

Pointing the way to a Scottish Organic Action Plan 2022: Work in progress

Scottish Organic Stakeholders Group
Subgroups' Omnibus Report
June 2022

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Introduction

We welcome the Scottish Government's March 2022 announcement of their plans for Scotland to become a global leader in sustainable and regenerative agriculture[1].

Organic production delivers benefits for climate and nature and is therefore one of the tools for the Scottish Government to help achieve their climate and nature targets. Increased adoption of organic farming in Scotland can make major contributions to reducing greenhouse gas emissions[2]. Globally, organic farming can lead to a 20% reduction in GHGs from agriculture[3]. Evidence also shows higher biodiversity on organic farms[4].

Organic farming, specifically, is the only legally-defined and certified food production system, with scientific evidence for benefits to nature and climate. The EU *Farm to Fork* policy recognises it as the gold standard, towards which other forms of agriculture should move.

Foreword

“We welcome the Scottish Organic Stakeholder Group’s new report. Their proposals and action plan to take the sector forward set an example of the kind of collaborative, industry led work that guides agencies like Scotland Food & Drink on how best to provide support in partnership with the sector.

Through our new Organic Development Manager post we are committed to supporting the delivery of a number of actions identified in the report particularly the development of Organic markets and supply chains.”

John Davidson
(Scotland Food & Drink)

“This report is the result of many people from a wide range of organisations and businesses working together in recent months. It provides us now with a set of specific recommendations for immediate action. This is a significant milestone paving the way to mainstreaming organics, and it lays the foundation for a new organic food and farming action plan.”

Ross Paton
(Chair of the Scottish Organic Stakeholders Group and organic dairy producer)

Current Context

Currently,

- According to Kantar (July 2021), the annual Scottish organic food consumer spend was £79 million, and up by 6.2% on the previous year[5]
- Nearly a third (32%) of shoppers in Scotland are 'eco-actives'[6]
- The area of organic land in Scotland is 1.8% of agricultural land, down from 4% in 2009[7]

The Scottish Government is committed to maintaining alignment with the European Union (EU). Comparing Scotland with the EU, we have almost the lowest organic land area and production value in the EU. Many countries in the EU currently have 5-8% of their agricultural land being farmed organically. The Scottish Government's policy is to double the organic land area by the end of this Parliamentary session (expected 2026). EU plans express an EU-wide ambition for '25% of the EU's agricultural land to be under organic farming by 2030' (Farm to Fork p11), and require each nation to produce national action plans for organic development[8].

By meeting the Scottish Government target by 2026, we can expect the following benefits:

- The total area of organic land in Scotland is currently 103,900ha (including land in conversion), and 89,600ha is currently fully organic[9]. Scottish organically farmed land would double to more than 200,000ha.
- The 529 organic producers and processors that Scotland has currently would increase substantially (and may double, nearing a total of 1000), creating numerous local jobs in the process.

Yet, while demand for organic produce continues to grow strongly in the EU and still rises modestly in the UK and Scotland – organic production in Scotland has declined in recent years. This suggests a market failure, where Scottish farmers and food producers are not taking advantage of the profitable organic market, leaving the door open for imports to cover the market instead. The SOSG subgroups' reports explain in detail the reasons for this and provide recommendations that address the challenges that they bring.

The recent steep rises in the price of nitrogen fertiliser may be prompting more farmers to consider organic conversion. However, for sustained growth to be achieved in line with the Government's target of at least doubling organic land by 2026, significant change is needed across the sector. What can be learned from EU neighbours is that even early modest government monetary investment in a handful of key areas combined with a strong government-led partnership approach can strengthen both production and consumption of organic food in the short term, thus leading to a situation where consumers pay for the greening of our food systems in the longer term.

If the Scottish Government is committed to using organic farming as a lasting transformational tool to achieve its new agricultural policy, then it needs a plan that is backed with resources and other support for it to succeed. The recommendations below will take us a long way forward.

The SOSG are ready and waiting for the Scottish Government to take the lead and to do what they can to help the Scottish Government and other key operators implement these measures.

About This Report

This report includes a set of clear recommendations that can pave the way forward. It builds on the SOSG's *Proposition for Action (May 2021)*, a set of 9 higher-level recommendations which were supported by 51 signatories, including 27 food & drink agencies and NGOs, and 24 organic producers and retailers (see Appendix for details). Subsequently, in early 2022 the SOSG organised discussions that took place over many months, bringing together more than 100 people representing producers, producer organisations, processors and other parts of the chain of suppliers and retailers and other key operators in the food & drink sector, unions, advisors and researchers, local authorities, NGOs working on related issues, and Scottish Government officials from several departments to develop the *Proposition for Action* into the more detailed recommendations we present in this report.

In meetings during March and April 2022, these organic stakeholders worked together in four subgroups that focused their discussions around:

- Facilitating organic conversion and maintenance
- Increasing public procurement of organic food
- Developing supply chains and markets for organic produce
- Developing research, advisory services and training for organics

Each subgroup agreed on a set of recommendations that are summarised in this report, below. (Full subgroup reports are available on the SOSG website at:)

The recommendations below are intended to support the Scottish Government in developing a national organic action plan that maintains alignment with the EU organics strategy, guides policy in the years ahead, and specifically, moves organics from the margins to the mainstream.

While each subgroup agreed on actionable recommendations, some of these will require further development and resources to be committed, as detailed in the final section of this report.

One Cross-cutting Recommendation on Government-led Messaging

Each of the four subgroups independently identified one common theme, namely:

the need for consistent messaging to bring about the culture change that is needed to shift organics from the margins to the mainstream.

The Scottish Government, the stakeholder group and food and farming organisations must work together to develop and promote a strong clear message around what organics is, what it can do to solve the increasingly urgent nature and climate challenges that Scotland faces, and how it can stimulate the local economy and the food and drink sector. Consistent messaging from government and industry about the multiple benefits of the organic sector and the legally binding nature of organic standards is essential for bringing about progress across all four subgroup areas. Without this, organics will continue to be seen by some as 'niche'/'elitist', 'backward-looking' and 'not real farming'. This picture is further complicated due to competition with other labels that are promoted to those who are potentially interested, including 'local', 'regenerative', 'sustainable' and/or 'low carbon'. Development of a 'sustainably Scottish' label further complicates the picture and adds to this challenge.

Specifically, the SOSG asks for the Scottish Government to lead on enabling the following:

- Developing clear messaging about the benefits of the organic sector in terms of what organics is and what it can do for Scotland (nature, climate, and the economy)
- Promoting this common messaging with staff in mainstream agencies and drawing up a joint communications plan with them. These agencies should at a minimum include the NFUS, QMS, SRUC, FAS, Scottish Universities & Colleges, Local Authorities, and Scotland Food & Drink.
- Exploring ways to promote organics to the public, and including, for example, plans for including representation of organics effectively in organic excellence awards, and in the Royal Highland Show and the Food & Drink Fortnight.
- Providing financial support and communications expertise, and other resources to enable the above.

Summary of Subgroups' Specific Recommendations

Each subgroup independently produced a full report of their discussions which are available the Scottish Organic Stakeholders Group website. Details of who took part in each subgroups' discussions are in their full reports.

Inevitably the subgroups' discussions, and hence their recommendations, spontaneously overlapped, and this was particularly true for the subgroup on Developing Supply Chains and Markets which discussed the overall themes that concern the other subgroups.

Facilitating Organic Conversion and Maintenance

Co-chaired by David McKay (Head of policy, Soil Association Scotland) and Joanna Sinclair (Head of policy and membership support officer, Scottish Organic Producers' Association (SOPA)).

1. There is a role for the Scottish Government (SG) to help bring about the culture change that is required with clear and consistent promotional messaging to encourage farmers to make the switch to organic. Alongside this, there must be financial support and expert advice to support all stages of the process, including to retain the farmers, crofters & land managers who convert their businesses to organic in the longer term. This campaign should extend to consumers to encourage demand and market growth.
2. There must be a long-term commitment from the SG to maintain organic conversion and maintenance support. While the SOSG recognises the budgetary pressures facing the SG, we argue that the budget for organics should be protected - at the current rate or higher - to help deliver on the political commitment to double organic farmland during this parliament. Post 2024/25, the Agri-Environment Climate Scheme - including payments for organic conversion and maintenance - should be integrated into the new farm payment system.
3. We have sought clarification from the SG around the current cap on support, particularly at the higher eligibility threshold. If necessary, rules should be reviewed to ensure that interested producers at either end of the spectrum are not dissuaded from converting due to lack of support. The new farm support system from 2024/25 should also ensure that holdings of any size qualify for support payments for organic conversion and maintenance, so that neither small-scale nor larger producers are disadvantaged or dissuaded from converting due to lack of support.
4. The SG should review its application processes, particularly around communications, regional consistency, the potential for a rolling application window, transparency of criteria for approval/rejection, and information around the support that is available during and following the application processes. This should include regular meetings of a small group (representatives from RPID, certification bodies and other producer or member organisations) to discuss queries, help disseminate information and respond to farmers/crofters more efficiently and effectively.

5. Certification bodies should review their processes and the way in which they are communicated. Improvements should be made where possible, while ensuring processes remain robust and retain their necessary rigour to uphold the integrity and trust in organic produce among consumers.
6. The annual publication of data on the Scottish organic sector[10] should resume as soon as possible, with the SG committing to work with the sector and certification bodies on what data is collected and how the statistics can be improved to provide robust and reliable information for those considering conversion. This should include joint working between the Scottish and UK governments to provide robust data on imports/exports of organic produce into and out of the UK, and into and out of Scotland.
7. Correct advice is crucial for both pre- and post-conversion planning as well as the funding application process. The Farm Advisory Service (FAS) is often generic and not sufficiently specific to organics; we propose that a review is conducted of the organic expertise of FAS staff to ensure that qualified and correct advice is being given impartially to Scotland's farms, crofters and land managers. As it stands, FAS can be used as a means of mainstreaming advice and to integrate organics into the wider agri-sector. Ultimately better signposting to all organic specialist advisory services that are available in Scotland is needed.
8. The Four Nations Working Group (FNWG) on organics should take a collaborative approach, between the governments of the UK, and also with the organic sector. Groups such as the SOSG and the English Organic Forum should be represented on the FNWG to ensure the industry is engaged with proposed policy or regulation changes in each of the four nations. The FNWG must also recognise and respect the differences in approach in the devolved nations, in particular the Scottish Government's stated ambition to remain aligned as closely as possible to changes in EU regulation.

Increasing Public Procurement of Organic Food

Chaired by Jayne Jones (Chair of ASSIST FM, Manager Commercial Services Argyll & Bute Council).

1. Undertake qualitative and quantitative mapping to show on a geographical basis the sites to be supplied and the availability of organic produce, and of processing and distribution facilities.
2. Establish a fund of £5m to help lower the barrier for Councils and other public sector procurers who face initial financial challenges to procuring organic food. In the longer term, this spending should be decided on locally, with a percentage of the farm support budget going to local authorities and public bodies to support a sustainable local food economy.
3. Invest £2m a year in a Scottish House of Food to provide initial and in-service training for catering and procurement staff, learning from experience in Denmark and Finland.
4. Identify a basket of products that can enable a swift movement towards increased organic public procurement and provide some early wins.
5. Ensure that the Good Food Nation Bill and the work to develop Local Food Strategies include specific measures and outcomes relating to organic, ethical and climate-friendly food.
6. Establish pilots to test out dynamic purchasing to enable locally produced and seasonal organic products to be used in public sector kitchens.
7. Spread risk and commitment between the producer and the purchaser with a clear recognition that investing in any pilot and relationship-building is not money wasted, but is money invested in community wealth building, in the green economy and the wellbeing economy.

Developing Supply Chains and Markets for Organic Produce

Chaired by Stuart Martin (NFUS) with the help of the SOSG Secretariat.

1. To grow demand for organic produce by simplifying and mainstreaming the message:
 - A coordinated approach to communicating what organics is and does (QMS, SF&D NFUS, SRUC and Soil Association/SOPA)
 - Support for the development of CPD for staff across the whole supply chain (including catering and procurement staff) to understand the benefits of organics and how to act on expanding uptake and demand for it (SF&D Academy)
 - Don't confuse the message with messaging for the export market (it's a different market)
2. Research what messaging works for SMEs' markets (SF&D Knowledge Bank)
 - Ease access to and visibility of organic produce
 - Persuade larger retailers to make organic produce more widely available (SF&D)
 - Persuade larger caterers to normalise sourcing organic ingredients/foods (SF&D)
3. Build the supply chains for scaling up, scaling out and export
 - Set up collaborative networks of smaller primary producers and processors (SAOS, SF&D)
 - Develop processing capability to support small scale primary producers (SAOS/ FPMG/Shared Prosperity Fund)
 - Investigate the export market (SF&D, Scottish Enterprise)
4. Invest in easy wins as they become a gateway to other produce whose price differential is larger (e.g. monogastric meat)
 - Invest in measuring and matching existing spare supplier capacity with demand and make plans to grow capacity where required (SF&D)
 - Invest in opportunities to produce more in Scotland (all wanted with little availability): berries (incl. frozen), oats for oatmilk, other grains, dairy products, vegetables such as broccoli, legumes, bread, value-added products (KTIF, SAOS, FAS)
5. Expand organic public procurement
 - Follow detailed recommendations from the SOSG Subgroup on Public Procurement
6. Build on the work in Wendy Seel's 2017 proposals for a "Scottish Organic Growth Hub" to create
 - A 'one stop shop' for organic market intelligence and sector information for producers and consumers
 - Accessible signposting of growth support resources pertinent to Organic businesses
 - Better facilitation of market opportunities and supply chain development (SF&D)

Developing Research, Advisory Services and Training for Organics

Chaired by Professor Christine Watson (SRUC).

1. We recommend that the Scottish Government commissions a short-term piece of work to collate, organise and review research relevant to Scotland on organic farming and food. That it updates this material where needed; translates it into suitable formats using appropriate and engaging channels including online (quizzes, podcasts, video, webinars) and face-to-face options; and publicises its availability effectively to ensure that a wide range of key audiences (policy advisors, farmers, individuals/public, in different sectors, and at different educational levels), can access and engage with it. This could be done through a combination of desk-based work and expert interviews. This work is likely to identify knowledge gaps that should inform future research priorities; but the focus would be on 'knowing what we know' and making it widely available in accessible forms.
2. In developing the specifications for the new advisory service, we recommend that the Scottish Government considers both how to provide specialist advice on organics, and ensure that organics is main-streamed within generic provision. The specifications should encourage synergy between research, advice and knowledge exchange. They should make the best use of existing practical examples of where research and advice add value; and promote a two-way exchange of ideas between practice and research/advice.
3. We recommend that multi-year organic knowledge transfer and exchange projects should be funded. Consideration should be given to include 'organic conversion' monitor, demo farms and field labs that enable sharing of detailed, live, practical and hands-on learning around the processes of change to a wide range of audiences and in different formats to allow for accessing this learning in a wide range of ways.
4. As to the provision of training, we recommend that CPD modules in organics tailored to different audiences are developed by training providers and made available widely and in different forms. Professional coms people should be used to create websites that point to existing websites and platforms, build on existing networks, and use trusted brands (e.g. Soil Association, Rural Payments website) and public events (e.g. The Royal Highland Show) to promote and support materials around organics.
5. Linked to the review of land-based learning, existing learning provision for organics should be mapped against current and future customers' needs.
6. A graduate-level programme for organic market gardeners should be developed and funded (e.g. as part of the Green Skills agenda).

Recommended Early Investments

The current organic action plans of nations across Europe show three common ingredients: funding for conversion, market development and investment in research. Scopes of funding varies, but

the countries with the most successful organic sectors are the ones where the government has delivered continuous support over many years.

For example, Denmark's organic research has had a dedicated funding stream since the 1990s.

The SOSG has not developed a detailed recommended budget for building towards a strong organic sector in Scotland as that would be more appropriate for a later stage. For now, we have discussed general directions of travel and higher-level recommendations that are key to get growth of the sector off the ground.

The government's target of doubling land for organic farming is unlikely to be reached with agricultural schemes alone as we also need to build consumers' interest in paying for better produce. Instead, therefore

the SOSG recommends early investments in low-hanging fruit that are key to generate interest and investment from key stakeholders in organics,

as follows:

- Establish a government-led public-private partnership to develop common messaging on organics' role in the future of Scottish food and farming, to stimulate new interest in organics and help establish supportive logistics among key public and private partners (approx. £0.2 m/year, primarily for a Secretariat/Organic Growth Hub)
- Support for organic conversion and maintenance payments (not new cost) (approx. £8.6m/year to reach the government target of doubling organic farmland).
- Mainstreaming organics in key food and drink industry organisations and key advisory services (a dedicated full-time position in each of Scotland Food & Drink, Scotland Food & Drink Federation, NFUS, QMS, plus regional support posts in advisory services including FAS).
- Establish a "Scottish House of Food" that can function as a public procurement "do and think"-tank. It would build the capacity that is needed to manifest local Good Food Nation Plans as vehicles for sustainable, budget-neutral growth of the Scottish organic sector (£2m/year). Additionally, a one-off £5m fund to support initial transition costs for moving towards organic food procurement in the local public sector and similar development of markets and processing facilities that enable this.
- One-off short-term work, to collate, organise, review and make available to a wide range of different audiences, the research that is directly relevant to growing organic food and farming in Scotland (£0.2m redirected from existing budgets), and ensure that this is mainstreamed in future government training and advisory services initiatives.

Next Steps

To date, a wide range of stakeholders have collaborated in the SOSG under their own steam over several years to produce the *Proposition for Action* in May 2021 (Appendix for details) and, in their subgroups, the detailed recommendations in this report.

Looking ahead, the SOSG expects the Scottish Government to take the lead on taking these forward into a Scottish Organic Action Plan. The SOSG can continue to offer assistance with further developing the plan's recommendations and to act as an independent sounding board on organic issues where they arise. To date, the coordination of this support has been undertaken by Nourish Scotland in collaboration with a handful of key SOSG members who make up the SOSG's Secretariat. Some modest resources will be required to secure the SOSG going forward.

The SOSG welcomes the new one-year Organic Development post in Scotland Food & Drink. The SOSG recommends that this appointment is extended to at least three years, as part of the organic growth hub.

APPENDIX

Organic Food and Farming in Scotland - Realising potential

Scottish Organic Stakeholder Group ***Proposition for Action*** to Scottish Government (May 25, 2021)
The full text of this document is found on the SOSG website.

The stakeholders listed below have worked together to identify the following priorities for action and are keen to work with the Scottish Government to realise the potential organic farming holds for Scotland.

We encourage the Scottish Government to:

1. By the end of 2021, develop and publish a Government-led Scottish Organic Action Plan for the period to 2030. This plan should cover both “pull” initiatives (increasing the demand for Scottish organic produce) and “push” ones (increasing organic land, and the production, processing and availability of Scottish organic food to all). In developing and implementing the plan, the Government should convene and support broad-based stakeholder involvement, building on the *Scottish Organic Action Plan* which ran to 2020.
2. Set a target for the percentage of land in Scotland to be organic by 2030, aligned with other policies such as Ambition 2030, emissions reductions targets in the Climate Change Plan, the new agricultural support arrangements from 2025, the Biodiversity Strategy to 2030; and taking into account the EU target of 25%. Ensure that funding, policy, research, training and advice post-CAP support this transition, including for example the work of the Regional Land Use Partnerships.
3. Maintain organic certification equivalence with the EU, which will implement a revised standard at the end of 2021.
4. Set targets with timelines for increasing Scottish organic food in public procurement for schools, hospitals and other public sector catering.
5. Actively recognise the potential contribution that organic food and farming can make when developing relevant policies, for example on climate change, biodiversity, soil, water, air quality, food, the rural economy and the marine environment.
6. Encourage food and farming bodies including Scotland Food and Drink, Quality Meat Scotland and Food Standards Scotland to bring organic food and farming into their mainstream activities.
7. Ensure that advice on organic farming forms a significant element in new contracts for farm advisory services.
8. Integrate organics as a key component of any future Good Food Nation Bill, including the development of short supply chains, markets, e-commerce platforms and shops to link local farmers with consumers in ways which are financially viable.
9. Forge an organic collaboration between consumers, farmers, producers, retail, Knowledge and Education institutions, research and relevant public authorities to inform the Scottish Organic Action Plan and support the development of the organic sector in Scotland.

References

The ***Proposition for Action (May 2021)*** is supported by the following signatories:

Agencies and NGOs:

Argyll & Bute Council
 Biodynamic Association
 Denholm Consulting
 Farm Stock (Scotland) Ltd.
 Garden Organic
 Highland Good Food Partnership
 Landworkers' Alliance (LWA)
 MOO (Muir Of Ord) Food
 National Farmers Union Scotland (NFUS)
 Nature Friendly Farming Network (NFFN)
 Nourish Scotland
 OMSCO – The Organic Dairy People
 Organic Growers Alliance
 Pasture Fed Livestock Association
 Propagate
 Scotland Food & Drink
 Scottish Agricultural College Consulting (SAC Consulting)
 Scottish Agricultural Organisations Society (SAOS)
 Scottish Badgers
 Scottish Crofting Federation
 Scottish Dairy Hub
 Scottish Land and Estates
 Scottish LINK Food and Farming
 Scottish Organic Milk Producers (SOMP)
 Seed Co-operative
 Soil Association Scotland
 RSPB Scotland
 World Wildlife Fund (WWF)

Producers/retailers:

Auchlea Farm Kingswell
 Auchencairn Dairy Farm
 Balcaskie Estates East Neuk
 Bankhead Farm
 Beecroft Organic World
 Brewsters Farm
 Caldwell's Veg
 Chapel Farm
 East Coast Organics
 Edinglassie Farm Huntly
 The Ethical Dairy
 Green City Wholefoods
 Howemill Aberdeenshire
 Hugh Grierson Organic
 Knockfarrel Produce
 Locavore
 Loch Arthur Creamery
 Mossgiel Organic Farm
 Myreside Organics
 Peelham Farm
 Scotland The Bread
 Skea Organics
 Vital Veg
 Woodside Arran Farm

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