

University of Dundee

## Draft Scottish National Adaptation Plan

Reid, Colin

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## Draft Scottish National Adaptation Plan

The *Draft Scottish National Adaptation Plan (2024-2029)* sets out proposals for “actions today for a climate resilient future” as the country comes to terms with the climate emergency we face.<sup>1</sup> While much of the debate on climate change focuses on “mitigation” (the steps to reduce the causes of the problem), adapting to the effects of an already changing climate is essential in order to avoid disruption and harm on a massive scale. A brief Public Consultation Summary is accompanied by over 100 pages of more detailed discussion and policy proposals as well as proposals for cross-cutting action and a monitoring framework. Consultation responses are due by 24 April, 2024 and the final plan is expected in the autumn.

The proposals are grouped around five outcomes:

1. Nature connects across our land, settlements, coasts and seas
2. Communities creating climate-resilient, healthy and equitable places
3. Public services are collaborating in effective, inclusive adaptation action
4. Economies and industries are adapting and realising opportunities in Scotland’s Just Transition
5. Scotland’s international role supports climate justice and enhanced global action on climate adaptation.

Views are sought on priorities within these outcomes, on how they might be achieved, the contributions different parties could make and the barriers and incentives that help to shape actions.

Throughout the consultation, emphasis is placed on adaptation being a shared responsibility and on how pervasive our response to the challenge must be. For example, it stresses that restoring nature is not just a “rural issue” but is equally important in towns, with measures such as more trees and greenspaces in built-up areas for flood resilience and cooling. Both public and private sectors have a role to play in shaping and implementing our responses and a specific question asks about barriers to private investment for adaptation action.

In relation to planning, the objective is that: “Development planning ... takes current and future climate risks into account and is a key lever in enabling places to adapt.” However it is recognised that: “Delivering on all of the ambitions of NPF4 will be challenging, which needs a commitment from all sectors who have an interest in creating sustainable places.” For both new and existing buildings, as well as infrastructure, the initial design and any work done for maintenance and improvement must seek to ensure resilience in the face of the changing climate.

The Plan proposes a system of annual reports, based on quantitative indicators, as a means of monitoring progress. In some cases these will look at the direction in which the indicators are moving rather than setting specific objectives which might create perverse incentives, especially when many indicators will be proxies for the resilience which this the true objective. An initial baseline will be published against which trends can be tracked.

A feature of the paper is that it makes connections with many other initiatives and areas of policy. In the discussion of cross-cutting action, the links with a number of “most critical” policies are explicitly made: Climate Change Plan, Just Transition Plans, National Planning Framework 4, Flood Resilience Strategy, Biodiversity Strategy, Transport Scotland, Public Health Scotland, NHS Scotland Climate Emergency and Sustainability Strategy, Vision for Agriculture, Land Use Strategy, National Strategy for Government and the Programme for Government. Many other plans, programmes, networks, guidance, strategies and reviews are mentioned, and information will be drawn from recent consultations on matters such as the Biodiversity Strategy and water policy.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://consult.gov.scot/energy-and-climate-change-directorate/scottish-climate-adaptation-plan/>

This reveals both the great strength of and the big question marks over the paper. The strength is the very impressive way in which the pervasive impact of climate change is identified, along with the vast range of policies, practices and expectations which need to change to create a more resilient society that can cope with the challenges to come. Adapting to climate change is not a matter of concern only for those who might identify themselves as having an “environmental” role, but for everyone and therefore every driver in society must evolve to reflect this.

The first big question, though, is whether all of this can be tied together to provide a coherent response. Although all heading in the same direction, there is a real danger of the many different elements moving at different speeds, scales and intensities and thus failing to smooth the path to a more sustainable and resilient future. Such fragmentation is exactly what having a National Adaptation Plan admirably seeks to avoid, but the task is formidable.

The second big question is whether the proposals do enough. So much of what is promised is in terms of reviews, future plans and strategies, research, networks and partnerships, but it is much harder to identify transformative steps that are being put in motion or immediately in prospect. Even where policies are in place, are they delivering what is promised? Is NPF4 achieving “a significant change in direction in how we plan for the future of our places and communities, placing the twin crises of climate and nature at the front of our thinking”? At a time of recession and austerity, is there the capacity to implement the many strategies and plans that are promised? For example, budgetary pressure has led to a cut of over 40% in the Forestry Grant Scheme for 2024-25 which suggests that woodland creation targets may be hard to reach, in the short-term at least.

The ambition behind the Adaptation Plan is very much to be welcomed, as is its work in showing how all sectors of policy and society have a part to play in securing a better future for us all. Whether there is enough here to achieve the urgent transformation required to match the climate emergency is less certain.

Colin T Reid  
University of Dundee