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Crichton Institute

Policy Briefing 07

What should Dumfries and Galloway look like in 2035?

Introduction

On Wednesday 6th May, the Crichton Institute (CI) hosted a panel discussion on 'What should Dumfries and Galloway look like in 2035?' at the Douglas Arms Hotel, Castle Douglas. There were six panel members and a chair², and around 30 audience members, including representatives of the public, private and third sectors, young people and researchers.

The session began with panel members offering their thoughts on the most significant land use challenges and opportunities facing Dumfries and Galloway (D&G). Discussion between panel members and participants covered a wide variety of topics, and concluded with an agreed set of key messages that participants wished to feed to regional and national policy-makers and politicians³. This briefing provides a summary of the key messages from the event.

Key messages for national and regional policy-makers and politicians

There needs to be a clearer vision of what D&G should look like in 20 years time: This may require creative and innovative thinking, and sometimes radical and controversial 'outside-the-box' decisions which are not limited by what has always been done in the past. A clear vision, designed from the 'bottom-up', will set the framework for appropriate actions; otherwise, we run the risk of simply continuing to talk. Land managers are 'stewards of the land' and need to be appropriately rewarded for their role in achieving the vision. This role will require an awareness of the extent to which any decisions taken about land use will have knock-on consequences for other land users, including those living and working in, and visiting, rural Scotland.



There needs to be a clearer understanding and articulation of how D&G contributes to 'Scotland plc': With a clear vision, the region can deliver multiple benefits for Scotland (and the UK and Europe), including high quality food, forestry and timber resources, quality tourism attractions, a thriving cultural sector, carbon sequestration, etc. Not all of these benefits are adequately valued yet through the market.

It is vital to fully involve communities, including young people, in land use decisions: While over-arching direction is needed from central government, the vision and appropriate accompanying actions need to be designed by communities. Such bottom-up dialogue, which could take place at (sub)catchment scale for example, can be encouraged and facilitated by appropriate actions at national and regional level. Land is the basis for rural communities to make a living, and the prime purpose of land use decisions should be to support the wellbeing and prosperity of people; in short, people should be the focus, and at the heart, of decision-making. Young people are often innovative and forward-thinking and will be the land managers of the future.

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² The event was chaired by Dr Sarah Skerratt, Co-Director CI Policy Function. Panel members were: Steve Rogers (Dumfries and Galloway Council), Dave Roberts (SRUC Dairy Research Centre, Dumfries), Tim Liddon (UPM Tilhill), Derek Robeson (Tweed Forum), Nick Jennings (Upper Eskdale Development Group) and John Thomson (Southern Uplands Partnership).

³ This event was organised by the CI's Policy Function which is directed by SRUC's Rural Policy Centre (RPC). The RPC provides the Secretariat for the Cross Party Group in the Scottish Parliament on Rural Policy which met on May 20th to discuss 'What should rural Scotland look like in 2035?'. The key messages from the Panel Discussion event were fed into this meeting by CI staff. The summary briefing and other papers from the May 20th meeting in the Scottish Parliament are available here (http://www.sruc.ac.uk/info/120597/group_meetings_2014-15/1381/meeting_4what_should_rural_scotland_look_like_in_2035).

We need to empower communities that wish to get involved: Not all communities will be able to, or wish to, fully engage (D&G has the highest number of moribund Community Councils in Scotland), but more work is needed to empower those communities that do wish to engage. The public and private sectors need to be ‘fleet-of-foot’, responsive to what communities are saying and willing to take and allow risks where appropriate. Many communities are willing and able to take on more responsibilities, often with only a small amount of (or zero) funding.

The current remit of Scottish Enterprise (SE) is hindering sustainable development in the rural South of Scotland: The different remit of SE and Highlands and Islands Enterprise is an issue which is regularly debated and there is a strong feeling that Scottish Enterprise’s remit hampers development in the rural South of Scotland. While some participants called for a change in SE’s remit, others called for a new organisation to be established with a broad remit – a Southern Scotland Development Board. Without one of these changes, it was felt that the South would always be disadvantaged vis-à-vis the Highlands and Islands.

An integrated partnership approach is vital: Policy-makers regionally and nationally need to learn to understand and respect the environment. An integrated approach is required which recognises the multiple roles of land (economic [and not just agricultural], social, cultural and environmental), the multiple stakeholders involved, the importance of both natural and built heritage, etc. otherwise it will not be possible to resolve conflicts and maximise opportunities. Within this approach, a breadth of issues need to be considered, including: demographic ageing, tackling the dominance of low paid, low skilled jobs, climate change, sea level rise, the likely increased incidence of flooding and severe weather events, changes to public service provision, tackling connectivity challenges, etc.

Reform of the planning system is vital: The current planning system is risk-averse and stifles creativity, proactivity and innovation. If we maintain it, we run the risk of simply re-creating a ‘museum of the countryside’. Much stronger links are required between land use and community planning. The box is broken, and we need to think outside it!

Emphasis on sustaining local economies is important within an over-arching vision: We need to think about how best to sustain local economies, recognising that working and living patterns have changed as people have become more mobile. Diverse economic activity in remoter areas is critical to maintaining sustainable and balanced communities, and therefore to appropriately managing the land. There may be new opportunities for communities based around local energy generation, which may help to reduce fuel poverty and generate better local energy sufficiency and reliability. In regions which are projected to experience population decline, radical decisions may be required to encourage in-migration, such as providing financial incentives to attract people to come and work in sectors where there are particular skill shortages.

Recognising diversity is important within an over-arching vision: There are different challenges, opportunities and trade-offs in different locations from the ‘squeezed middle’⁴ to remote rural and upland areas. Stakeholders need to work closely together to identify how to use different areas to maximise their potential and the potential for Scotland as a whole.

Five specific policy and organisational changes were suggested: 1. The Scottish Land Fund must be at least continued, if not expanded. 2. There would be value in having a community leadership programme to sit alongside the current SE Rural Leadership programme which is focused primarily on business leadership. 3. More investment is required in local skills programmes which will encourage companies to invest and young people to stay. 4. The centralisation of public sector jobs is damaging to our rural communities and must be stopped, if not reversed. 5. Regional ring-fencing of the Scotland Rural Development Programme (SRDP) budgets would help to ensure that regional priorities are more effectively targeted.



Three issues were suggested as requiring particular attention: 1. There is too much of a focus on climate change mitigation but not enough on climate change adaptation. Evolving our behaviour may bring benefits, for example, growing more/different crops in response to our changing climate and establishing new businesses to take advantage of new opportunities in renewables. Regional challenges must also not be ignored, such as the vulnerability of the long coastline to increased flooding. 2. Rural poverty, and particularly fuel poverty, remain a challenge across much of rural Scotland including D&G and are closely tied up with land use decisions relating to local renewables projects, for example. 3. Understanding the impacts of CAP reform on primary production and land use in D&G is critical. Based on that better understanding, appropriate responses can be designed and delivered.

⁴ This is a term which has been used by researchers at the James Hutton Institute in Aberdeen, to describe ‘the most contentious land use zone in Scotland’. For more information, see: <http://www.hutton.ac.uk/news/challenges-squeezed-middle>.