



AN INTRODUCTION TO POLICY IN SCOTLAND

This guide introduces policymaking in Scotland, how policies are developed, and the difference between policy and legislation. It updates and synthesises information from previous BES-SPG policymaking guides. To find out about the policymaking process at Westminster please read the [BES UK Policy Guides](#).

WHAT IS A POLICY?

A policy is a set of principles to guide actions in order to achieve an objective. A 'government policy', therefore, **describes a course of action** planned by the government on a particular subject. Documentation on all Scottish Government policies is publicly available through the Scottish Government website.



EXAMPLES OF POLICY

Details of a policy and the steps needed to meet the policy's ambitions are often specified in government strategies, which are usually developed through stakeholder engagement. For example, government consultations allow any organisation or member of the public the opportunity to respond and provide further evidence and opinion.

These strategies are non-binding (i.e., have no legal force) but are developed to help meet commitments, which can be legally-binding e.g. the commitment the UK has made under Paris Agreement.

Examples of current Scottish Government environmental policies and strategies:

- [Climate Change](#)
- [Scottish Biodiversity Strategy](#)
- [Forestry Strategy](#)
- [Marine Environment](#)

THE BES SCOTTISH POLICY GROUP

The [BES Scottish Policy Group](#) (BES-SPG) is a group of British Ecological Society (BES) members promoting the use of ecological knowledge in Scotland. Our aim is to improve communication between BES members and policymakers, increase the impact of ecological research, and support evidence-informed policymaking.

We engage with policymaking by making the best scientific evidence accessible to decision-makers based on our membership expertise. This guide is a resource for scientists interested in the policymaking process in Scotland and the various avenues through which scientific evidence can be used to inform policy.

If you are interested in learning more, we run a variety of policy-related training days and events throughout Scotland. For more information and to keep up to date with any opportunities and activities you can also [sign up for our newsletter](#) and [follow us on Twitter](#).

THE POLITICAL SYSTEM IN SCOTLAND

The UK Parliament passed the [Scotland Act 1998](#) following a referendum on Scottish [devolution](#). This Act set up the Scottish Government of Ministers and the Scottish Parliament and specifies which matters are reserved to and which are devolved from the UK Parliament.

Broadly, devolved matters are those with most day-to-day relevance to Scottish people. The issues of most concern to BES members are largely devolved matters, such as the environment, rural affairs, agriculture, fisheries, and forestry.

Table 1: Devolved vs Reserved matters

| SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT RESPONSIBILITY DEVOLVED MATTERS | UK GOVERNMENT RESPONSIBILITY RESERVED MATTERS |
|--|--|
| Agriculture, forestry, and fisheries | Benefits and social security |
| Education | Immigration |
| Environment | Defence |
| Health and social services | Foreign policy |
| Housing | Employment |
| Law and order | Broadcasting |
| Local government | Trade and industry |
| Sport and the arts | Nuclear energy, oil, coal, and gas |

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN POLICY AND LEGISLATION?

Although policy and legislation are interrelated, each has a distinct function. Legislation may have an associated policy that guides action to assist enforcement.

Table 2: Differences between a policy and legislation

| POLICY | LEGISLATION |
|--|--|
| Sets out what government plans to do towards achieving a long-term purpose or goal | Sets out the law – the procedure or standard that people and organisations must follow |
| Must comply with existing law, but may also lead to the proposal of new laws | Can be used to enforce the course of actions within a policy |
| May be adopted to fulfill legislative commitments | New laws may be developed to enforce part or all of a policy |
| Tend to evolve and adapt over time under review processes | Tend to be fixed for much longer periods of time |



Scottish Parliament © Hamish Irvine / Flickr

WHO ARE POLICYMAKERS?

‘Policymaker’ is a broad term, including all people involved in formulating, developing or amending policy. In Scotland policymakers include:

- Government Ministers and their advisors, civil servants, MSPs (Members of Scottish Parliament).
- Government agencies such as, NatureScot (formally SNH), Marine Scotland and Scottish Environmental Protection Agency.
- Government agencies and public bodies have expert knowledge in the ecological domain, and play a critical role in developing Government policies. For instance, NatureScot lead on the development of Scotland’s Biodiversity Strategies and the Scottish Forestry lead on the Forestry Strategy.
- Local government civil servants lead on local issues, broadly in accordance with government policy, such as Local Biodiversity Action Plans.





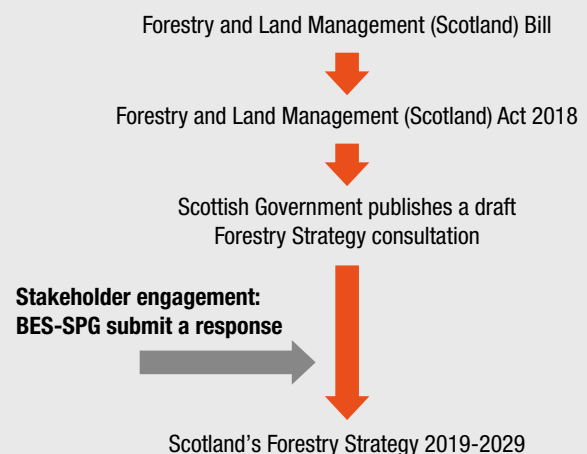
Developing a Forestry Strategy in Scotland

2018, the Scottish Parliament passed the [Forestry and Land Management \(Scotland\) Bill](#). This completed the devolution of forestry to Scotland when the Bill received Royal Assent and became the [Forestry and Land Management \(Scotland\) Act 2018](#).

From the Act, the Scottish Government is required to produce a Forestry Strategy, in consultation with stakeholders. The strategy should set out the Government's vision for Scottish forestry as well as the key objectives and actions required to achieve the vision.

The Government published a draft [Forestry Strategy 2019-2029](#) – for consultation. BES-SPG asked its members for their views on the draft policy, and after collating all of the scientific evidence received from forestry experts BES-SPG submitted a [response](#) along with other stakeholders.

Pathway to Scotland's Forest Strategy



WHERE DO POLICIES IN SCOTLAND COME FROM?

Elections are normally held every five years in Scotland and policies may emerge at different points during the political cycle:

- From party manifestos (declaration of policy and aims) prior to an election
- In response to particular situations or events, for example the [United Nations Paris Agreement](#) which is the legally-binding international treaty on climate change

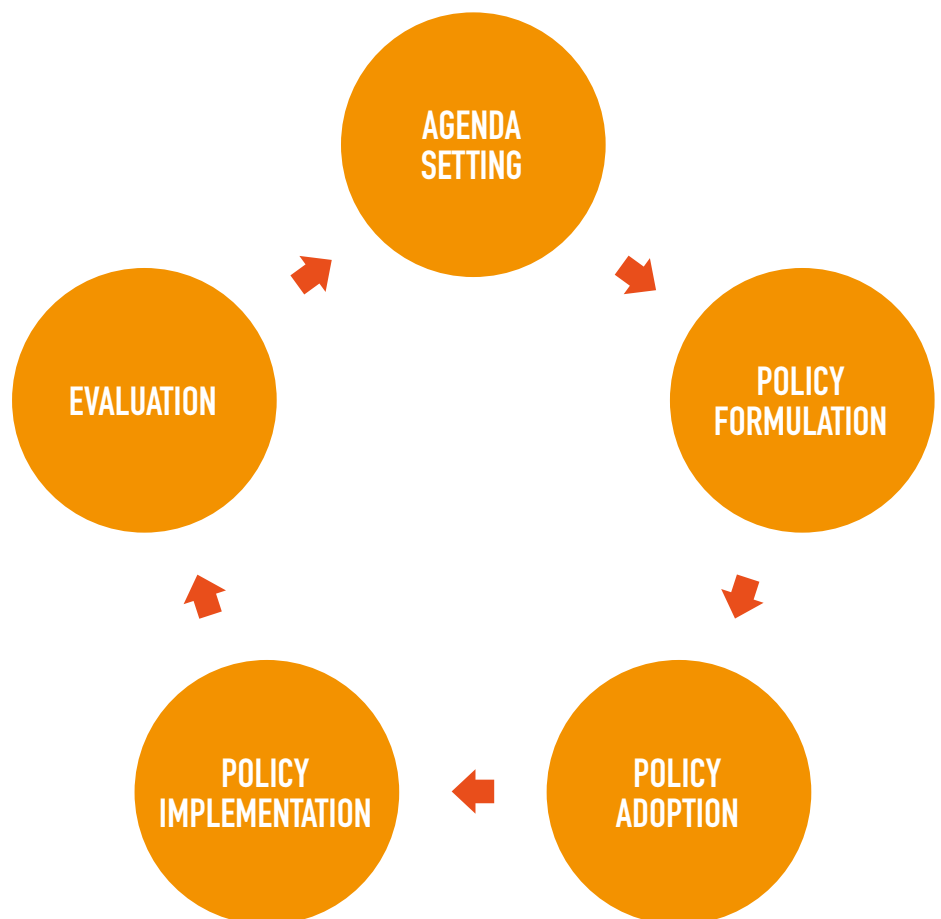
Policies may arise as a result of legislation, for example:

- [The Climate Change Plan](#) and [A Land-Use Strategy for Scotland](#) arose from the [Climate Change \(Scotland\) 2009 Act](#)
- [The Marine \(Scotland\) Act 2010](#) led to the network of [Marine Protected Areas](#)

External organisations and individuals can engage in and influence policy development through speaking to policymakers at all stages:

- Via formal consultation and engagement with the government
- Via lobbying of Ministers, Parliamentarians, and through wider public advocacy (to note: the BES does not campaign or lobby on issues)
- By providing existing or new research to inform policy

Diagram 1: Lifecycle of policy making



Source: Based on Figure 20.1 in Knill and Tolsun (2008)



WHAT ARE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT CONSULTATIONS?

The Scottish Government regularly consults on proposed areas of policy such as a draft strategy or at the early stages of planning a bill before it is drafted. Any interested parties/individuals may respond to a consultation which is usually in the format of a set of questions to be answered. All consultation responses are analysed and used in the decision making process. You can find open consultations [here](#). Don't know where to start? Get in touch with the BES-SPG to find out more [here](#).

WHAT IS A BILL ?

A bill is a draft law. Bills seeking to change the general law are called public bills and can be introduced by:

- A member of the Scottish Government
- An individual Member of Parliament
- A parliamentary committee

HOW DOES A BILL PASS THROUGH PARLIAMENT?

A bill must pass through three stages before finally receiving Royal Assent and becoming an Act of the Scottish Parliament.

Stage 1

Relevant parliamentary committee(s) consider the general principles of the bill and take evidence from stakeholders. Following a debate, Parliament votes whether to proceed with the bill. **Stage 1 provides the best opportunity for submitting research evidence.** At this point the BES-SPG could respond to a consultation and have the most impact.



Stage 2

Parliamentary committee(s) scrutinise the bill line-by-line and may make amendments based on the evidence they receive; at this stage the government may also bring forward amendments; all amendments are voted on by the committee.



Stage 3

The amended bill is considered by Parliament, further amendments are debated and voted on by the MSPs and there is a vote whether to pass or reject the final bill.

You can find out more about bills and how they are passed in Scotland [here](#).



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WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT AND SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT?

| SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT | SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT |
|---|--|
| Law-making body for devolved matters | Formulates and implements policy on devolved matters |
| Is formed of 129 MSPs and scrutinises the work and policies of the Scottish Government | Introduces most bills (draft laws) to be considered by the Scottish Parliament |
| Each citizen in Scotland is represented by eight MSPs: one constituency and seven regional | The First Minister is nominated by the Scottish Parliament and heads the Scottish Government |
| Scottish Parliament Committees are formed of MSPs from the balance of political parties | Cabinet secretaries are MSP's appointed by the First Minister to head a government department supported by Ministers |
| Committees hold the Government to account, scrutinise legislation and policy, and conduct inquiries | Scottish Government directorates are responsible for putting government policy into practice |



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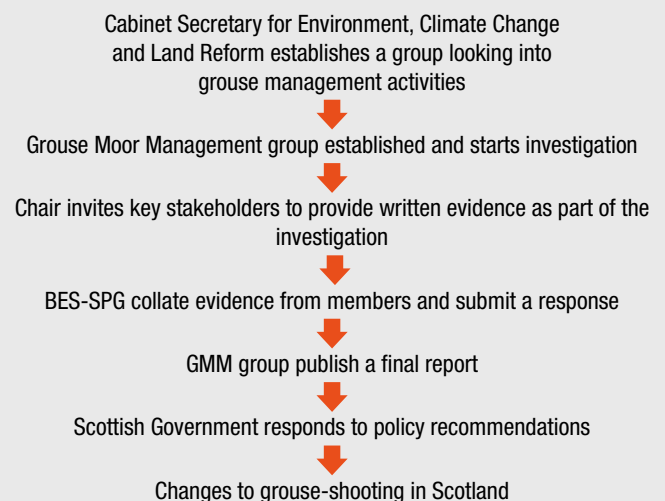


Red Grouse © Sailesh Panchal / Flickr

Inquiry into Grouse Moor Management in Scotland

The Scottish Government set up an independent Grouse Moor Management Group (GMM Group) following NatureScot research on satellite-tracked Golden Eagles. The GMM Group's remit was to "examine the environmental impact of grouse moor management practices ... and advise on the option of licensing grouse shooting businesses". As part of evidence gathering, the Group's chair wrote to key stakeholders, including the BES-SPG, asking for evidence on practices and issues relating to raptor persecution, predator management, muirburn, mountain hare management, use and application of medicated grit, regulation, licensing, and Codes of Practice. The GMM group set out its recommendations in a report published in 2019. The Scottish Government responded and now intends to bring forward legislation to license grouse moor management earlier than the five years that was suggested in the 2019 report. The legislation will be accompanied by a new Code of Practice on grouse shooting in Scotland.

Pathway of Inquiry



HOW DOES SCIENCE INFLUENCE SCOTTISH POLICYMAKING?

The British Ecological Society (BES) is committed to making the best ecological evidence accessible to decision-makers. Policymaking processes are rarely straightforward, however, and understanding how best to share expertise with decision-makers can be challenging. This section explains how ecological research can support evidence-informed policymaking.

INFORMING THE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT

The devolved Scottish Government has a range of responsibilities, including matters that the BES is concerned with such as education and the environment.

WHO PROVIDES SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE TO THE GOVERNMENT?

The science used within the government comes from a range of sources including governmental and non-governmental research agencies, universities and others including organisations like the BES. For example:

The Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA): for Scotland is responsible for informing policy development to benefit the economy, people and environment of Scotland. They work closely with the Scottish Science Advisory Council to advise the Scottish Government across all areas of its work.

Committees: The purpose of government committees, for example, the Environment, Climate Change and Reform Committee, is to ensure that policy and decision-making are based on solid scientific advice and evidence.

SPICe: The Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) provides impartial, factual information and analysis to members in support of parliamentary business. SPICe is divided into several categories, the most relevant for ecology being Environment and Energy. You can find useful policy summaries on their website.

Scottish Forestry: is the Scottish Government agency responsible for forestry policy, support and regulations. They support Scottish Ministers in their roles and develop policies and strategies, including the Scottish Forestry Strategy.

SEPA: The Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA). Part of their work involves providing advice and guidance on environmental issues and leading and participating in local and national level scientific studies and research

NatureScot: (formerly Scottish Natural Heritage) is Scotland's Nature Agency. They work closely with the Scottish Government, and inform and advise Scottish Ministers on a range of issues. They also partner with various other organisations.

Forest Research: Forest Research is Great Britain's principal organisation for forestry and tree related research. They provide expertise, data, products and services for the government and the tree, wood, forest and natural resources sectors, including for Scottish Forestry and Forestry and Land Scotland (the Government agency responsible for managing our national forests and land).

James Hutton Institute: This organisation has the Scottish Government Strategic Research Programme which covers Natural Assets, Productive and Sustainable Land Management and Rural Economies, and Food, Health and Wellbeing. Research Deliverables are developed through discussions between various stakeholders and the Scottish Government.

CEH: The Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (CEH) are an independent, not-for-profit research institute. They collaborate with various organisations and provide evidence to inform government decision making.

University research: The government provides Scottish universities with support to secure funding from a range of sources. The Scottish Funding Council maintains Scotland's competitive research base through a range of investments, as well as the training and development of postgraduate teaching and research students. The government also supports Scottish universities by promoting international collaboration and through innovation centres.



HOW CAN RESEARCHERS ENGAGE WITH GOVERNMENT?

FORMAL AVENUES

The public are invited to give their views on new or changing government policies through consultations. The government department responsible for the relevant policy area will consider these responses before making a decision. The BES-SPG responds to relevant consultations with contributions from members. [Sign up to our newsletter](#) or [follow us on Twitter](#) to find out about opportunities to contribute.

INFORMAL AVENUES

Building informal networks with civil servants is an important way of communicating research to policymakers. Finding out which civil servants are responsible for different policy areas is difficult, and it is often best to 'use people to find people'. Civil servants frequently attend BES-SPG workshops and conferences, which can provide a strategic opportunity to engage.

WORKING WITH GOVERNMENT

Research Council UK-funded PhD students can apply for three month internships at various government departments and agencies (see [Developing people and Skills at UKRI.org](#)).

Not funded by a UK Research Council? BES also has its own Policy Fellowship which provides mid-career ecologists with experience of working in a government department or agency. Also, the Scottish Graduate School of Social Science (SGSSS) has full-time (up to 3 months) or part-time (up to 6 months) internship opportunities. Former internships have been with the Scottish Government, but you can also apply for funding for an internship with an organisation of your choice (see www.sgsss.ac.uk/internships/).

You can also contact the BES Policy Team to find out more about our parliament shadowing schemes.



HOW CAN YOU ENGAGE WITH POLICYMAKERS?

- Scientific evidence is just one of many considerations that shape decisions in government. Economics, law and public opinion can also affect decisions
- Read up on the current policy context of your research area
- Ensure that all communications with policymakers are concise, digestible and unbiased. Try to provide options with the pros and cons and communicate levels of uncertainty
- Try to make your research publicly available as policymakers often have limited access to scientific journals
- Try to identify funding streams that are relevant to policy and enable research to be designed alongside policy makers, as policymakers' budgets and staff time are limited
- Build trust and long-term relationships by ensuring you have frequent interactions with policy contacts and asking how you can help them. Remember policymakers do not always engage with scientists and evidence in a coordinated way as priorities and procedures differ widely between departments and individual civil servants
- Stay up to date on events and news from relevant government departments and non-departmental public bodies through mailing lists or social media
- Be opportunistic; civil servants attend BES Annual Meetings – find them and speak to them!

HOW CAN I CONTACT A MSP?

You can find the contact information and specific interests of MSPs [here](#). You can also use the [motions and answers](#) section of the Scottish Parliament website to get an indication of the interests of each MSP. Important positions to be aware of in the context of ecology in Scotland are the Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform and the Minister for Rural Affairs and the Natural Environment

HOW CAN I KEEP UP TO DATE WITH COMMITTEES/ PARLIAMENT ACTIVITIES?

A good place to start is to sign up for relevant newsletters and bulletins from the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government websites which will provide you with updates straight to your inbox. Everything you need to know about Scottish Government Committees can be found [here](#). Particularly relevant is the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform Committee, which covers environment, land reform, water quality, climate change, National Parks, Crown Estate, marine planning and animal welfare (except farm animals).



BES INVOLVEMENT AND CONTACT INFORMATION

HOW DO THE BES GET INVOLVED

In line with the BES-SPG's aim of providing robust ecological evidence, we regularly respond to Scottish Government consultations on behalf of our members. Members' evidence is collated into a response, which is checked by both the SPG Committee and BES Policy Committee before submission. The archive of all our responses can be found on the BES website.

By getting involved with BES-SPG, ecologists will benefit from:

- Support to communicate their research to relevant policymakers
- Invitations to networking, policy engagement and training events
- Developing contacts at the science-policy interface
- Receiving regular updates on Scottish policy issues
- A forum to exchange ideas and develop novel applied research

How can you support the BES-SPG responses? We encourage ecologists at all career stages to get involved by:

- Drafting an answer, or part of an answer to a consultation
- Providing evidence
- Reviewing the responses

If you would like to get involved in our work please get in touch and indicate your area of expertise. Or please feel free to reach out to our Policy Officer who is listed on our [website](#).



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