

Who owns Scotland matters more than many want us to believe



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Last week the Scottish Government published research on public attitudes to land reform in Scotland.

The research matters because land reform's detractors — usually those with the most landed power, and therefore the most to lose — have long tried to put the brakes on the process by arguing that the public cares not a jot for who owns Scotland's land and how it is used.

The new research report shows that they could not be more wrong.

Its findings, culled from a representative sample of 1,501 members of the Scottish public and a series of nine workshops and 12 individual interviews, are illuminating. They show that when considering 'land in Scotland', participants tended to first think of rural land that had not been built on.

From an urban perspective that

translates as land being 'out there', away from where most people live. Survey respondents viewed climate change (24 per cent), building on greenspace (18 per cent), and inequality in landownership (17 per cent) as the three biggest challenges for the future of Scotland's land. Challenges identified by workshop participants and interviewees included concentrated land ownership, absentee landlords, housing developments encroaching on the greenbelt, derelict land, land banking and access rights disputes.

The research shows that there is widespread public support for diversifying Scotland's uniquely concentrated pattern of land ownership, a longstanding cornerstone of land reform policy. 71 per cent of survey respondents supported widening ownership of both rural and urban land to include more public, community and third sector ownership, while only seven per cent opposed that aim.

Other research participants also highlighted the importance of diversifying ownership for reasons of fairness, good stewardship and innovation so as to generate collective benefits.

As the report notes: "Participants felt concentration of ownership was at the expense of the majority of people benefiting from the land, and that it had implications for access to and use of the land, as well as ownership".

However, not all participants made a link between land ownership and use.

Other longstanding land reform issues of concern also resonated with the public. 73 per cent of survey respondents did not think there is enough information or transparency of land ownership in Scotland.

44 per cent of respondents were concerned about derelict or vacant land in their own areas, and there was support

for tightening regulations to ensure that land does not remain derelict.

Respondents were also strongly supportive of current access rights but thought that there should be more education and clarity about the respective responsibilities of the public and landowners, and on how to settle disputes.

Very few survey respondents (13 per cent) stated that they had previously been involved in decision-making around land use. People in the most deprived areas of Scotland were half as likely as others to have been involved, although they were just as interested in being involved in the future.

The findings show considerable public appetite for engaging more in land use decisions. Around two thirds of survey respondents indicated they would be interested in doing so. The report states that the main barrier to that is lack of public awareness of possible engagement routes.

Crucially, lack of public awareness of what 'land reform' means in practice, and of what the Scottish Government's land reform agenda involves, also featured as key findings from the research. 73 per cent of survey respondents said they knew 'not very much' or 'nothing at all' about the government's plans for land reform.

However, the report states that "when presented with an overview of the Scottish Government's aims for land reform and the main elements of the 2003 and 2016 Land Reform (Scotland) Acts, participants were, overall, very supportive of the aims".

Some research participants were surprised that the legislation had been so recently passed. There was also a lack of public awareness that the Community Right to Buy legislation had been extended to cover urban as well as rural areas. As the research also makes clear,

much of the support for the land reform agenda was grounded in "its potential to achieve wider social aims such as equality and fairness".

It's evident from the research findings that the Scottish public are highly supportive of land reform's underlying aims even if their awareness of the terminology is somewhat fuzzy. The public understand that concentrated land ownership can prevent communities from improving and sustaining the places where they live.

They are clear on the need for more transparent information on who owns Scotland. And they are motivated to engage more fully in land-use decisions if given opportunities to do so in genuinely meaningful ways.

These findings therefore leave the next Scottish Government and parliament with several linked challenges to address if the Scottish public are to get the policy answers to the 'land question' they deserve.

Most fundamentally, there is a need to ensure that the land reform process, defined as changes to the ownership and use of land in the public interest, increases both its momentum and policy reach in the next parliament.

That means applying appropriate legislative and fiscal policy tools to diversify Scotland's concentrated pattern of landownership to better serve the public interest. It also means providing communities with the advice, financial investment and other support to enable them to make the places where they live more sustainable through community ownership and other forms of community-led development linked to land use.

A second challenge is to demystify the idea of 'land reform', thereby making it more relatable to the public in ways that demonstrate the central importance of

land in shaping the wellbeing of our rural and urban communities. Closely related to that, relevant Scottish Government departments should also be encouraged by Scottish ministers to embrace land reform as a cross-cutting theme of relevance to their portfolios.

The third challenge is to provide communities with the tools and routes to engage in land use decision-making that ensures their voices are listened to and accommodated in determining particular land uses.

Properly resourcing and connecting community-led 'local place plans' to the wider planning system is one obvious way to do that. Having communities as equal partners in the Scottish Government's recently announced pilot Regional Land Use Partnerships is another.

No-one should be under any illusion that these challenges lend themselves to quick or easy solutions. Moreover, they require considerable political will and imagination in order to be properly addressed.

Fortunately, we are fast approaching a juncture where such qualities can be held up to the light of democratic scrutiny and choice.

In just a few weeks' time the Scottish public will go to the polls to elect their next parliament. The extent to which land reform features in each of the political parties' manifestos will provide a clear signal as to the coherence and credibility of their respective visions for a greener, more prosperous and ultimately fairer Scotland.

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