Scotland's Fourth Land Use Strategy (LUS4)

Change Mental Health Consultation Response

Why Mental Health and Wellbeing Belong in a Land Use Strategy

Land use and planning shape determinants of wellbeing

Change Mental Health hosts and brings together Scotland's *National Rural and Islands Mental Health Forum*, so we firmly believe land use can have a direct influence on the social and environmental determinants of mental health.[1] Green and blue spaces can provide restorative environments, improve air quality, encourage physical activity, and reduce isolation[2]. Evidence suggest access to these environments can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression, and support resilience and recovery.[3]

Improving wellbeing delivers "triple wins"

Actions that support mental wellbeing often also deliver biodiversity and climate gains. For example:

- Community gardens and allotments support social connection, food resilience, and biodiversity.[4]
- Woodland restoration or "forest bathing" can reduce stress, enhance ecosystems, and store carbon.[5]
- Blue/green corridors provide safe active travel routes, cutting emissions while boosting wellbeing.[6]

Policy alignment and precedent

Scotland's *Place Principle*, planning reforms, and public health priorities already highlight the need for integration between land use and health. LUS4 has the opportunity to formalise that link at a national scale by embedding wellbeing as a land use outcome.

Equity and inclusion

Access to restorative environments is uneven; people in deprived areas can face greater barriers to green space and recreational land use[7]. Embedding wellbeing objectives in LUS4 would help address these inequities, ensuring that restorative environments are not a privilege but a right.

Post-COVID and climate resilience

The pandemic reinforced the importance of local green and blue spaces for mental health. At the same time, climate change is placing stress on communities. Prioritising wellbeing in land use builds resilience by strengthening social fabric, promoting active living, and fostering connection to place.

Possible Inclusions for LUS4

1. Embed wellbeing objectives explicitly

Adopt Place and Wellbeing Outcomes as a guiding framework, and include clear wellbeing goals such as:

- Universal access to high-quality green space within a 10-minute walk.
- Protected quiet or wild zones for psychological restoration.
- Community growing spaces in underserved areas.
- Safe active travel corridors linking homes, schools, and workplaces.

2. Prioritise equitable access

- Ensure deprived areas and rural communities are prioritised for investment in green and blue infrastructure.
- Require wellbeing and equity assessments when allocating land for housing, recreation, or infrastructure.

3. Apply wellbeing-centred criteria in Regional Land Use Partnerships (RLUPs)

- Require RLUPs to consider mental wellbeing in decision-making.
- Include public health and mental health organisations in governance.
- Encourage wellbeing impact assessments for major land use proposals.

4. Strengthen cross-sector collaboration

- Involve health professionals and mental health charities in early-stage land use decisions.
- Introduce formal requirements for Health Impact Assessments or Wellbeing Impact Assessments on significant developments.
- Encourage co-design with communities, particularly groups at higher risk of poor mental health.

5. Promote nature-based and community-based interventions

Support land use initiatives with a strong evidence base for improving mental health, including:

- Community gardens and allotments.
- Woodland access and forest bathing.
- Blue/green corridors for walking, cycling, and quiet recreation.
- Therapeutic gardens (sensory, mindful, biodiversity gardens).
- Rewilded “quiet zones” for psychological refuge.
- Linkages to “green prescribing” in healthcare.

6. Monitor and evaluate wellbeing outcomes

- Track metrics such as frequency of access to nature, self-reported mental wellbeing, and participation in community land-based activities.
- Develop longitudinal studies to assess how land use decisions influence wellbeing over time.

7. Frame wellbeing as central to sustainability

Wellbeing must not be a “soft add-on.” Restorative land use and equitable access to green/blue spaces should be seen as core components of a just transition, climate adaptation, and resilience. The consultation already recognises “cultural and wellbeing benefits” such as sense of place, recreation, and mental health support

Conclusion

Scotland’s land is central to its future - not only for climate and biodiversity, but for the mental health of its people. A Land Use Strategy that embeds wellbeing can deliver multiple wins: stronger mental health, healthier ecosystems, and more resilient communities.

Change Mental Health urges the Scottish Government to make mental wellbeing an explicit priority in LUS4, ensuring that land use policy contributes to a fairer, healthier, and more resilient Scotland.

References

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