural advice services being delivered where required was seen as a continuing concern.

More reassurance and focus would be required on training advisors to understand and support farms and crofts in addressing the climate challenge while delivering quality products.

A key concern was the centralisation and economies of scale in aspects of agriculture. One example was dairy farms north of Aberdeen finding the distance for milk to travel to England for bottling or packaging by major companies was now a prohibitive issue and precluded their product from reaching the wider market.

The environmental impact of examples such as this along with the obvious detriment to farms across the north of Scotland renders it impossible to continue longstanding aspects of agriculture in certain areas of the country.

Food security and local production are both adversely affected by this, so many agreed that climate action through a Just Transition would require a focused response on supply chains or alternative products for such farmers.

One concern that was present in many discussions was the low cost of food which did not relate to the costs of production, losses made by farms and subsidies to supplement such losses, and the need for us to support environmental action that recognised the true costs of food in Scotland.

It was not seen as sustainable to continue with food that was cheaper than could be produced with disregard for the environmental impact, although some appreciated that cost of living pressures needed to be addressed further for those on the lowest incomes to ensure a Just Transition and Scotland taking appropriate next steps to become a “Good Food Nation”.

#### *Theme 4: Reforming Future Farm Support*

There was wide support for delivery of a just transition as a central priority in reform of farm support.

Many were troubled at the factsheet figures demonstrating low incomes and lack of profit for so many in rural communities and our agriculture sector.

Participants were keen for evidence-based action to ensure money was not wasted on unsustainable practices or subsidising losses, but focused on ensuring efficient and modern support for quality Scottish produce.

Farmers directly engaging in the process were keen to point out that they had good jobs, hard work was rewarded and agriculture still provided attractive prospects for employment in their communities, and did not want the consultation to be negative in presenting this for the future sector Plan.

#### *Theme 5: Restoring Nature*

There was some concern that the focus on peat had a more specific relevance in certain communities and islands, rather than a national impact, although respondents did welcome the changed policy support for restoration of peatlands and clear benefits of natural carbon retention, with some feeling that many communities and islands were already aware and embracing opportunities.

A strong view across different regions of Scotland was that communities would welcome the opportunity to identify priorities for action to support restoration and protection of nature locally.

There was already recognition and backing from local groups in communities through networks such as RSPB, our own eco-congregations, and the new Climate Action Hubs that were taking action on nature in their own neighbourhoods.

This would be a popular measure for the sector Plan, to welcome and encourage community-led action on climate and nature, helping to build confidence in wider community involvement in developing the Plan and future action for a Just Transition relating to land use.

## Transport



*Transport: hybrid consultation participants in Gorbals Parish Church, Glasgow*

The Transport sector consultation had a slightly higher level of participation in engagement across the three sectors though our movement. There was strong support for demonstrating the need to reduce domestic car use and short flights as clear priorities for modal shift in Scotland.

Some did express concern at the expense and accessibility of alternatives which currently were not always an option for some parts of the country. One example was the prohibitive cost of longer distance rail travel from Scotland compared to cheaper air travel, although participants clearly understood the much greater impact on climate as a major cost to the environment.

It was also pointed out by some that air was more reliable for some island communities awaiting improved ferry services and possibly producing fewer emissions. The outcome “Island communities are well connected to the mainland” required more urgent immediate action to build confidence that the Scottish Government was addressing this adequately in the sector Plan.

The emphasis on transport as the largest contributor to Scotland’s greenhouse gas emissions was seen as a key driver stimulating action to make the biggest impact towards Net Zero and ensure a Just Transition for all our communities.

The outcomes were broadly welcomed, however many hoped that community involvement in decisions on transport could be phrased more strongly and would aim for community influence potentially through ownership and better engagement on franchise opportunities for bus services, as an example.

It was felt by most participants that lack of control by local authorities and limited influence for wider communities would make it difficult to provide transport options that met local needs and reduced car usage.

### *Theme 1: Reducing inequalities and car use*

Fair reduction of car usage was seen as having specific needs and challenges in different areas of Scotland.

The factsheet and consultation paper were shared widely and commented on in all discussions, highlighting the particular challenges around women, diverse and minority communities, people with disabilities, rural accessibility and disadvantaged communities where low income was a persistent concern.

Safety issues were strongly supported as key drivers for change, particularly from public health and community safety perspectives.

Many participants expressed positive experience and aspiration for electric vehicles but there continued to be less confidence in the charging infrastructure being fit for purpose. It was felt that the cost of public transport needed to be addressed by government, including, as one example, much more expensive bus fares in Glasgow compared to similar rail journeys at present.

Free bus travel for young people and over-60s was seen as a positive by most, although a small number of respondents expressed concern in certain areas at the viability of services which had become too reliant on subsidised passengers travelling for free and were not seen as preferable options for those travelling to work, for example.

### *Theme 2: Facilitating viable alternatives to car use (including public transport, place-based and digital solutions)*

More control of public transport was seen by most participants as a key aspect in a future Plan.

Bus routes in many cities and town were taking longer over recent years due to congestion from increased overall traffic and specifically more car usage, so it was seen as a key positive step to enhance the public transport offer across Scotland.

It was also accepted that some areas of the country will find it difficult to access public transport and would still require domestic car usage.

Affordable access to electric vehicles and government direction to improve the charging network were seen as key measures in these often more isolated communities.

Many felt that the pandemic restrictions had demonstrated online options for work and services could be successfully implemented and maintained, but there remains a need to address digital inequality where access has to improve, particularly for those with lower incomes, inconsistent internet coverage or less confidence in using technology, specifically among older citizens.

Community groups were able to promote active travel and concepts such as liveable neighbourhoods, but this was also seen by a large number of consultees as a key priority requiring increased investment in public realm, footways and carriageways to make walking and cycling more attractive as a safe alternative to car use.

### *Theme 3: Capturing opportunities from investment, trade and innovation*

Participants largely had limited awareness of Scotland's current strengths in this area but were informed by the consultation paper, although almost all recognised the shift to electric trains remained a priority for government and was still crucial to Net Zero ambitions in public transport.

Some suggested that it was essential to highlight successes and showcase innovation, with lower costs and reduced pollution seen as attractive for economic opportunities.

It was also seen by some as important to link transport closely with research and development, and Scottish education establishments, in promoting this more widely, developing appropriate new approaches and attracting a workforce for the future.



Just Transition across transport, reducing emissions and supporting those facing disadvantage in that change, was also seen as a key selling point for attracting positive interest in Scotland’s climate action plan with related potential for jobs.

*Theme 4: The skills and jobs needed for the transport transition*

It was understood by many that there would be a shift in the nature of work across the sector and training new skills would be vital to the current workforce.

The importance of linking key employers with the college sector was seen as important in addressing this, with a regional focus enabling access to jobs from different areas across Scotland, rather than reliance on a few key providers centralising opportunities in certain localities.

Some did express concern at reliance on automation when safety, for example, would benefit from a human presence.

We look forward to supporting the next stages of the Plan for each sector.

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