

Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee

3rd Meeting, 2021 (Session 6), Wednesday 8 September 2021

Session 6 Introductory Meetings – Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands

Briefing for this session

The substantive background information for this session can be found in the SPICe subject profiles. These provide a broad overview of the areas within this Committee's remit and the Cabinet Secretary's portfolio and set out the policy development to date. The three subject profiles of most relevance to this Committee are:

- [Land Use and Rural Affairs Subject Profile](#)
- [Marine and Fisheries Subject Profile](#)
- [Animal Health and Welfare Subject Profile](#)

The following information in this paper provides an overview of live commitments and areas of work in relation to the Cabinet Secretary's remit with brief background information, building on the more detailed explanations set out in the subject profiles above.

The Cabinet Secretary's remit

Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands, Mairi Gougeon MSP

The [Cabinet Secretary's remit covers](#):

- cross-government co-ordination on islands
- Islands Bond
- carbon-neutral islands
- food and drink supply chain

- Scottish Food Agency
- agriculture
- fisheries and aquaculture
- animal welfare
- crofting

Suggested themes for questions

Below are some topics which the Committee may wish to consider. These are based on recent proposals and commitments within the Cabinet Secretary's remit.

The Cabinet Secretary's remit

The Cabinet Secretary's remit is set out above. However, there is significant overlap between this portfolio and others, particularly that of the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport, the Minister for Environment, Biodiversity and Land Reform, and the Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity.

- Members may wish to explore whether the Cabinet Secretary has ministerial responsibility for environmental subjects where they relate to the rural affairs and islands remit;
- Members may wish to explore whether the Cabinet Secretary will be working closely with, and/or be formally supported by, the Minister for Environment, Biodiversity and Land Reform and the Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity.

Agriculture

There are expectations for major reform of agriculture and land use policy against a backdrop of significant implications of both the climate and nature crises, and EU exit.

Members may wish to explore:

- The timeline and expectations for **development and roll-out of a new agriculture policy** to replace the Common Agricultural Policy. A [consultation on the 'first steps towards a national policy'](#) was published in August 2021. The following areas may be of interest in particular:
 - a. How **addressing climate change and biodiversity loss** will feature in a new agriculture and land use policy, as per the Scottish Government's commitments in the [Climate Change Plan update](#) and the [Statement of Intent on the Scottish Biodiversity Strategy post-2020](#);
 - b. The extent to which the [UK Internal Market Act](#), the [UK Subsidy Control Bill recently introduced in the House of Commons](#), and **common frameworks such as on Agricultural Support**, may have **an impact on the Scottish Government's policy choices** for agriculture and land use policy.

- **Crofting reform** – what steps the Scottish Government is intending to take this session;
- The recently announced **‘root and branch review’ of land-based education**. The [terms of reference for the Commission for the Land-Based Learning review](#) were published on 24 August 2021: “The work of the group will support the Scottish Government’s ambitions of delivering a just transition to net-zero, by ensuring our learning system equips people with the skills and knowledge needed to work in Scotland’s land-based sectors as well as any new and emerging green occupations in land-based sectors”;
- Links between land use policies and support and the **Fourth National Planning Framework** due this autumn.

Fisheries

As with agriculture, fisheries and marine policy is undergoing significant changes as a result of EU exit, with both social and environmental drivers playing a role.

Members may wish to ask about

- Progress towards producing **Joint Fisheries Statements** with the UK Government and other devolved administrations, and Fisheries Management Plans, under the UK [Fisheries Act 2020](#). A Joint Fisheries Statement must set out the policies of the fisheries policy authorities (in Scotland’s case, Marine Scotland) for achieving, or contributing to achieving the ‘fisheries objectives’ set out in the Act. The objectives are the sustainability objective, precautionary objective, ecosystem objective, scientific evidence objective, bycatch objective, equal access objective, national benefit objective and climate change objective. The statement must be laid before the UK legislatures by November 2022.
- Activities in the [Scottish Government’s Future Fisheries Management Strategy](#). The Strategy was published in December 2020 following consultation over the preceding years. The Fisheries Management Strategy addressed the following, among other things:
 - a. An anticipated **‘Catching Policy’**, which may address issues such as tackling discards and bycatch (where unwanted or unintended catch is disposed of), and a system for distributing fishing quota amongst the Scottish fleet;
 - b. Plans for rolling out **Vessel Tracking and Monitoring Systems**, which remotely monitors movements of fishing vessels via GPS. The aim of these systems is to support enforcement of fisheries regulations and improve transparency.
 - c. **Strengthening inshore fisheries management** through the [Regional Inshore Fisheries Group network](#). Regional Inshore Fisheries Groups facilitate local fishers to come together to explore fisheries management initiatives and develop a fisheries management plan.

- d. **Improving career opportunities and working conditions** in fisheries. It may be worth noting that aquaculture, fisheries management, and food and drink processing are in scope for the root and branch review of land-based education referred to above.
- Plans for **inshore fisheries management** stemming from the [SNP-Scottish Greens draft shared policy programme](#), including to consult on proposals to “apply a cap to fishing activity in inshore waters (up to three nautical miles) that will limit activity to current levels and set a ceiling from which activities that disrupt the seabed can be reduced in the light of evidence as it becomes available”;
 - The Scottish Government’s programme of work regarding **climate change and biodiversity loss where it relates to fisheries**, for example introducing fisheries management measures for Marine Protected Areas by March 2024 as per the SNP-Greens draft shared policy programme;
 - Progress towards **regulatory reform for the aquaculture sector**, including proposals in the SNP- Scottish Greens draft shared policy programme to establish an independent review to provide recommendations by the end of 2021.
 - a. [Suggestions were made by the previous Cabinet Secretary](#) that aspects of this reform process could be taken forward as part of work towards publishing a **Fourth National Planning Framework**.

Islands

The Cabinet Secretary is responsible for cross-government co-ordination on Scotland’s islands. During the last parliamentary session, the key piece of legislation in this area was the [Islands \(Scotland\) Act 2018](#). Furthermore, she has responsibility for island bonds which the Scottish Government is committed to developing. The SNP manifesto for May’s Scottish Parliament election stated:

“To help stem depopulation, we will establish an Islands Bond – offering 100 bonds of up to £50,000 to young people and families to stay in or move to islands threatened by depopulation. The bonds will support people to buy homes, start businesses and otherwise make their lives for the long term in these communities”.

Clearly one of the main ambitions of the Islands Act is to address declining island populations. Research [published last year](#) by the Scottish Rural College (SRUC) explored various cases of island repopulation initiatives from around the world. Although financial incentives were considered crucial, the SRUC concluded that single, standalone initiatives are unlikely to address depopulation on their own.

Members may wish to ask about:

- Whether the Scottish Government intends to develop and promote **other policies and approaches to complement island bonds**.

- How the Government intends to **promote and develop a more diverse economic base** to ensure people from across different job sectors can reside in remote/island regions.
- Given the possibilities for remote/home working have been demonstrated over the past year, **whether civil service, local authority and enterprise agency jobs are now more available and accessible to islanders.**

The Islands Act introduced a duty on the Scottish Government to prepare and publish a national islands plan, which it did [in December 2019](#). The Act also introduced a duty on relevant public bodies to carry out Island Communities Impact Assessments (ICIA). These should demonstrate that public bodies, including the Scottish Government, take island issues into account when developing or reviewing policies, strategies or services.

Members may wish to ask about:

- **How Islands Communities Impact Assessments are being used in policy-making**; for example, is there any evidence that these are making a difference.
- **Why the National Islands Plan does not include time-specific targets**, and what developments there have been in improving island-specific data with which to monitor progress.

Animal welfare

A number of manifesto commitments were made in relation to animal welfare, in addition to developments that happened at the end of the last session. Members may wish to enquire about:

- The SNP manifesto commitment to **reform the [Animal Health and Welfare \(Scotland\) Act 2006](#)** – members may wish to ask about the scope and timing of this reform;
- The **work of the newly established [Scottish Animal Welfare Commission](#)**, which has a remit to look at:
 - a. how the welfare needs of sentient animals are being met by devolved policy
 - b. possible legislative and non-legislative routes to further protect the welfare of sentient animals
 - c. the research requirements to provide an evidence base for future policy development
- Intentions for **taking forward the recommendations of the [Review of the Protection of Wild Mammals \(Scotland\) Act 2002](#)** (‘the Bonomy review’), and manifesto commitments “to close loopholes in the law protecting foxes”;
- The SNP manifesto commitment to establish a **new Scottish Veterinary Service**;

In addition, members may wish to enquire about the responsibilities around taking forward the [recommendations from the Deer Working Group](#) and implementing the commitment to [bring forward grouse moor licensing](#) following the [Independent Review of Grouse Moor Management](#). These issues both have animal welfare aspects, but also environmental aspects which sit under the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport. Members may therefore wish to ask:

- Whether the Cabinet Secretary considers the commitments on taking forward the recommendations of the Deer Working Group and bringing forward licensing for grouse moors to be within her remit;

Food and drink

As the Committee heard from stakeholders last week, there is considerable development occurring in relation to food and drink. Members may wish to enquire about:

- **The [Good Food Nation Bill](#)** – timeline and expectations for what is to be included in new legislation, and the [SNP manifesto commitment for a new “single independent Scottish Food agency”](#)– the remit and role of this body, timeline for establishing it, and how it will be established;
- The Scottish Government’s **recently published consultation on a [Local Food Strategy for Scotland](#)**;
- **Budget support for food and drink sectors** – commitments within SNP manifesto to create a ‘Sustainably Scottish’ brand with initial support for products to become the first ‘sustainably Scottish’ products, and to provide £15m to “support food processing and manufacture to develop local supply chains and transition to low or zero carbon operations”.
- **Coherence within Scottish Government’s policies related to food** (for example, healthy diets, education, social security and food poverty, food production and the environment, etc), and how Ministers and Cabinet Secretaries are working together across portfolios.
- Ongoing **implications of EU exit for food and drink sectors** - how imports and exports are functioning 9 months on from the end of the transition period, and any ongoing issues in particular sectors (e.g. seafood) that the Scottish Government is seeking to address;
- **Access to labour within food supply chains** and the [‘recruitment crisis’ warned of by food and drink businesses](#).

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