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Introduction

1. This commentary considers the results of the 2001 Scottish Vacant and Derelict Land Survey in the context of planning policy at the national and local level. The Scottish Executive publishes the results of the annual survey in a Statistical Bulletin. The issue of vacant and derelict land links into the wider Scottish Executive objectives of sustainable development, economic competitiveness, social justice and environmental quality. While the reclamation of vacant and derelict land is part of the remit of the Enterprise Networks, councils and other interests including the private sector, have an important role in reclaiming and reusing land.

Background

2. The Scottish Vacant and Derelict Land Survey (SVDLS) is an annual survey undertaken to establish the extent and state of vacant and derelict land in Scotland and the amount of land that has been reclaimed since the previous survey. The survey has been carried out annually since 1990. While not all local authorities participate fully, the majority of authorities in the central belt and urban areas provide data every year. The main purpose of the survey is to provide a national data source to inform the programming of the rehabilitation, planning and reuse of vacant and derelict sites. The information provided is an invaluable source of information relating to such sites and assists in reinforcing and justifying national policy established to bring about the reuse of these wasted resources.

3. For the purposes of the survey the definitions of vacant and derelict land are:

Vacant: land within urban settlements (with population over 2000), or within 1km of settlements, which is vacant e.g. unused, unsightly, or which would benefit from development or improvement.

Derelict: land in urban and rural areas which is so damaged by development or use that it is incapable of development for beneficial use without rehabilitation, or which is not being used for the purpose for which it is being held or for a use acceptable in the local plan, or land which is not being used and where contamination is known or suspected.

4. Brownfield land is a frequently used term. A variety of definitions of brownfield land exist, the most succinct of which is “any land which has been previously developed”¹. It can also refer to the reuse of redundant buildings for new uses. Reference to previously developed or brownfield land is more

¹ Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, 1998

wide-ranging than, but inclusive of, vacant and derelict land as defined above and referred to in this commentary.

Policy Context

5. The broad context for planning policy relating to vacant and derelict land is provided at the national level through statements such as Down to Earth², the Framework for Economic Development in Scotland³, Smart Successful Scotland⁴ and the social justice strategy “Social Justice...a Scotland where everyone matters”⁵. Vacant and derelict land has also come up as a significant issue in the Cities Review.

SVDLS 2001
Table 4

6. The full and effective use of land is an important element of sustainable development; land is a finite resource therefore best use must be made of it. Monitoring the volume of vacant and derelict land in Scotland has shown that the total area of land recorded as vacant and derelict has reduced from 15,400 hectares in 1993 to 10,607 hectares in 2001. The volume of land being brought back into use is in reality higher than the fall in total volume would indicate, but land is continuing to fall out of use for a variety of reasons including economic restructuring and clearance in peripheral housing schemes. Reductions in the total amount of vacant and derelict land shown in the SVDLS results from are the result of land being brought back into use, naturalisation⁶ or land being removed from the survey for definitional reasons.

7. The economic policy promoted by the Scottish Executive accepts sustainable development as an integral part of a strong economy, and that all features of the physical infrastructure in its broadest sense are relevant to economic development including those which concern transport, buildings and land. Bringing vacant and derelict land back into productive use is necessary to meet continuing market demand for development land in urban areas.

SVDLS 2001
Table 10
and Table 11

8. The quality of Scotland’s environment is an important factor in promoting competitiveness and prosperity, while environmental protection and enhancement can bring long-term economic benefits. The quality of the urban and rural environment is affected by the amount of vacant and derelict land, particularly long-term vacancy or dereliction. Where the length of time land has lain unused is known, 65 per cent (6,296ha) of the vacant and derelict land recorded in the 2001 survey has been in this state since before

² Scottish Office, 1999

³ Scottish Executive, 2001

⁴ Scottish Executive, 2001

⁵ Scottish Executive, November 1999

⁶ Where a site appears to have reverted to a naturalised state and to have blended back into the surrounding landscape

1991 and 29 per cent (2,790ha) since before 1981. The problem of market failure impacts particularly on land with severe constraints on its reuse. Such land cannot be overlooked and intervention from the public sector is likely to be required to achieve a sustainable end use. Market demand for development land in urban areas should be met as much as possible by bringing vacant and derelict land back into use in preference to greenfield sites.

9. Bringing vacant and derelict land back into effective use can contribute to area regeneration and improvements in the physical environment in support of the 'people and places' emphasis of the social justice strategy. The new uses of reclaimed land range from agriculture and forestry, to business and industry, residential, recreation and leisure, nature conservation and community uses. Of the land brought back into use in 2000-2001 32 per cent (253 ha) was for residential development, 16 per cent (129ha) was for mineral activity, 15 per cent (121ha) for agriculture, 14 per cent (111ha) for various business and industrial uses and 8 per cent (60ha) for recreation, leisure and passive open space.

SVDLS 2001
Table 18

National Planning Policy and Advice

10. National planning policy places a priority on the reuse of vacant and derelict land, both as a contribution to regeneration and renewal and as a means of meeting market demand for development land in urban areas and reducing the pressure for development of greenfield sites. The need to make best use of existing urban areas and to seek to reuse brownfield land (which includes vacant and derelict land) is an integral part of Executive planning guidance and advice.

11. NPPG1: The Planning System establishes the overall commitment of the planning system to the rehabilitation of vacant and derelict land. Two of the key objectives of sustainable development which can be tackled through the planning system are the promotion of regeneration and the full and appropriate use of land, buildings and infrastructure and the promotion of the use of previously developed land and minimising greenfield development.

12. NPPG2: Business and Industry highlights vacant and derelict land as a wasted resource and acknowledges that industry and business have a wide range of needs which cannot all be met on rejuvenated sites, but the aim in the longer term is to increase the supply from this source by investing in environmental improvement.

13. NPPG3: Land for Housing recognises the important and effective contribution brownfield sites (including vacant and derelict sites) have made, and can still make to the supply of land for housing. The benefits to regeneration and the local environment are reinforced, as are the benefits of better use of existing infrastructure, reduced need to travel and reduced pressure on greenfield sites. The policy clearly states that as much of the demand for new housing as possible should be met from brownfield sites. The possible need for assistance for developers in clearing dereliction or contamination is also discussed.

14. NPPG10: Planning and Waste Management establishes the possibilities associated with landfill and bringing land back into use. The potential for land raising on derelict sites, eventually creating new landforms is also addressed. A complementary Planning Advice Note (PAN63: Waste Management Planning) was issued in February 2002. NPPG11: Sport, Physical Recreation and Open Spaces puts forward the possibility of using suitable vacant and derelict land for golf courses, NPPG8: Town Centres and Retailing considers the use of vacant and derelict sites in the context of the sequential approach to retail location.

15. NPPG2 and NPPG3 are currently being revised and updated. The consultative draft NPPG2: Economic Development (January 2002) identifies the contribution previously developed land can make to the supply of sites for economic development and states that development plans should promote reuse where marketable and economically viable sites can be achieved. In support of this, the draft policy indicates that long-term planning can identify areas for reuse and redevelopment that will require investment in remediation, infrastructure and environmental improvement. The use of compulsory purchase in assembling sites that meet market needs is encouraged.

16. The consultative draft NPPG3: Planning for Housing (March 2002) considers the significant contribution brownfield land can make to the housing land supply. The draft policy makes it clear that planning authorities should promote the reuse of previously developed land in preference to greenfield land, provided that a satisfactory residential environment can be created. However, given that the availability of previously developed sites varies considerably across the country, it is not considered appropriate to set a national target for brownfield residential development.

17. PAN52: Planning and Small Towns considers the issue of vacant and derelict land in some depth, particularly in relation to the blight and reduction in confidence that can result. The advice note indicates that planning authorities should consider the potential contribution which vacant and derelict

land and obsolete or redundant buildings can make towards meeting development requirements. Sites should not be seen in isolation but in the context of an integrated approach to regeneration related to the needs and opportunities in the town as a whole. Planning authorities should have a clear view of priorities in order to determine early action projects and to identify the measures required to find new uses for land and buildings which have fallen into disuse. PAN60: Planning for Natural Heritage highlights the possibilities for creating and enhancing wildlife habitats and earth heritage interests through renewal and improvement of vacant and derelict land.

SVDLS 2001
Table 6

18. 56 per cent (3,544ha) of recorded vacant and derelict land is known to be, or suspected of being contaminated. A new contaminated land regime, implementing the provisions of Part IIA of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 came into force in July 2000. PAN33: Development of Contaminated Land provides advice on the implications of the regime for the planning system. Of particular importance is the 'suitable for use' approach which has been adopted by the Scottish Executive.

Strategic Policy

SVDLS 2001
Table 1

19. The extent of the problem of vacant and derelict land varies across Scotland, with a high proportion focused in Glasgow and Lanarkshire. 31 per cent (3,341ha) of vacant and derelict land recorded in 2001 is in Glasgow or North Lanarkshire; a further 6 per cent (686ha) is in South Lanarkshire. Overall ten local authorities⁷ account for nearly three-quarters of recorded vacant and derelict land (7,681ha). Existing structure plan policies, which will have influenced current levels, generally support the reclamation and reuse of vacant and derelict land, although to varying levels. The Strathclyde Structure Plan considers the issue in the context of urban renewal, highlighting the benefits and the problems of implementation. These problems include ownership, the requirement for public bodies to achieve the highest value for their land and lack of developer interest. The need for environmental improvement on sites to increase attractiveness for investment is highlighted. Working on similar principles, the Fife Structure Plan identifies the removal of dereliction and implementation of environmental improvements as an important element of the plan strategy. The Tayside Structure Plan also highlights the link between the reuse of vacant and derelict land and urban renewal. Both the Fife Structure Plan and the Central Structure Plan address the specific problem of dereliction resulting from the coal mining industry.

SVDLS 2001
Chart 1

⁷ North Lanarkshire, Glasgow City, Highland, South Lanarkshire, Fife, West Lothian, North Ayrshire, Renfrewshire, East Ayrshire and Dumfries and Galloway. (Latest available figures for Highland are 1993.)

SVDLS 2001
Table 10 +
Table 11

20. Emerging structure plan policies will be a key influence on the amount of vacant and derelict land brought back into use in the next 10-15 years. The finalised Glasgow and Clyde Valley Joint Structure Plan seeks to eliminate long term vacant and derelict land over the next 20 years and sets a target of increasing the rate at which brownfield land is brought back into use from 300 hectares per year to 400 hectares per year. Long-term sites are those which have been vacant or derelict since before 1985. They are often characterised by multiple constraints including contamination, land instability/ undermining, lack of infrastructure, multiple or unknown ownership, poor accessibility and chronic market failure. In Glasgow and the Clyde Valley⁸ 42 per cent (1,998ha) of vacant and derelict land, where the length of time of disuse is known, can be classed as long term.

21. For the city of Glasgow, the Glasgow Alliance has set a target of reducing the amount of long-term vacant and derelict land by 50 per cent between 1998 and 2004. The three main initiatives being pursued currently are Brownfield Sites for Housing (Scottish Enterprise Glasgow, Glasgow City Council, Communities Scotland, housing associations and house builders), Strategic Sites for Business and Industry (partnership involving Scottish Enterprise Glasgow, Glasgow City Council, Strathclyde European Partnership and the private sector) and the Land Renewal Programme (Glasgow City Council, Scottish Enterprise Glasgow and Communities Scotland). 129 hectares of long-term vacant and derelict land in the city has been taken up since 1998 (Source: Glasgow City Council). To ensure that the Glasgow Alliance target is met, work is currently underway to bring forward new proposals particularly aimed at land that does not have an immediate economically sustainable end use.

22. A strategic approach to tackling the problem of derelict land has also been adopted in Lanarkshire. The initiative is a partnership between Scottish Enterprise Lanarkshire, Communities Scotland, North Lanarkshire Council and South Lanarkshire Council. The derelict land strategy proposes a twin track approach to treatment of priority sites; the identification of three significant clusters for priority action and the development of a greening programme in support of the core initiatives. The aim is to secure the redevelopment of half of the core sites over a 10-year period and remove the impression of dereliction from the remainder. The strategy emphasises the need for a Lanarkshire-wide partnership approach to tackling the problem, including private landowners and organisations such as the Scottish Greenbelt Company and Central Scotland Countryside Trust.

⁸ Area covered by Inverclyde, Renfrewshire, East Renfrewshire, South Lanarkshire, North Lanarkshire, East Dunbartonshire, West Dunbartonshire and Glasgow City Councils

SVDLS 2001
Table 17

23. Overall the amount of vacant and derelict land has been dropping, indicating that supportive planning policies and actions are having a positive effect. However, the scale of the problem remains significant. Between 2000 and 2001, 521 hectares of land were added to the survey. This significantly reduces the impact of the 792 hectares that were reclaimed. 355 hectares were removed from the survey due to redefinition; 252 hectares were removed because of naturalisation.

SVDLS 2001
Table 16

Intended and Actual Uses

SVDLS 2001
Table 13

24. For the land currently recorded as vacant or derelict the most common preferred or intended uses (as defined in the local plan) are residential (2,304ha), general industry (1,244ha), manufacturing (1,126ha), agriculture (969ha) and passive open space (712ha). The high level of land allocated for manufacturing would seem unrealistic in view of the economic restructuring which has occurred in the past two decades. The desire to return land to agricultural uses may also need to be reconsidered in the light of the major changes in the rural economy, particularly as the identified land is mostly derelict. It is not possible to generalise to any great extent, however the survey results indicate the need for a comprehensive re-evaluation of local plan allocations to reduce the discrepancies between intended use and actual use.

SVDLS 2001
Table 21

25. The coincidence of intended use and actual use of reclaimed vacant and derelict land is relatively poor. There are some noticeable discrepancies between the preferred uses for specific sites and the actual use on that site, for example, for 33 hectares the preferred end use was offices/ business class and overall 33 hectares of land was reclaimed for this use, but only 18 per cent (6ha) of the land intended for offices/ business class was actually used for this purpose. The highest coincidence is for residential uses where 83 per cent (189ha) of land intended for residential uses was actually brought back into use for residential development. The coincidence rate is generally less than 50 per cent. These results may derive from inappropriate and unrealistic aspirations both by planning authorities and owners. There are also some significant differences in the amount of land intended for a use, and the amount actually developed for that use. For example only 9 hectares of the land which was brought back into use was intended for retail, but 43 hectares was actually developed. Most of the additional land used was intended for manufacturing/ other general industry. Both agriculture and manufacturing/ other general industry have more land intended for the use than being developed. This may be indicative of development plans failing to keep up with the market.

26. Whilst residential and manufacturing/industrial uses are the most common preferred or intended use for vacant and derelict sites, reclamation for 'green' uses is also common. In 2001 the preferred or intended use (where known) for 20 per cent (2,107ha) of land classed as vacant or derelict was agriculture, forestry and woodland, nature conservation or passive open space. A good example of reclamation for nature conservation purposes is Seafield Law in West Lothian, where a shale bing has been remodelled to create a positive landscape feature and a range of new habitats including woodland, wildflower meadows, ponds and wetlands. It should not be overlooked that classification as vacant or derelict does not automatically imply that land has no ecological value in its existing state. Natural colonisation takes place over time and sites can become important habitats for a variety of species of flora and fauna, offering opportunities to manage the sites for nature conservation, public open space or other recreational purposes. Reuse for environmental purposes, particularly where low cost management strategies can be developed, can be particularly relevant in rural and urban fringe locations. Existing initiatives that can be utilised include Paths for All, Greenspace for Communities (SNH), Community Woodlands and the Central Scotland Forest. The finalised Glasgow and Clyde Valley Joint Structure Plan identifies the target of the restoration of 3,000 hectares of degraded or poorly managed urban fringe land to positive countryside uses by 2020 to assist the creation of a Green Network. For some long-term sites environmental improvement through 'greening' may be the only viable option at present and can help to counteract the blight caused by the appearance of the sites.

Co-ordination and Funding

27. Environmental improvement and the reclamation or improvement of derelict land is a responsibility of the Enterprise Networks⁹, which commit significant resources to these activities, but councils also have an important role. Concerns have been expressed that land renewal and environmental improvement currently have a lower priority than in the past. Smart, Successful Scotland¹⁰ sets out new priorities to meet the anticipated future challenges for the enterprise networks. Renewal and reclamation and environmental improvement are not specified priorities, but there is an acknowledgement of the importance of image, quality of life and the environment in contributing to the objective of promoting Scotland as a globally attractive business location. Co-ordination of efforts to bring land back into effective use is essential, particularly to make best use of available resources. Joint working is also important for introducing innovation and

⁹ Enterprise and New Towns (Scotland) Act 1990 Sections 1 and 4

¹⁰ Scottish Executive 2001

broad thinking on potential end uses for vacant and derelict sites. The involvement of councils and bodies such as Communities Scotland, SNH and other public bodies, environmental NGOs, large landowners such as NHS Trusts, water authorities, Clydeport and Forth Ports, Railtrack Property, coal companies, the private sector and local communities is therefore important in expanding ideas and creating opportunities.

SVDLS 2001
Table 5

28. Ownership of vacant and derelict land is spread between the public sector (2,542ha) and the private sector (5,375ha), with 419 hectares in mixed private and public ownership. Ownership of the remaining 1,792 hectares is unknown. Ownership issues can make reclamation more complex, particularly where there is more than one owner. However the results of the 2001 survey show that, where known, only 8 per cent of sites (714ha) have multiple ownership. 63 per cent (5,260ha) have a single private owner, 29 per cent (2,434ha) a single public owner.

29. Whilst the reclamation of vacant and derelict land does not automatically require public subsidy, support is necessary for many sites particularly where there are problems such as contamination, lack of infrastructure, poor accessibility or the dereliction is long term. For long term sites the problem of dereliction can be compounded by multiple constraints and severe market failure, therefore the level of public sector subsidy may need to be relatively high. The public sector cannot provide the resources alone and must work with private sector developers. Options for financial support include allocations to LECs from Scottish Enterprise National or Highlands and Islands Enterprise, ERDF funding and Objective III funding from Europe, Communities Scotland Funding Programmes including GRO grant and landfill tax credit funded projects. The priority is to ensure that such funding contributes to economic development, social justice and sustainable urban renewal.

Conclusion

30. The results of the SVDLS show an encouraging downward trend in the amount of vacant and derelict land in Scotland, however a continuing commitment to addressing the issue is necessary. Environmental improvement and the reclamation of derelict land remains an important priority for the Enterprise Networks but councils, supported by up-to-date and relevant local planning policy, are important facilitators. The findings of the survey in 2001 demonstrate that local planning policy may not be as effective as it needs to be, sometimes holding unrealistic aspirations for the end use of the land.

31. At the national and strategic level the context is set for the preference of brownfield land (including reclaimed vacant and derelict land) over previously undeveloped land, and this is being followed through at the local level. However the reclamation of land and the attraction of investment require more than supportive policies, they require partnerships between councils, LECs, Communities Scotland and the private and voluntary sectors. In some circumstances financial support from the public sector may also be necessary.

Note

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