

Supporting and enabling sustainable communities: **An Action Plan to Address Depopulation**



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01 Ministerial Foreword

Scotland's first national Population Strategy, published in 2021, sets out the diverse and cross-cutting demographic challenges that Scotland faces, and a programme of work to address these. We know that we are facing a number of demographic challenges, including a falling birth rate which is coinciding with an increasingly ageing population, and a changing relationship with migration following the ending of free movement. As a result of these trends, Scotland's population is projected to start declining from 2033; the only country in the UK where this is the case. Additionally, our population's distribution across the country is not balanced, as the most recent projections show that 14 council areas are projected to decline over the next decade, while many of our urban communities continue to grow.

Scotland's population change is therefore not felt equally across the country, and is driven by a myriad of complex, interlinked factors, which can vary from one community to another. Addressing the impact of these challenges requires a collaborative response across the Scottish Government, local government, and partners to ensure a thriving and sustainable country for generations to come. The 'More Balanced' strand of the Population Strategy, which this Action Plan builds on, sets out an ambition to achieve "sustainable distribution of our population in a way that works with the characteristics of our places and local ambitions for change".

In this Action Plan, we set out actions to take forward at both a local and national level, to address the very real challenges Scotland faces as a result of depopulation. It puts firm action into place which establishes depopulation as a priority area of focus for the Scottish Government and will enable us, over time, to achieve our aim of a sustainable distribution of our population, in a way that works for places and enables local ambitions for change. The Scottish Government is committed to taking a genuine partnership approach to the development and delivery of the Action Plan, which is why we have engaged with a wide range of local, regional, and national stakeholders to ensure that this plan is collaborative, coherent, and reflects action which can be taken from community to national level in order to best support communities to thrive.

Throughout the development of this document, I have met with representatives from a wide range of areas affected by population decline, including the Highlands, Argyll and Bute, Na h-Eileanan Siar, Dumfries and Galloway, Inverclyde and the Small Isles. Through these conversations, I've heard that what communities and organisations want is to be enabled to support population attraction and

retention at a local level. The steps being taken through this Action Plan will proactively support that, with a view to enhancing the evidence base about what can work more widely across areas of Scotland affected by population decline.

Addressing depopulation is a whole-government effort. That is why the Ministerial Population Taskforce will oversee this Action Plan's delivery and take steps, wherever possible, to use the evidence gained from the actions listed to enhance our approach in future. By establishing this new programme of targeted work, we will embed considerations around population sustainability across a range of the Scottish Government's key areas of work and seek to enable local leadership to make decisions relative to the population in their area, on issues that matter most to them.



Emma Roddick

Minister for Equalities, Migration and Refugees

02 Executive summary

This Addressing Depopulation Action Plan, the development of which has been overseen by the Scottish Government’s Ministerial Population Taskforce, sets out the Scottish Government’s strategic approach to addressing the challenges of population attraction and retention within communities facing population decline.

In line with the ambitions of the Verity House Agreement between national and local government, published in June 2023, this Plan emphasises and endorses the importance of local leadership and seeks to exemplify the maxim “local by default, national by agreement”. We know that a place-based approach to applying national, regional, and local policies will be essential to sustainably and effectively address depopulation. This Action Plan therefore aims to provide the starting point, and the nationally agreed commitment, on how best to deliver on local needs and ambition. Throughout the document, actions are listed alongside each key policy area. Actions are also included in full at Annex A.

This Action Plan is structured around three key chapters. Firstly, we identify a spectrum of factors relevant to depopulation at the **community level**, setting out our existing evidence base with regards to depopulation in Scotland, why it is important to address it, and our approach to doing so. A more detailed account of the latest demographic projections for Scotland is set out in chapter three.

Secondly, we showcase the current and future role of **regional and local actors** in addressing depopulation. This includes local authorities,

enterprise agencies, regional groups, the third sector, and community groups. It sets out the range of work already ongoing by our partners in support of this agenda, as well as any planned future interventions that will be delivered collaboratively to support communities, economies, and public services to flourish. This includes a range of targeted, place-based funded interventions which will be delivered in areas acutely affected by population decline, responding to challenges identified by local leadership.

The role that the Scottish Government will play at a **national level** in supporting communities’ local objectives is then set out in the final chapter. This is achieved through the delivery of a wide range of policies which directly and indirectly support the addressing of depopulation, for example housing, healthcare and connectivity. This section also reflects a range of learning from a range of case studies, policy pilots and research which were undertaken to inform the development of this Action Plan.

The Scottish Government is clear that this Action Plan represents the **first phase** of how we establish and deliver a programme of work to strategically address this challenge, having identified and mapped the initial actions that we and partners will take. Through the establishment of an Addressing Depopulation Delivery Group, which brings together the Scottish Government, our independent Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population, and a range of relevant regional and local actors, a **second phase** will aim to evaluate the delivery of the actions set out within this plan, and further establish future work to be overseen by the Ministerial Population Taskforce. This will enable the Scottish Government and partners to harness learning and outcomes which can be implemented more widely across Scotland, while still ensuring a place-based approach is at the core of how we deliver interventions to support our communities.

03 Context

3.1 National context

National Records of Scotland updated national-level population projections in January 2023 to reflect revised international migration figures and assumptions about future international migration. These projections emphasise Scotland's fundamentally different (and more challenging) demographic position in comparison to the rest of the UK, as framed within Scotland's Population Strategy.

Among the key points include:

1. The population of Scotland is projected to continue increasing until around mid-2033, peaking at 5.53 million. It is then **projected to fall by 0.6% to 5.49 million by mid-2045**. The projections show Scotland's population falling below the mid-2020 baseline by around 2050.
2. The **projected population change for Scotland is lower than the figure for the UK** as a whole. The population of the UK is projected to grow by 8.0% to mid-2045. If these projections are realised, **Scotland's share of the UK population would fall** from 8.1% in mid-2020 to 7.6% by mid-2045.¹
3. **Scotland's falling overall population size will coincide with an increasingly ageing population structure.** The number of people aged 65 and over is projected to grow by nearly a third by mid-2045. The number of children is projected to fall by nearly a fifth. The population aged 16-64 is projected to fall slightly (-3%).
4. More people are projected to move to Scotland than leave each year. However, **there are projected to be more deaths than births each year**, and the gap between births and deaths is projected to widen. Over time, this is projected to outweigh the growth from migration.
5. Crucially, **the potential impact of a considerable loss of in-migration to Scotland following the ending of freedom of movement is not accounted for in these projections**, and we are already seeing the impact of the ending of freedom of movement on labour shortages in key sectors of our economy and public services. It is therefore possible these projections may still be providing a more optimistic interpretation of future migration trends than can be expected should current UK immigration policy continue.

1. Based on the [2020-based interim national population projections: year ending June 2022 estimated international migration variant](#) published in January 2023. This is the latest population projections release which covered both UK and Scotland figures.

3.2 Local context

While the above projections are undoubtedly useful in framing the national level challenge which we face with regard to our future population structure, the impact of a changing population is not being felt equally across Scotland – with many of our rural and island areas and those on the west coast facing particular challenges.

The most recent National Records of Scotland sub-national population projections² demonstrate a varied picture with regards to future population change across Scotland.

A majority of council areas (18 out of 32) are projected to increase in population by mid-2028. **14 councils are projected to decline (more than the 8 in the previous projections).**

Most population growth is projected to be in the central belt and urban areas, while most examples of population decline have been observed in, and are projected to mainly be in, the West of Scotland.. However, depopulation as a phenomenon typically occurs at a smaller, local level, and population projections covering entire local authorities, as set out below, can mask trends occurring within smaller geographies. While local authority-level projections are helpful in pointing towards likely future trends, this Action Plan sets out more local level interventions where population decline is occurring, in order to have a targeted impact in the communities where it is needed most.



Tobermory, Isle of Mull

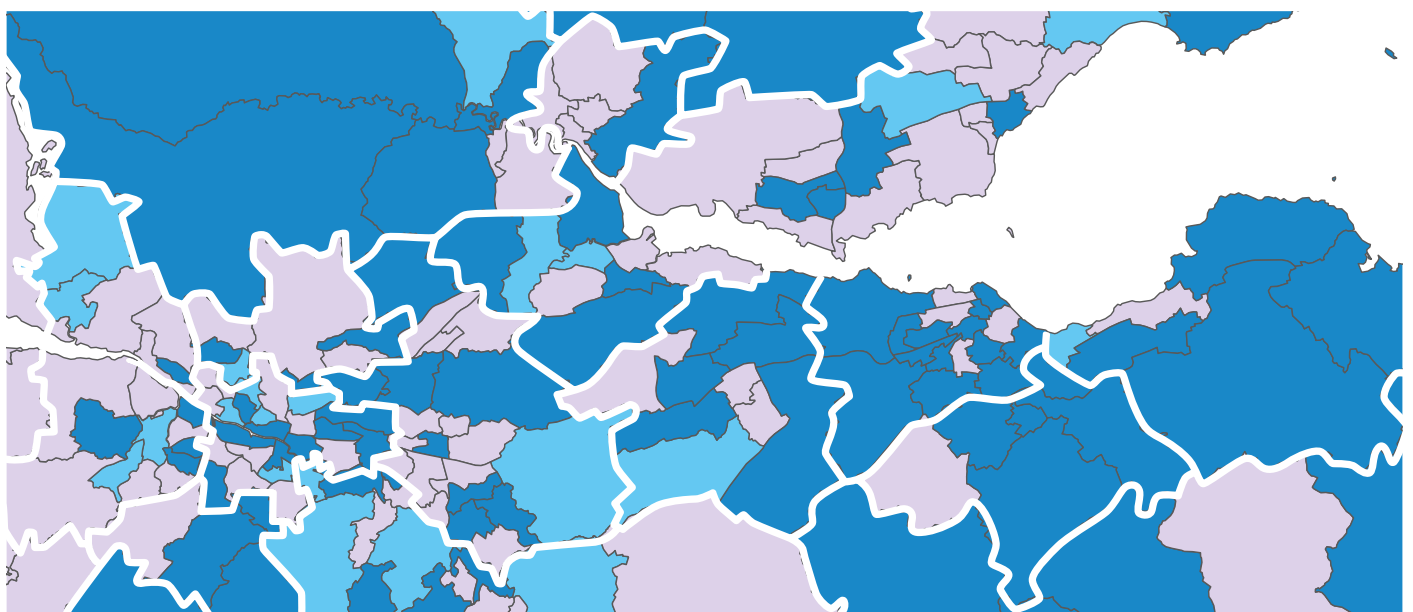
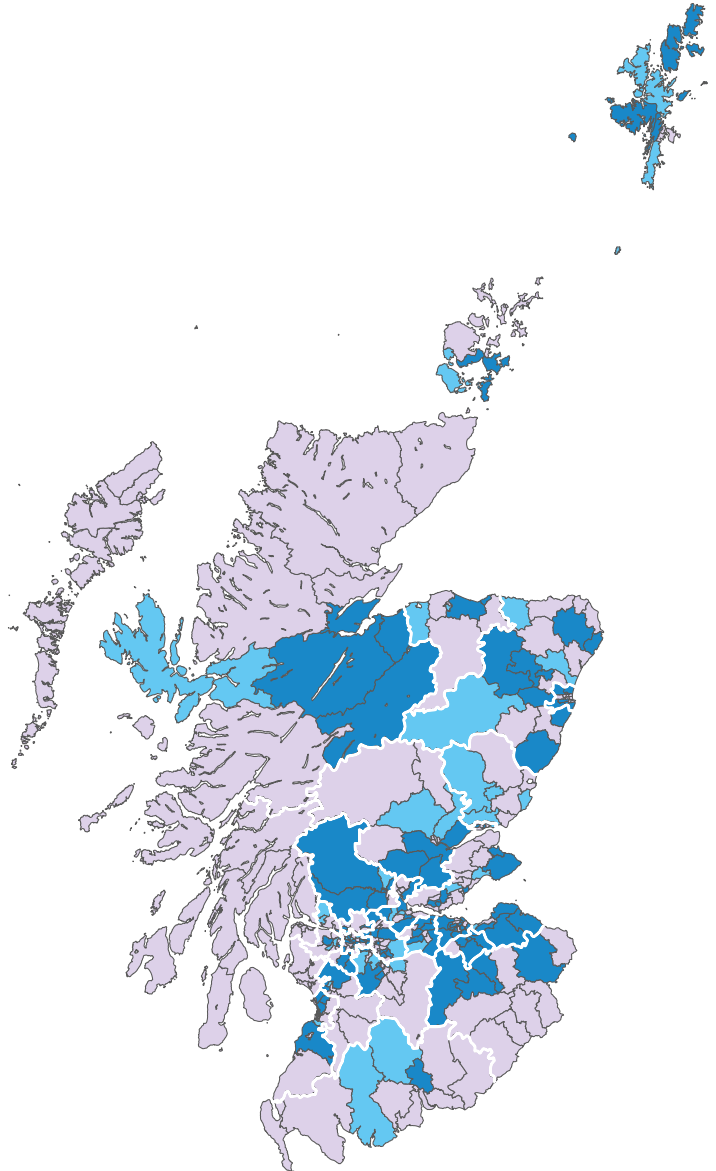
2. National Records of Scotland, 2018, Population Projections for Scottish Areas 2018-Based.

Projected population change, 2018 to 2030

The following Scotland-wide map was provided by the **Improvement Service** and harnesses National Records of Scotland data around population projections to show projected population change at sub-local authority level from 2018 to 2030. Twenty-six local authorities below are broken down by multi-member wards. The remaining six (Argyll and Bute, East Renfrewshire, Highland, North Ayrshire, South Ayrshire and South Lanarkshire) requested that the Information Service used different sub-council areas, such as Housing Market Areas, Community Planning Partnership Localities, Neighbourhoods and Community Areas.

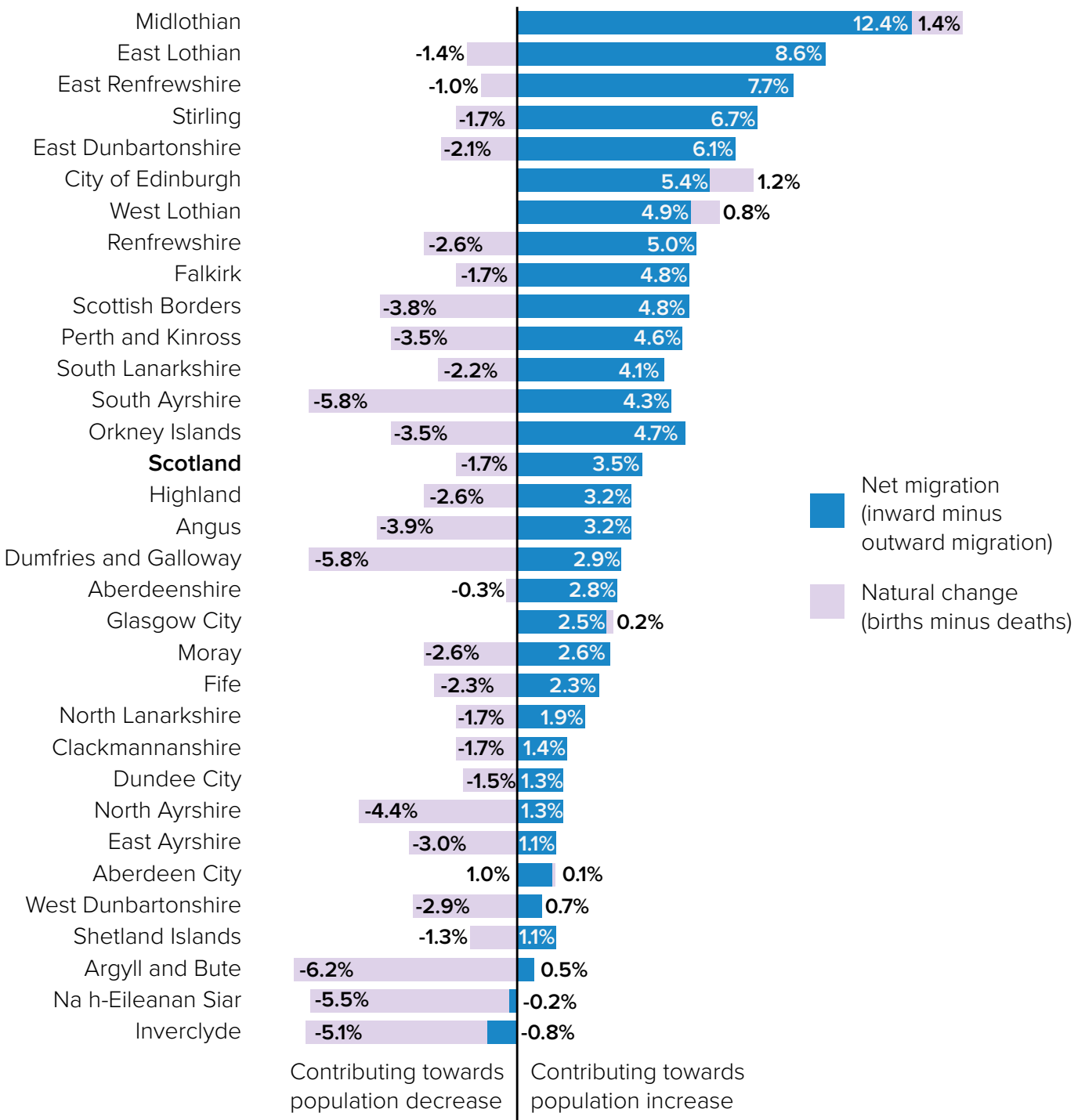
The map below details those same projections across the central belt, demonstrating the variability in projected outcomes at a local level. This further emphasises the need to embed a targeted and place-based approach to delivering the strategic approach set out within this Action Plan.

- Population Decline
- Above Average Growth
- Below Average Growth



In most councils, population increase is the result of migration, with more people arriving than leaving. Inverclyde and Na h-Eileanan Siar are the only councils projected to have more people leaving than arriving. In most councils, there are projected to be more deaths than births, contributing to population decline.

Percentage change for council areas, 2018 to 2028



Following the publication in September 2023 of **national and local authority-level data** from Scotland's Census 2022, in Spring 2024 we expect to see released small area data, down to neighbourhood level. This will be crucial in informing our approach to addressing depopulation in a targeted way and enable us to review our approach with the most up-to-date and granular data available. This small area data will also enable regional and local partners to identify where they may wish to prioritise efforts to address depopulation, if they so choose.

Action

We will harness sub-local authority data from Scotland's Census 2022, when it becomes available in 2024, to review this plan to further inform the development and delivery of targeted, community-level interventions.

Population Strategy context

Underpinning the national approach which the Scottish Government is taking to address our population challenges, and harness new opportunities, is the delivery of Scotland's first national Population Strategy, published in March 2021.

The 'Population Balance' chapter within the Strategy set out the importance of population change at the local and regional level, with the national position clearly masking divergent outcomes occurring at a local level. It is in response to this strand of the Population Strategy that this Action Plan has been developed, putting firm action in place which will enable us to achieve our aim of a sustainable distribution of our population, in a way that works for places and enables local ambitions for change.

Within the Strategy, we are clear that a wide range of interconnected issues drive depopulation, where it occurs, and that there is not a single solution which would work everywhere. We state the importance of the sense of place which people gain from living in an area – this Action Plan will set out how we intend to support and enable this, for the benefit of communities, their economies, and their public services. This is the starting point from which we aim to address this issue at a national level.

Verity House Agreement

Since the Scottish Government announced development of this Action Plan, the **New Deal with Local Government** has been agreed between COSLA and the Scottish Government. This sets out our vision for a more collaborative approach to delivering our shared priorities for the people of Scotland and underpins what we hope to achieve through this Action Plan, and how we hope to achieve it.

All three shared priorities contained within the agreement – tackling poverty, just transition to net zero, and sustainable public services – are relevant to a strategic agenda focused on addressing depopulation. In order to maximise economic opportunity evident across Scotland and not just in select locations, and to realise net zero across a range of sectors current facing labour shortages, it is crucial that conditions are created to enable people to live and work in areas currently experiencing depopulation. However, the priority to **'deliver sustainable person-centred public services recognising the fiscal challenges, ageing demography and opportunities to innovate'** is most clearly aligned with what we will seek to achieve with this Action Plan.

Actions within this document will, where relevant, be designed and delivered entirely within the spirit of the Verity House Agreement, namely in line with the maxim of **'local by default, national by agreement'**. Through applying this principle, the Scottish Government will seek to act as a facilitator and enabler for local government, economies and communities to address challenges in a manner which best meets local needs. To do this in the context of work to address depopulation, the Scottish Government will consult and collaborate with Local Government, for example harnessing existing mechanisms such as the SG/COSLA Population Roundtable (which brings together the Scottish Government and COSLA with all 32 local authorities to discuss population matters) and the Population Programme Board (which includes senior leadership from the Scottish Government, COSLA and the enterprise agencies), and ensure that in every relevant case, local, place-focused leadership is enabled to inform shared priorities and objectives to be realised.

National Islands Plan

As required by the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, and after an ambitious consultation exercise, the **National Islands Plan** was published in December 2019. It provides a framework for action to meaningfully improve outcomes for island communities. It sets out 13 Strategic Objectives and over 130 commitments, which must be delivered over the five-year lifetime of the Plan.



The Population Strategic Objective in the Plan outlines commitments that aim to address population decline by ensuring a healthy, balanced population profile in islands. However, it is fair to say that the commitments across the entirety of the National Islands Plan all contribute to this objective. Depopulation was the top priority issue identified by respondents to the National Islands Plan consultation and this is why, within the National Islands Plan, we committed to “**developing an action plan to support the repopulation of rural and island communities**”.

The National Islands Plan recognises that, in the view of island residents, decision makers are remote **from them**. Furthermore, islands and island communities in Scotland are not only resilient, but also innovative. Whether it is in the field of community-based solutions in estate management, energy or digital connectivity, health delivery, in the arts, in culture or in language, island communities are often paving the way for ideas and solutions that can then be exported **to** the mainland. The concepts of remoteness and peripherality, how they are applied to places, and how the use of such language may itself affect perceptions and depopulation is an important consideration in our approach to supporting sustainable, thriving communities.

Action

As required by the Act, the National Islands Plan will be fully reviewed in 2023-2024 to make sure it is fit for purpose. This will help us to ensure our islands policy and support continues to prioritise the actions which will best improve outcomes for communities. If the analysis of the review determines it appropriate, the Scottish Government will develop a revised National Islands Plan in 2024-2025 that will help to ensure that we continue to deliver our ambitions and to realise our vision for thriving, sustainable and successful island communities.

National Planning Framework 4

We know from speaking to stakeholders and communities that there is a need for the planning system to be an enabler for us to deliver a more balanced population. **National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4)** replaces National Planning Framework 3 (2014) and Scottish Planning Policy (2014) and represents a package of planning policies to guide us to the place we want Scotland to be in 2045, and was developed with a strong understanding of spatial variation in demography. We also know that, through this system, every effort must be made to ensure that unintended consequences for outcomes in relation to sustainable populations are minimised. NPF4 does this by being required by law to contribute to the following six outcomes:

1

Meeting the housing needs of people living in Scotland including, in particular the housing needs for older people and disabled people

2

Improving the health and wellbeing of people living in Scotland

3

Increasing the population of rural areas of Scotland

4

Improving equality and eliminating discrimination

5

Meeting any targets relating to the reduction of emissions of greenhouse gases

6

Securing positive effects for biodiversity

NPF4 also recognises that, in areas in southern Scotland such as Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders, Regional Spatial Strategies and Local Development Plans should **“increase the population by improving local liveability, creating a low carbon network of towns and supporting sustainable rural development”**.

In areas such as parts of: the Highlands; Argyll and Bute; and Moray, Regional Spatial Strategies and Local Development Plans **“should maintain and help to grow the population by taking a positive approach to rural development that strengthens networks of communities”**.

Local Place Plans

The Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 introduces local place plans. Linked to the NPF and local development plans, they will provide the opportunity for communities to influence the development of their neighbourhoods in a way which builds on community empowerment across Scotland.

Local Place Plans are to be taken into account by the planning authority in the preparation of Local Development Plans, and can provide an effective new method for rural and island communities to engage and shape their local priorities to deliver the benefits of local living.

Provisions on the preparation, submission and registration of Local Place Plans came into force in January 2022, with resources to support communities in preparing Local Place Plans are available through the ourplace.scot website.

Rural Delivery Plan

The Scottish Government is clear that there is already good work ongoing across the country, much of which will feature within this Action Plan. In supporting this work, and delivering new commitments, we will proactively target investment and support where we think the biggest gain can be realised, with an underlying principle that outcomes are driven by the aspirations and ambitions of communities. In the First Minister's policy prospectus, published in Spring 2023, a commitment was made to publish a **Rural Delivery Plan**, showing how all parts of the Scottish Government are delivering for rural Scotland. This will include areas such as agriculture, land reform, marine, islands, transport, housing, social justice, population, digital connectivity, economic development, skills, health and social care, and the environment. Development of the Plan is being overseen by a Ministerial Working Group, jointly chaired by the Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands. The delivery model and policy areas covered by this Action Plan will align closely to, inform, and be informed by, the wider work to develop and implement the Rural Delivery Plan.

04 Defining how we address depopulation

Within any geographical area, populations do not remain fixed over the longer term. This is true in Scotland as much as anywhere else in the world. Throughout its history, Scotland’s populations have shifted in size and location, influenced by short and long-term macroeconomic forces and historical trends, and changes in political and policy environments.

This Action Plan will not seek to set out a restoration of population profiles to historic levels, because focusing solely on this risks failing to understand the drivers and change that has led to depopulation.

Instead, we will map the policy landscape which we understand to be influencing depopulation, defining the role of those policies in terms of how they can support these communities, and we

will set out a delivery-focused approach which responds to current challenges. This will aim to create the conditions to enable more stable patterns of population retention and attraction within communities and ensure that we do not set ‘fascinating goals’ which are ‘impossible to achieve’³ such as choosing an arbitrary historical date and committing to restoring local populations to that level. It will not set out a specific Scottish Government objective for any given geographic area in terms of future population numbers, nor will it set out whether an area should aim for specific outcomes. Instead, it will set out our support for interventions which are appropriately place-based and/or person-centred, with communities enabled and supported to thrive, where appropriate setting their own objectives and delivery models with regard to population. This approach will also inform our approach to evaluation, set out within the section on Measuring Success, below.

Rothesay port and Wemyss bay, Isle of Bute



3. Pinilla and Saez (2021), What Do Public Policies Teach us About Rural Depopulation: The Case Study of Spain. European Countryside, 13(2), p. 341.

With regard to this Action Plan, addressing depopulation is defined as:



Identifying a spectrum of factors relevant to depopulation at community level

Showcasing the current and future role of regional and local actors (including local authorities, enterprise agencies, regional groups, the third sector and community groups) in delivering a collaborative set of interventions to support communities, economies and public services to flourish



Setting out the role which the Scottish Government will play at a national level in supporting communities' local objectives

As part of addressing depopulation policy, we must also recognise that communities' local objectives and the interventions that enable communities,

economies and public services to flourish may broadly fall within three themes:

1

Addressing population decline

2

Growing existing population (including growing specific demographics e.g. working age)

3

Reintroducing people to areas that had previously been populated ("repeopling")

The reintroduction of people to areas that had previously been populated will require considerable policy and delivery coordination. However, many examples of sustainable, successful approaches to “repeopling” exist such as the settlements of Fernilea, Fiskavaig or Portnalong in Skye. This area of Skye now possesses “a substantial population” with “several (mostly tourism-related) businesses, a community hall and other facilities... activity, traffic, enterprise”.⁴

4.1 Drivers of depopulation

It is understood that there are differing primary drivers influencing depopulation in rural and island areas versus the specific instances of depopulation occurring in urban areas in Scotland, and that while there may be similarities present between outcomes in depopulating communities, the factors and their specific local impact can often be uniquely experienced from one community to another. A wide range of these factors identified to us by stakeholders during the development of this Action Plan are highlighted within the chapter about the Scottish Government’s national response to this challenge.

Perceived peripherality has been articulated to us by stakeholders to be an underpinning driver of depopulation in **rural** and **island communities**, meaning that distance from perceived economic and employment opportunity, and public services, is often noted as part of why people may choose to leave an area, or not move to it. This Action Plan is clear that these communities contribute greatly to Scotland, both socially and economically, and their sustainability is intrinsic to delivering the Scotland that we all want to see. Whilst the primary focus for addressing depopulation is to ensure that communities have the required infrastructure, services and opportunities to flourish, language also plays a considerable role. The terminology that is adopted when referring to rural and island communities



can either help to challenge the perception of peripherality, or it can perpetuate it. References to communities as “remote” risk entrenching attitudes that people need to “get out to get on”, and portrays areas as lacking in people, culture and enterprise. We know this not to be true – rural and island parts of Scotland are filled with opportunity and these areas contribute hugely to Scotland’s success.

As such, with only minor exceptions when it provides a statistical, and very specific role, such as the **Urban-Rural Classification Index**, the Scottish Government will no longer refer to rural and island communities as “remote”. We will also continue to consider research into new ways of understanding and referring to rurality such as the James Hutton Institute’s work on **Sparsely Populated Areas**.

Economic conditions, including the long-term effects of deindustrialisation, are more closely linked to depopulation occurring in select **urban** areas, with identification of a need for favourable business conditions and aligned local skills provision to address population decline within these areas. Therefore, we know that we have to target our action depending on the needs of places, and that there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach to addressing this challenge.

With the strategic ambition of ensuring that communities, economies and public services are enabled to flourish across Scotland, in line with the reality of what we know these areas offer, this Action Plan will set out a broad range of factors and drivers which we have identified as resulting in depopulation, and set out the action which the Scottish Government, partners, and communities will seek to take to address these challenges in the future.

4. Scottish Land Commission (2019), [Repeopling Emptied Places](#).

4.2 Why we want to address depopulation

We want to address population decline because we understand the value of our communities and their economies in contributing to Scotland’s economic wealth and cultural richness. We know that population decline can have an adverse effect on community confidence and service sustainability, increasing the vulnerability of communities now and for the longer term. We know, too, of the immense opportunity within all of Scotland’s communities, to drive economic growth as we deliver our transition to Net Zero over the coming decades. Halting or reversing depopulation, stabilising and balancing local populations is, therefore, required to provide a more diverse demographic which can meet local socio-economic needs and help us achieve national objectives.

A stable population includes a sustainable dependency ratio (the average number of economically dependent people per 100 economically productive people, within a specified area at a specific point in time). With many areas facing depopulation in Scotland also projected to face higher dependency ratios in the future, addressing depopulation by attracting and retaining working age people to affected areas serves a wider and important societal purpose, creating balance not just at a national, strategic level but also locally.

This provides a rationale for why the Scottish Government and affected local areas have a desire to see the challenge of population decline being addressed. However, we also need to consider how addressing depopulation at a local level can help us meet regional and national ambitions.

The Scottish Government recognises the historic impact of the Clearances and that many of the scars are still felt in communities. As part of addressing the long-term effects of this, where possible and desired we will seek to rectify the remaining barriers for people returning to cleared land, contributing towards delivering a more prosperous and fair nation, now and into the future.

Supporting sustainable communities in our rural and island areas supports a wide range of national objectives, for example around managing our natural capital, delivering high quality public services, attracting tourists, and enabling outdoor-led health and wellbeing. It also links clearly to the three missions of: **reducing child poverty**; a **fairer, greener, growing economy**; and **public sector reform**.

Furthermore, the Scottish Government’s National Outcomes include that **“Our communities are shaped by the quality and character of the places we live in and the people we live among”** and that **“to be healthy and happy as a nation we must nurture and protect our local resources, environments and all who live in them”**. Therefore, in order to deliver on our national aspirations, it is essential that we address, as a nation, the challenges leading to depopulation.

4.3 Our approach

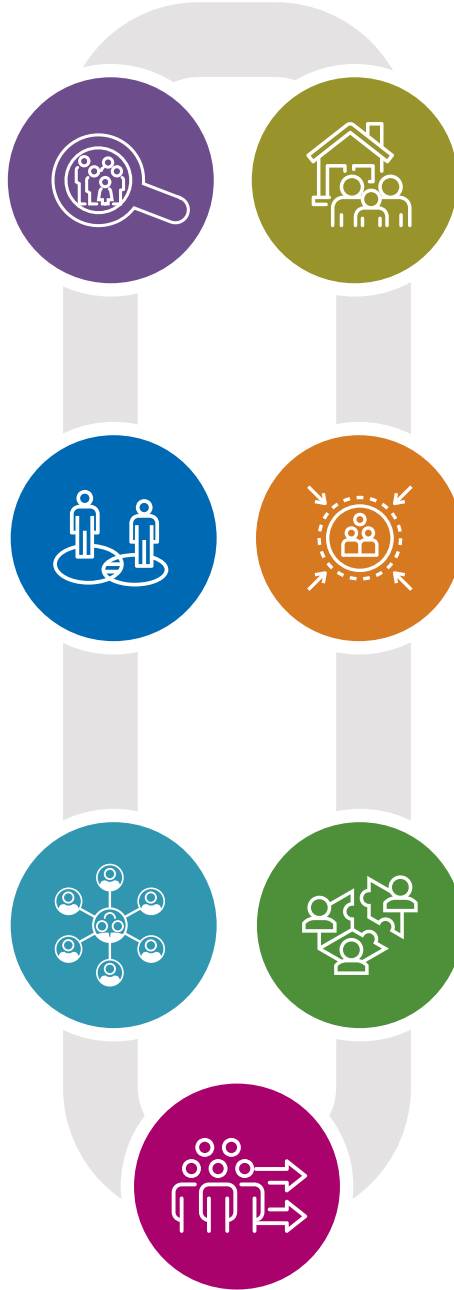
We have taken a multi-pronged approach to developing this Action Plan:

By identifying existing national policy which either directly or indirectly supports population retention and/or growth, we have mapped a broad range of interventions already in place which support our strategic objective to address depopulation and support sustainable communities.

By commissioning new research in specific areas and delivering policy pilots which build on feedback received in response to the Islands Bond consultation, we have gained new insights and identified gaps and barriers within the policy landscape to inform how we develop and deliver new interventions.

We have worked in deep partnership with policy teams across the Scottish Government, and with the local government and third sectors, and with community representatives, to refine and develop this Action Plan, ensuring that it meets the needs expressed to us by communities.

Following delivery of the range of actions set out within this Action Plan, a second phase will aim to harness learning and outcomes towards wider targeting of support and enablement for communities facing population decline, while still ensuring a place-based approach is at the core of how we and partners deliver interventions and maximise opportunity.



We've sought to build on the initial success of Community Settlement Officers, located within three rural/island Local Authorities, creating a new network covering a wider range of geographies affected by depopulation, with a view to this network supporting even wider work across the country in the future.

Now and into the future, we are applying a data-driven, place-based, and locally driven approach to designing, delivering, and supporting interventions. This will ensure that we take account of the different potentials of rural areas to support population growth given existing demographic structures, migration rates and economic links with other regions, and the opportunities for progressive development across different places.

We're clear that this Action Plan represents the first phase of how we establish a programme of work to strategically address this challenge, having mapped the breadth of the challenge and established the initial action we and partners will take.

In our approach to developing this Action Plan, what we have specifically not done is seek to direct exactly how depopulation may be tackled in a specific place. Instead, we have provided: the national policy commitment to address depopulation; an initial summary of some of the key policies that engage with significant factors of population change; and a recognition that a place-based approach to applying national, regional and local policies will be required to sustainably and effectively address depopulation.

By its very definition, that place-based approach can only be driven by local actors relevant to each specific place. This Action Plan provides the starting point, and the nationally agreed commitment, to undertaking discussions on how best to deliver on local needs and ambition.

The list of actions within this Plan are significantly focused on those being delivered by Scottish Government, and often represent policies and strategies that impact on population that are already underway. It is crucial that this collection of actions is not interpreted as the complete extent of Scottish Government's effort to address depopulation, nor that addressing depopulation is the overwhelming responsibility of Scottish Government.

Through engagement with communities, stakeholders and partners, it has been frequently raised that individuals and organisations need to be supported in developing a greater understanding of the "why", "how" and "who by" of delivering actions, services, and policies that have an impact on them. In doing so, individuals and organisations can be encouraged to more meaningfully engage and hold those responsible for delivery to account, thus empowering communities to have a greater role in shaping their futures.

In the context of such a multifaceted and cross-policy, cross-sectoral issue as depopulation, this sharing of what work is already underway can be even more crucial, and will allow for more informed discussions on what more may be required to address depopulation (whether that is new policy or new approaches to delivering policy).

For that reason, this Action Plan highlights a large volume of Scottish Government actions both underway and upcoming. These actions should be understood as the foundational level of Scottish Government policy in relation to addressing depopulation, from which all partners (national and local government, agencies, communities, business, etc) can collectively build approaches to realise the ambition of this Action Plan.

4.4 What the evidence tells us

Building on previous reports on the impacts of Brexit on Scotland’s population, migration schemes for rural areas, family migration, and more, in 2022, the Scottish Government’s Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population (EAG) published a report exploring Place-Based Approaches to Population Challenges.

The report assesses approaches to supporting rural and island repopulation, drawing from a range of international case studies. Its publication fulfilled the commitment made at previous Conventions of the Highlands and Islands (CoHI) to investigate how targeted repopulation efforts can work and builds on the long-term commitment the Scottish Government has made to investigate ways to support the repopulation of our rural and island areas – including the idea of a ‘Repopulation Zone’ proposed by local authorities at CoHI. The published report does not contain explicit recommendations for the Scottish Government, but sets out detailed lessons which have informed the development of this Action Plan.

High level insights from the report tell us:

- There is **no quick fix** to population challenges, such as those found in parts of the Highlands and Islands. Housing, jobs, critical infrastructure, talent attraction, and migration are all central to the challenge.
- **Long-term coherence across policy is critical;** between national, regional, and local actors to drive successful local attraction and retention.
- **Local leadership matters.** Policies and initiatives to support local population levels need buy-in from communities.
- **Ideas for targeted population policy interventions, such as ‘Repopulation Zones’, need to be carefully calibrated in order to have positive impact;** unintended consequences on neighbouring areas and lack of community buy-in are risks that have damaged targeted population interventions elsewhere, in the past.
- **International learning** can inform how Scotland takes forward our approach on rural and island population sustainability (e.g. from Spain, France, Germany).



The EAG notes that specific policies are also shaped by national political traditions, local governance arrangements, and welfare regimes. These differences must be acknowledged in drawing lessons for Scotland, with its own rich and unique societal and policy history. Whilst this necessitates sensitivity, it does not invalidate the huge benefits which may be drawn from international comparisons, and an awareness of how rural ‘repopulation’ policies are carried out elsewhere. However, the EAG acknowledges that constraints exist to **direct** comparability between international experiences and Scottish examples, and that there is a need to adapt to national and local specificities.

With this caveat in mind, the EAG presented the following key lessons for Scotland, drawing from the range of international case studies highlighted within the report:

- **Approaches to spatial targeting:** A range of approaches to spatial targeting (in which actions are focused on a particular geographical area) show a gradual shift from a mainly quantitative approach to identifying zones, to one where such fixed identification of zones is less of a necessity. Hard boundaries are perhaps less appropriate when seeking to address less tangible social issues, well-being, and spatial justice.
- **The importance of coherence:** One example illustrates very clearly a danger associated with zonal approaches to repopulation policy. Western European countries, including Scotland, have complex local policy landscapes. National, regional and local policy stakeholders should consider very carefully whether introducing yet another layer of intervention will deliver additional benefit. Interaction between policies is not always positive and ‘coherence’, both horizontally and vertically is vital, but hard to achieve in practice. These are crucial considerations before introducing zonal repopulation policies in Scotland.
- **‘Demographic Proofing’ tends to be passive and is potentially ‘toothless’:** There is a risk of words not being followed by effective action. Whilst a ‘proofing’ approach (which sets goals and responsibilities for those delivering strategic objectives) in theory addresses the need for coherence, unless it is accompanied by actions and delivery, it is unlikely to have much impact.
- **Shifting policy goals:** All of the European examples indicate a move away from maintaining or increasing population numbers towards a focus upon well-being, and social/spatial justice, emphasising citizens’ rights to basic services wherever they wish to reside.
- **Responses to ageing within a population should not be neglected:** Age-group specific interventions can deliver psychological benefits and enhanced well-being.
- **Local community involvement in policy design and implementation is crucial:** Intensive consultation, or better still, involvement in decision making ensures effective tailoring of interventions, and encourages ‘buy-in’ and commitment.

To conclude, the independent view of the Expert Advisory Group is that tackling Scotland’s population concerns is clearly an important policy issue, with changes in people’s individual behaviour, shifting local dynamics and new policy conversations emerging in this post-COVID period offering opportunities for a forward looking, collaborative approach. Repopulation zones may represent innovative models for intervention but possible unintended repercussions or consequences must be carefully considered prior to delivery. Embedding, from the beginning, a clear set of intervention goals and an associated process of ongoing evaluation is key to maximising the chances of success.

4.5 Measuring success

This Action Plan represents Phase One of delivering a strategic approach to addressing this issue. It will not initially, on its own, resolve the underlying, multi-faceted challenges facing different populations across Scotland. For that reason, success will not be easily defined as, for example, a percentage increase in a population within a specific geography. Addressing depopulation policy is focused on creating choice. Regardless of

geographic location, individuals should be able to have a genuine choice of whether they remain in their community, or move elsewhere and, if they do move, they should also have the choice to return. Therefore, success will, in time, be defined as communities telling us that they feel supported and enabled to thrive by whatever metric they choose as their local priority, and that changes they experience are driven by choice. This could involve:



Facilitating communities to design and deliver their own approaches to addressing population decline, supported by nationally delivered initiatives within their localities.

Being able to attract the people and skills needed to sustain local economies.



Ensuring strong, person-centred public services are delivered where they are needed.

Giving local communities better access to the tools and support they need to sustain themselves.



In order to maximise the chances of success from this programme of work and to enable lessons to be learned for the future delivery of Phase 2, we will proactively combine elements of both formative and summative evaluation approaches. By embedding a formative approach from the start of programme delivery, we will harness the expertise of the Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population to develop evaluation criteria grounded in the reality of the operating environment of the actions and interventions newly set out within this Action Plan. We will work with partners and communities to collectively set agreed parameters for evaluation, reflecting that the Scottish Government's idea of a successful intervention may differ from the priorities identified by a community or local delivery partners. By doing this, we will embed place within how we collectively define success and allow variability in developing criteria which are relevant and appropriate for the place where the intervention is taking place.

This will also mean that, at the point we evaluate the finalised outcomes of these interventions, there will be a clear line of sight between the desired aims and objectives of the interventions, as established at the start of the process, and the final point where we evaluate to measure success and scope applicability for extending the programme of work into new parts of Scotland.

As previously stated, in addressing depopulation, this Action Plan will deliver on our National Outcomes. Whilst there will be a subjectivity in measuring the success of addressing depopulation due to the commitment that the definition of success will be set by the metrics local communities choose, delivering against National Outcomes also allows for progress to be measured against the **81 National Indicators** aligned to our **National Performance Framework**.

Supporting Delivery

We will establish an **Addressing Depopulation Delivery Group** to monitor and report on the delivery of the actions outlined within this Action Plan. We will invite the broad range of partners involved in delivery to participate, including: the Scottish Government, COSLA, local authorities involved in the delivery of Community Settlement Officer roles, enterprise agencies, and community interest representatives. It may also become a useful forum to inform successful delivery of a Rural Visa Pilot scheme in future, if the UK Government agrees to its delivery.

We will work with partners to design a **Population Impact Assessment**, to be used by decision-makers across the public sector to meaningfully assess the impact of new investment or interventions, including considering the direct impact (i.e. of an intervention in the place where it is being delivered), but also indirect impacts (whether interventions would be better delivered elsewhere in line with overarching population strategic aims).

Action

We will evaluate the outputs and outcomes of this Action Plan, and engage the Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population, and wider stakeholders, to independently consider and advise on potential next steps to further support effective evaluation of this work.

4.6 International engagement and learning

The Scottish Government's Population Strategy contains a commitment to engage internationally to share learning and best practice on addressing demographic challenges, and to carry out further evidence gathering and analysis on existing policies and literature to identify further areas for exploration. With a strong backdrop to population policy design in Scotland, which is informed by the independent Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population, first steps in this space have involved engagement between Scottish Government policy officials, EAG academics, and the international research community. Building on what is set out below, the Scottish Government intends to, in time, harness these relationships to inform the design of domestic policy interventions, and support international partners in addressing similar challenges relating to depopulation in their respective countries.

Spain

Reciprocal visits have taken place between October 2022 and March 2023 between academics and government officials from Scotland and Aragón, Spain. These visits highlighted the alignment of the demographic challenges in Aragón and Scotland and presented an opportunity for both territories to learn lessons from their respective approaches. This approach aims to contribute to the common goal of the development of the evidence base around challenges relating to depopulation, and how to better address them to achieve balanced and sustainable communities across the two territories.

In June 2023, a collaboration agreement was signed by the Chair of the EAG and the Director of the University Chair of Depopulation and Creativity at the University of Zaragoza, to strengthen and develop cooperation across areas that may inform future policy development in either Scotland or Aragón. Joint activities will focus on the following areas of shared interest:

1

Developing a better understanding of the role of communities in attracting and retaining populations

2

The interlinked capitals (social, human and political) that drive migration to rural areas

3

Exploring how local governance influences the drivers of population outcomes; and how local initiatives relate to wider policy goals

Japan: Island Depopulation lessons for Scotland

Another example of international learning in this space is a **research report commissioned by the Scottish Government in 2022** to explore approaches taken to address island depopulation in Japan.

Like Scotland, Japan has many small islands, a large proportion of which have experienced depopulation in recent years. The research explores the impact of policy interventions in Japan, and proposes a series of recommendations for informing future Scottish island policy. The research was undertaken by a team based at Scotland's Rural College, Akita University and Hiroshima University.

The research sought to address a range of research questions aimed at potentially supporting the development of policy interventions in Scotland which would address depopulation and support sustainable communities.

The research primarily focused on case studies relating to four islands in Japan (the Gotō islands, Nakanoshima, Sado Island and the Amami Islands), where varying interventions have been made to address depopulation linked to net zero, tourism, education, and remote working. The report set out a total of 15 recommendations for where island policy interventions in Japan could be useful to consider in the Scottish context.

One of the primary recommendations for Scottish policy development was to establish a **flexible policy framework** to ensure that local level interventions could be tailored as far as possible to local circumstances across diverse communities. As set out within a range of case studies within this document, the development of this Action Plan has been partially informed by a series of small-scale, community-based policy tests, to identify challenges and policy tensions concerning population decline within communities. These case studies demonstrate the need to enable flexible policy design to be delivered locally, and in line with local needs and ambitions, harnessing a place-based approach.

Another key recommendation within the report is that **“any policies seeking to address demographic trends on islands are informed by up-to-date and accurate evidence about the historic, recent and potential future population trends”** – including an understanding of the issues at a small, local scale, and how these issues can vary across different localities. The Spring 2024 publication of small-area data as part of Census 2022 will be a first step towards demonstrating that variability, at a granular level, across Scotland. Once published, data will also drive our next steps around, at a local level, better understanding the complex underlying causes of depopulation. This wider gathering of evidence should also seek to encompass **“the interplay between demographic trends and wider social, economic and environmental processes, including land use, service provision, economic activity, transport and digital infrastructure, etc”**.

Additionally, the researchers propose that further research exploring changing work and livelihood strategies, noting that **“evidence collected on changing work and employment patterns since the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that rural and island locations may benefit from more flexible or hybrid working becoming the norm [...] While it was initially hypothesised that this shift to more flexible working would impact more accessible rural locations, there is evidence that people are prepared to move further out of urban centres, thus bringing the benefits of this shift to a wider geographical area (Nordregio, 2022)”**.

As set out in the section on Transport, the Scottish Government has since commissioned an external research project to investigate the links between connectivity and household location choice, with a view to informing future decision making around connectivity.

Actions

- We will build on existing agreements with the academic community in Aragón in pursuit of shared objectives in addressing demographic challenges. Harnessing the feedback from stakeholders and building on learning from the evidence base, we will proactively implement a flexible, community-driven approach to the design and delivery of policy interventions.

Northern Sparsely Populated Areas network

The Northern Sparsely Populated Areas network (NSPA) encourages close collaboration between the four northernmost counties of Sweden (Norrbotten, Västerbotten, Jämtland Härjedalen, Västernorrland), the seven northernmost and eastern regions of Finland (Lapland, Northern Ostrobothnia, Central Ostrobothnia, Kainuu, North Karelia, Pohjois-Savo and South Savo) and North Norway (Finnmark Troms region and Nordland) – 13 in total.

Low population density and demographic changes (especially in the sense of rural depopulation) are among the network’s key thematic priorities, demonstrating strategic overlap with priorities identified within this Action Plan for the Scottish Government’s Ministerial Population Taskforce. The NSPA seek to raise awareness of their members (and the challenges they are facing) in EU institutions, to influence EU policy and to provide a platform for best practice.

The NSPA have a long-standing relationship with Highlands and Islands Enterprise and Scotland Europa, including collaboration on an annual event for the European Week of Regions and Cities. This year’s event focused on retaining talent in sparsely populated areas to accelerate the green transition, which is aligned to strategic objectives identified elsewhere in this Action Plan around the Just Transition.

Action

We will, with Scottish partners, harness opportunities and maintain linkages with the NSPA to inform domestic policy making.

05 Regional and Local Delivery

The Scottish Government welcomes local leadership to tackling population sustainability challenges by trialling new approaches, sharing learning, and identifying gaps across key issues. Indeed, it is essential that tackling depopulation has this strong local leadership to ensure the nuances of local challenges and opportunities are understood and embraced. This local level of accountability and intervention can be enabled by Scottish Government, but should not be imposed by Scottish Government.

This enabling role extends to working within existing structures to fully utilise the powers available. In doing so, when insurmountable barriers present themselves, the evidence base is also created to advocate for changing policy or legislation.

Those organisations that form these structures also have their own roles and powers for tackling depopulation, and can play an integral role through taking on local coordination and leadership in putting their “place” under the magnifying glass, working out what is required, and collaborating with partners to develop and deliver the tailored solutions required. In many cases, it can be expected that these tailored solutions will present themselves as a place-specific blend of the range of enabling policies highlighted in **Section 6 Addressing depopulation: a national response, locally delivered.**

We will continue to support locally-led repopulation initiatives in areas like Argyll and Bute, Na h-Eileanan Siar, the Highlands, and North Ayrshire, and work with local and regional partners through the Convention of the Highlands and Islands. Furthermore, we will look to support local initiatives in the South of Scotland and work with the Convention of the South of Scotland to ensure success for this area.

The independent Expert Advisory Group’s recent report is, however, clear that ideas for targeted population policy interventions, such as ‘Repopulation Zones’, need to be carefully calibrated in order to have positive impact. Unintended consequences on neighbouring areas and lack of community buy-in are risks that have damaged targeted population interventions elsewhere in the past. The report highlights that local community involvement in policy design is crucial in order to ensure tailored interventions that will work for the community.

One way of ensuring the involvement of local communities is applying a place-based methodology, such as the Place Standard Tool, to facilitate and structure the assessment of a particular place. These methodologies are important as they provide a framework of shared understanding and a space in which people can identify the most urgent needs of the community as well as informing future action. This is a key component of our approach as we are keen to listen and engage with places’ assessments of their own areas in order to mitigate or adapt to the depopulation challenges by enabling positive changes led by local communities.

As part of our approach, we are clear that national and regional delivery structures, should, where possible enable and support locally-delivered action to address population challenges. This chapter therefore sets out:

- A range of collaborative work being delivered through existing regional and local structures, where a depopulation lens can be, or is being, applied to decision making;
- New initiatives to be delivered locally, and where appropriate supported by the Scottish Government, to enable local areas to better understand drivers of depopulation in their communities, and design and deliver tailored responses.

We are also keen to work with representatives of the community and where there is scope to work with cohorts of young people across Scotland who are affected by challenges relating to population decline, we will look to better understand their experiences in the context of population decline. As one component of this, we will work with Youth Scotland and the Young Islanders Network to meet the Network’s commitment to consider **“how to best address population decline through co-developing ideas and actions to support and encourage young people to remain on, move to or return to the islands”**. We will also explore opportunities to

engage with young people in other areas affected by population decline, to better understand why young people are leaving certain communities for elsewhere.

Actions

- We will continue to support locally-led repopulation initiatives in areas like Argyll and Bute, Na h-Eileanan Siar, the Highlands, and North Ayrshire, and work with local and regional partners through the Convention of the Highlands and Islands. Furthermore, we will look to support local initiatives in the South of Scotland and work with the Convention of the South of Scotland to ensure success for this area.
- We will work with Youth Scotland and the Young Islanders Network to meet the Network’s commitment to consider **“how to best address population decline through co-developing ideas and actions to support and encourage young people to remain on, move to or return to the islands”**. We will also explore opportunities to engage with young people in other areas affected by population decline, to better understand why young people are leaving certain communities for elsewhere.

Kirkcudbright, Dumfries and Galloway, Scotland



5.1 Local Authorities

Throughout the development of this Action Plan, the Scottish Government has engaged deeply with a range of local authorities and through COSLA. This includes regular, ongoing engagement with key delivery partners within rural and island local authorities, and harnessing feedback from all local authorities at a jointly-chaired policy roundtable, run by the Scottish Government and COSLA. In addition to this, COSLA is represented on the Scottish Government’s Population Programme Board, ensuring that the local authority voice is strongly represented in the work of the Programme.

As part of delivering on the commitments set out within this Action Plan, and as informed by stakeholders and key groups such as the Convention of the Highlands and Islands and the Convention of the South of Scotland, the Scottish Government and COSLA will work together to design and deliver solutions, ensuring the strengths of both local and national government are used to best effect to make the biggest possible positive difference to areas facing challenges around population.

Local Authorities will be an essential partner in addressing depopulation in agreeing priorities for development in their locality. For example, stakeholders have been unequivocal that the delivery and availability of affordable housing is absolutely essential to addressing our population challenges – across rural, island and urban areas.

Every local authority in Scotland is required by law to prepare a Local Housing Strategy, supported by a Housing Need and Demand Assessment (HNDA), which sets out its strategy, priorities and plans for the delivery of housing and related services. Housing and planning authorities can augment their Housing Need and Demand Assessments

with robust additional data and research where this exists. The Housing Need and Demand Assessment sets out long-term housing requirements, including the likely requirement for new homes as well as trends in affordability and tenure. A positive example of further building an evidence base to inform housing strategies is the work being undertaken by the Arran Housing Taskforce.

Case study

North Ayrshire Council has established an “Arran Housing Taskforce” which will involve a wide range of partners to address the issues which face island residents and businesses.

The Taskforce aims to assess the demand for affordable housing on Arran and identify issues that may be limiting economic sustainability and growth.

Working in partnership with the Scottish Government, local community groups and Registered Social Landlords who operate on the island, the Taskforce will be the recognised body that will work collaboratively on issues relating to housing on Arran.

Two current pieces of work the group are focusing on are:

- A localised island housing analysis identifying the level of housing need on the island. This will focus on affordable and rented accommodation but will not be restricted to that and aims to produce a holistic solution which also looks at the release of land for new build and private housing as well.
- Investigation into additional and novel models of financing projects to reduce reliance on public sector grants which may also enable a wider distribution of grant funding, therefore supporting more projects to be delivered.

Furthermore, planning authorities are required to prepare a Local Development Plan, for their area, reviewed every ten years, setting out how places will change in the future, including where development should and should not happen. Local Development Plans should set out tailored approaches to rural housing, and where relevant include proposals for future population growth – including provision for small scale housing such as that on crofts, including woodland crofts, and the appropriate resettlement of previously inhabited areas.

Local authority coordinated responses to depopulation

Taking a place-based approach to how depopulation is addressed in Scotland is a public commitment made by Scottish Ministers through the Convention of the Highlands and Islands, and through the Ministerial Population Taskforce. We know that that partners see it as a vital component to supporting the sustainability of communities facing population decline.

Three Community Settlement Officer posts exist, with each of the posts having been created in financial year 2022/23, in Argyll and Bute Council, the Highland Council, and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar. These had previously been jointly funded by Highlands and Islands Enterprise and each local authority, and we know that these roles have been effective because they have taken a place-based approach. These roles have developed in response to place-based needs within the three areas, and have included work to:

- Provide guidance to people wanting to stay in or move to the community;
- Work with partner agencies across their respective areas to gather data and information on the issues impacting on people's decisions to remain in/move to the community;
- Support the development of further projects and initiatives to help address population decline.



The Scottish Government agreed with host local authorities to jointly fund the continuation of these roles for the 2023/24 financial year. The Scottish Government has made this commitment in response to local authorities expressing the importance of continuing these posts, which they see as critical to supporting their communities. Highlands and Islands Enterprise will continue to support delivery through existing programmes in operation within Community Settlement Officer geographies.

In supporting the continuation of these roles alongside local authorities, Community Settlement Officers will enable:

- Further building the evidence base around the impact of having place-based co-ordinating/facilitating roles with a focus on addressing depopulation;
- Working with partner agencies across their respective areas to gather more data and information on the issues impacting on people's decisions to remain in/move to communities;
- Sharing learning from developing projects, initiatives, and partnerships to better inform the nationwide delivery of an addressing depopulation policy.

In meeting a wide range of locally-identified priorities tailored to the needs of communities, Community Settlement Officers will focus on:



Uist

- Continuing to support the 'Uist Repopulation Zone Action Plan'. The interventions proposed in this plan are based around five critical areas, housing, jobs, infrastructure, Gaelic, and skills. With support, there is a conscious effort to deliver and monitor this plan going forward with an inter-agency response to all actions.
- Continuing to actively promote the role of the Settlement Officer across several marketing channels, whilst continuing to provide a high-quality service to current and new residents in the community.
- Continuing to support the Uist dedicated online platform – Uist Beò. This platform has been designed to show the vibrant, authentic tales of Uist, encouraging relocation and settlement as well as connecting residents to resources and showcasing what opportunities there are available.
- Investigating childcare solutions on the ground with early years officers, SCMA, and Regional Economic Partnership childcare group.



North-west Sutherland

- Developing the already identified 5 housing sites with a cumulative area of over 6ha.
- Progressing housing development options for Tongue area to accommodate the expected 50 new jobs created over the next two years.
- As requested by communities, providing support for undertaking Local Place Plans to coordinate community development aspirations within the Highland Wide Local Development Plan.
- Supporting Highland Council Housing Development renovation and conversion of buildings for new accommodation.



Argyll and Bute

- Continuing to provide support to those wishing to relocate to Argyll and Bute.
- Continuing to gather evidence and provide partners with feedback on the challenges individuals experience remaining in and relocating to communities across Argyll and Bute.
- Continuing to work with local authority colleagues to review and update settlement strategic communications across several marketing channels, supporting those wishing to relocate to Argyll and Bute.
- Progressing with the implementation of the Settlement Project Support Officer Actions that were approved by the local authority's Economic Development and Infrastructure Committee on 31 August 2023.

Inverclyde

Depopulation within urban communities in Scotland is most apparent in Inverclyde, where a 5.6% population decline has been observed between 2011 and 2021. As set out in the opening chapter of this Action Plan, it is generally considered that the drivers of depopulation are different in urban settings compared to rural areas. The effects of post-industrialisation and deprivation are understood to have played a pivotal role in driving demographic and population change in the area, but the Scottish Government recognises the opportunity, through this Action Plan, to set out initial action which will be delivered in partnership with Inverclyde Council, focusing on locally identified priorities to enable future population attraction and retention measures to be successful.

The work of the Inverclyde Socio-Economic Taskforce has identified a number of investment proposals to generate growth in the local economy, with the aim of stabilising the population. The Scottish Government participates in the Taskforce and will consider all proposals for action in detail. That work complements the wide range of other work being delivered by the Scottish Government and partners which will support wider strategic objectives for the area, such as the Glasgow City Region City Deal.

Through a funding model similar to that being used to retain the Community Settlement Officers in Argyll and Bute, the Highlands, and Na h-Eileanan Siar, the Scottish Government will partner with Inverclyde Council to deliver a Community Settlement Officer focused on addressing depopulation in Inverclyde. The role will acknowledge opportunities identified locally to support the retention of new cohorts of people in the area, such as those granted asylum.

Dumfries and Galloway

Population decline in Dumfries and Galloway between 2011 and 2021 has seen an overall drop of 1.7%, with a range of potential drivers identified to be driving this trend. Additionally, more localised population outcomes in parts of the local authority area see an even greater trend of depopulation occurring.

Dumfries and Galloway Council has identified a need for greater understanding about the effect of current issues affecting the area's population outcomes, to enable them to design and deliver the best possible interventions to reverse population decline. For example, work delivered locally around provision of further and higher education courses has enabled local workforce demands to be met, and driven population retention of younger people as a result. However, there are opportunities around enabling the area to be somewhere where people are attracted in order to newly study at key phases in life. The Scottish Government will therefore provide funding for Dumfries and Galloway Council to undertake research, to improve the evidence base around this and ensure the greatest possible impact of future interventions. It is envisaged that this work would simultaneously support future delivery of addressing depopulation policy beyond Dumfries and Galloway, if interventions are identified which are applicable to other areas, and will complement existing support being delivered in the area through, for example, the Borderlands Growth Deal and other commitments.

Addressing Depopulation Fund

As part of this Action Plan, the Scottish Government is also announcing the establishment of an **Addressing Depopulation Fund**, which will support local authorities to implement varied pathfinder measures to address depopulation challenges within their localities. In keeping with the ambitions set out within this Action Plan and the Verity House Agreement, the Scottish Government will be flexible in enabling local government to use the funding in order to address local need. The Fund – which will initially make available £180,000 to be split between a prospective three local authorities – will be operational across financial years 2024/25 and 2025/26. By enabling local authorities to propose their own specific measures based on local need, this will generate learning in terms of successful approaches which may be more broadly applicable to communities across Scotland.



Actions

- We will work with COSLA to design and deliver solutions, ensuring the strengths of both local and national government are used to best effect to make the biggest possible positive difference to areas facing challenges around population.
- We will jointly fund the continuation of existing Community Settlement Officer roles for the current financial year, in partnership with local authorities. Highlands and Islands Enterprise will continue to support delivery through existing programmes in operation within Community Settlement Officer geographies.
- We will partner with Inverclyde Council to deliver a Community Settlement Officer focused on addressing depopulation in Inverclyde.
- We will provide funding for Dumfries and Galloway Council to undertake research with regards to local population outcomes.
- We will also establish an **Addressing Depopulation Fund**, to support local authorities to implement varied pathfinder measures to address depopulation challenges. In keeping with the ambitions within this Action Plan and the Verity House Agreement, we will be flexible in enabling local government to use the funding to address local need.

5.2 Enterprise delivery

Our enterprise agencies – in particular Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) and South of Scotland Enterprise (SOSE) – have a key role to play in addressing the challenges faced by our rural businesses and communities. They provide specialist expertise, training and funding for businesses and support the development of infrastructure to help businesses remain in their local area and employ more people. They support communities to build their capabilities and help them to develop community assets. Our agencies are actively involved in their Regional Economic Partnerships, developing and delivering regional economic strategies which identify where collaborative action can maximise outcomes and impact. SOSE and HIE have recently published new strategies, aligned with the aims and priorities of the Scottish Government, which will take forward their work over the next five years.

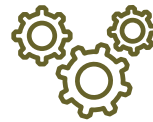
Highlands and Islands Enterprise

HIE recognises the need to support people, communities, and businesses and it does so through funding the development of businesses and community enterprises and enhancing the skills of people leading and working in organisations across the region. HIE's aim is to support sustainable jobs and the retention of a skilled workforce through a range of interventions.

This includes:



A locally based focus from locally based development staff who have a relationship with businesses and community organisations, supporting them to enhance their sustainability and development. This can mean grant funding, advice, or support to locate suitable finance for projects.



Skills development for business leaders, entrepreneurs and those working in community organisations. This often includes training for board members and good governance.



Supporting communities to acquire assets through the HIE-run Scottish Land Fund.



The operation of the Scottish Land Fund and funding for circa 50 community development officers who focus directly on population challenges.



Place-based planning support.



A strategic infrastructure programme including a property portfolio, the Science Skills Academy, and major investment in ports and harbours to optimise our renewable energy production across our regional coastline.



Broadband development and feasibility studies to support projects.

HIE has recognised the need to have a sustainable population and to address the needs of sparsely populated areas. In providing a specific officer to work on these issues, HIE is providing leadership and facilitation for the work of the COHI (Convention of the Highlands and Islands) Working Group on Population, as well as leading the development and delivery of the settlement officers project in three areas of the region during the 22/23 financial year.

HIE's work with businesses and communities is a long-term commitment. The dynamics of an economy can change over time and HIE is well placed to respond to this and support organisations. Change can take time in communities, so HIE's interventions can take time to deliver the desired outcomes. HIE is a willing partner in tackling key issues like housing and, whilst it does not have a primary responsibility for delivering housing projects, it works with communities and policy makers to support the conditions which makes these projects possible. Over the past decade, housing pressures have become an economic inhibitor for rural and island communities and, therefore, partnership working in this space is crucial for ensuring the economic success of the region.

HIE has a strong track record in transformational regional projects which it views as having been vital to the sustainability of the region. These have included hydro schemes, the development at Dounreay, supporting the development of the aquaculture sector, the world's first connected wave and tidal centre at E.M.E.C in Orkney, and the establishment of Wave Energy Scotland. In addition, HIE's investment in its regional University, the University of the Highlands and Islands, recognises the vital role of availability of higher education in the retention and attraction of young people. HIE aims to empower people and their communities and offers assistance through a network of business and community-focussed development managers. It supports one-off interventions based on need and the impact of the project. It has access to specialist knowledge and networking opportunities and, by investing in community assets, can support cultural and heritage developments which often form the centre of many communities. The HIE teams are based in the heart of Highland and Island

communities, all connected into core teams which look at wider sectoral issues. HIE has decades of experience to draw upon, with long standing relationships across the Highlands and Islands to deliver results.

South of Scotland Enterprise

South of Scotland Enterprise is Scotland's newest enterprise agency and was established on 1 April 2020. It brings a fresh and regionally focussed approach to economic and community development in the South of Scotland (covering Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders). Its focus as a public body is to help people, communities and enterprise in its region thrive, grow and fulfil their potential. In April 2023, SOSE published its **first five year plan** which captures its ambitions for the region.

Shaped by engagement with the South's businesses, social enterprises, community groups and members of the public, the key priorities of the plan have been entitled the Six A's:

1. Advancing innovation and improving productivity
2. Accelerating Net Zero and nature-positive solutions
3. Advocating for Fair Work and equality
4. Attracting ambitious investment
5. Awakening entrepreneurial talent
6. Activating and empowering enterprising communities

It supports people, communities and businesses across the region with support, that includes advice and potentially funding. Its staff work across the region. SOSE recognises that the success of the region requires people and population challenges have significant implications for businesses and communities in the region.

SOSE works with existing businesses to help create more opportunities for people in the region, encouraging them in their growth ambitions and supporting entrepreneurs wanting to start their

business, including those from under-represented groups. SOSE work inward investors to attract them to the region. Working with partners it is committed to creating a region where people want to live – from improvements in our digital and physical infrastructure, to strengthening the region’s further and higher education offer to create choices for people in the region to celebrating the region’s great quality of life.

SOSE is a key partner in the region’s Regional Economic Partnership that brings together public, private and third sectors together with education, health, housing and community interests. The REP has a clear strategy for the region’s success, to create a green, fair and flourishing region, which recognises the need to retain and attract people to the region through a variety of specific activities.

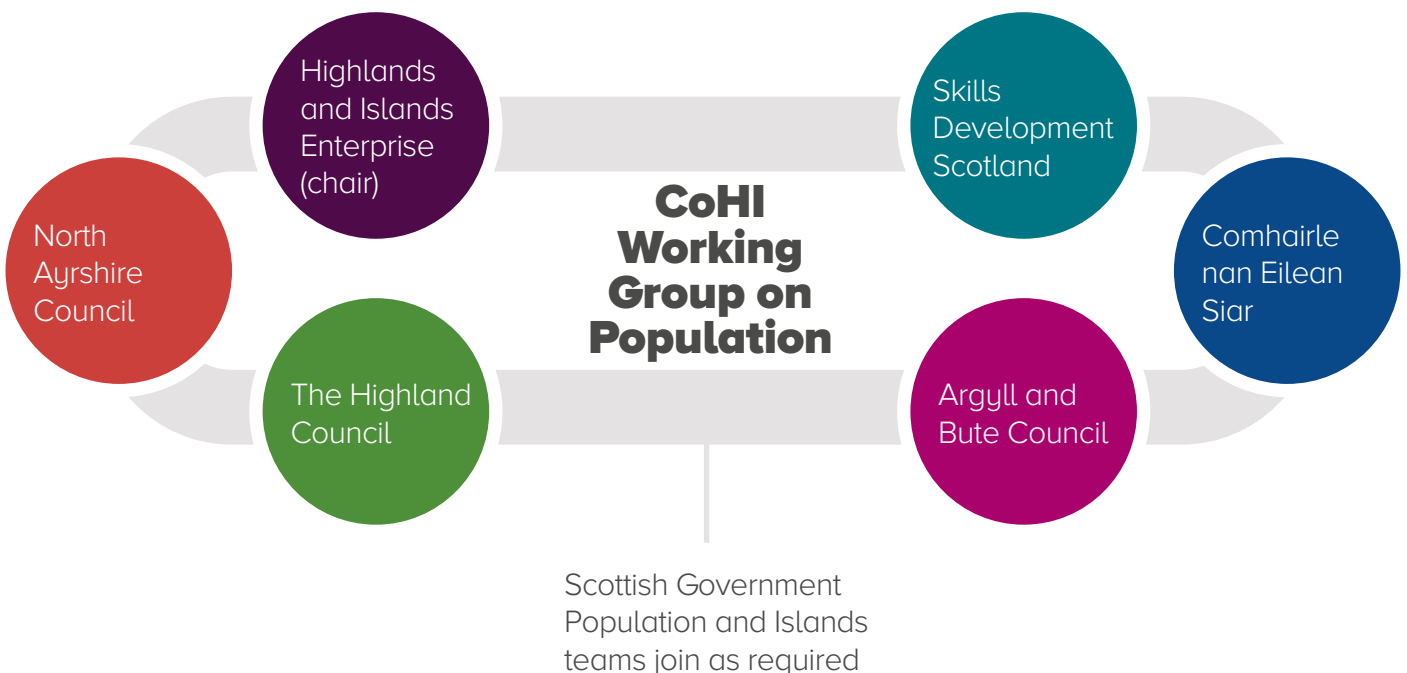
5.3 Regional Delivery

Convention of the Highlands and Islands

The CoHI Working Group on Population has been meeting regularly for over two years. The aim of the group is to provide a forum for the discussion of population issues and pilot approaches which seek to address the challenges of the declining population in the Highlands and Islands. The group seeks to find solutions for the challenges across sparsely populated areas critical to overall sustainability of communities in the region.

Five areas of focus were defined by the working group, namely housing, jobs, critical infrastructure (including transport and broadband), the provision of and accessibility to public services and retaining and attracting young people to the region. The group subsequently began working with colleagues and other partners to consider these issues through the lens of population, on which economic and community development is dependent.

The membership of the group consists of:



The group settled on geographical focus for the discussions and any project work. The working group is very aware of population issues elsewhere in the Highlands and Islands, but these areas were decided on based on what was known about them, and also as pilot zones:

- Uist
- North-West Sutherland
- Coll
- Tiree
- Kintyre
- Bute
- Roseneath Peninsula
- Arran
- Cumbrae

The existence of the population zones has provided a focus for local authority partners to align their services with the needs in the zones. It has delivered a refocusing of resources, in some cases to a specific action plan (in Uist for example), or it has provided a reason to tackle particular issues in one area (access to land for housing in North-west Sutherland). It has allowed knowledge to be shared from the already established local island plans for Cumbrae and Arran. Whilst in Argyll and Bute, it has enabled specific evidence bases to be developed to support projects across the region where local priorities differ in communities.

The partners involved in the CoHI Working Group on Population have individually and collectively reviewed resource allocation to support progress and projects in relation to population challenges. HIE has funded a specific post to drive the programme of the working group and provide leadership on the Settlement Officers project. SDS has deployed significant officer time to be part of the discussions and support key projects like the Island Skills Fund (below). The Group feels that addressing the critical issues will make it easier to retain and attract young people to the region. By looking at these issues through the lens of population, the clear links between the issues becomes clear. Providing a range of housing is positive but it will only make an impact in a community if people

can access services like childcare and high-speed broadband. A connected community is one which views itself through a wide lens to become a sustainable community.

Projects and Outcomes to date

The first initiative to develop from the working group is the **Settlement Officer project**, which has driven action set out elsewhere in this Action Plan. As mentioned above, three officers were recruited in three local authority areas (Argyll and Bute Council, The Highland Council, and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar).

In its first year, the project delivered distinct outcomes in each region, reflecting the true nature of place-based development. The different work streams carried out by the settlement officers in each region have demonstrated true place-based development, where a locally-based officer is able to respond to the needs of the community. For example:

- In Uist, the focus has been on fielding relocation queries, learning about specific challenges to retaining and attracting people to the region, which has helped inform and support the Uist Repopulation Plan.
- In North-west Sutherland, work has been prioritised on developing a pipeline of land for housing, working with partners to build relationships to allow this to happen. Some partners are working together for the first time.
- In Argyll and Bute, the officer has carried out extensive survey work providing detailed data for the first time about priorities in communities across the region.

Broadband and connectivity is deemed a key service in the region, akin to the installation of electricity. The focus on population zones has also provided a focus for potential broadband projects in parts of the region not yet reached by the R100 contracts. A connectivity survey has been completed in one of the zones – Uist – with plans now underway to run projects which address the various broadband issues in the islands. The focus given to this issue by the working group has

provided an established network for colleagues to tap into for project work. The working group has also provided views on the potential and viability for digital hubs in the region, a project being considered by HIE and supported by HIE's population manager.

Childcare has become a critical issue across the region. The Scottish Childminding Association, SDS, HIE, and local authority partners have worked together on projects to train childminders across Scotland, particularly in the Highlands and Islands. There is the potential for a pilot on a single care model where people are trained to work with children and the elderly in a community where it is difficult to find enough staff for both types of roles.

Convention of the South of Scotland

The Convention of the South of Scotland provides a structure for the public sector in the South of Scotland to engage directly with Scottish Government. It brings together public bodies with responsibility for growth and provides a forum for the exchange of ideas on priorities and how to tackle key regional issues.

Since its establishment it has focused on a range of topics of key regional interest. It has had a focus on housing, recognising the key need for housing in the region. It has explored the potential of key assets in the region from its cycling offer to its natural capital offer and how they contribute to the region's success.

The Regional Economic Partnership helps shape COSS' agenda ensuring that regional partners are engaging effectively with government, helping to shape policy that recognises the region's needs and opportunities.

Regional Economic Partnerships

The Scottish Government supports Regional Economic Partnerships (REPs) to develop and deliver their regional economic strategies. For some of these, addressing population challenges and securing a strong labour market within the region is essential (particularly in places like the South of Scotland, Ayrshire, Highlands & Islands, and Forth Valley). We acknowledge our role in working with the REPs to use economic opportunities to mitigate or lessen the challenge.

The known "drift" of working age and healthy population within these regions is captured in population data which is often used by both SG and UKG to select regions for economic interventions and determine funding allocations. Regions with low population were discounted from consideration from recent Investment Zones which, if replicated, would mean those regions will always suffer disadvantage for strategic, large scale and future-looking economic opportunities, potentially exacerbating the depopulation challenge within the region.

To help address this potential conflict in policy aims and ambitions, the Scottish Government's Regional Economic Policy Review contains a recommendation around developing a more nuanced allocation methodology for funding (which could potentially be adjusted and used for future policy making), which would take greater account of needs such as addressing depopulation in a far more sensitive manner more in keeping with the aims of a Wellbeing Economy.

Work around developing more nuanced allocation methodology is connected to work being undertaken to look at aggregating some budgets to a regional level to support the delivery of their regional economic strategies, which (as noted above) could include interventions intended to address some depopulation challenges.

Actions

- We will take forward the Regional Economic Policy review recommendation to develop a more nuanced allocation methodology for regional funding.
- We will, when developing new regional economic strategies, engage with and support Regional Economic Partnerships which are facing challenges around population decline, to note relevant work ongoing across the regions that would contribute to national outcomes and support population attraction and retention.
- We will support regional empowerment and growth by acting on the recommendations of the Regional Economic Policy Review, and working with Local Government and other partners to develop Scotland's network of Regional Economic Partnerships, supporting our rural and island businesses, including tourism.

Scottish Rural and Islands Parliament

The Scottish Government is committed to ensuring that the voice of rural communities and businesses is heard and included in the development of Scottish Government policy. We recognise the need for fresh approaches on long-standing issues impacting on rural and island development, as well as emerging opportunities to strengthen rural and island Scotland's contribution to building a more just, resilient, and sustainable nation.

Scotland is the only part of the UK that has a Rural Parliament. The **Scottish Rural & Islands Parliament** is a grassroots democratic assembly which aims to empower rural and island communities across Scotland, giving them a stronger voice to initiate change at a local and national level. The programme and event are shaped by a wide range of rural and island organisations.

The Scottish Rural and Islands Parliament met on 1-3 November 2023 at the Nevis Centre in Fort William, enabling voices to influence policy development including input to the forthcoming Rural Delivery Plan. Scottish Rural Action (SRA) continues to work with communities and officials to explore how the SRIP and its outcomes can contribute to wider policy. This year's event saw the inaugural Scottish Rural and Islands Youth Parliament (SRIYP), held on 1 November. Outputs from this youth-led forum will also play a vital role in policy development, ensuring rural young people have a voice.

We are also committed to working with community partners in developing a Rural Movement that will ensure all voices are heard and able to effect change. A rural movement is a partnership approach to networking and amplifying the diverse voices of rural and island communities. It serves two functions:

- Mobilising and connecting communities to each other so they are skilled and supported to shape their own futures; and
- Connecting communities to decision-makers to co-produce national policy.

Action

We will work with community partners in developing a Rural Movement that will ensure all voices are heard and able to effect change.

5.4 Economic Investment

There are myriad economic opportunities across Scotland that, if fully embraced, can help to deliver on our ambition for a more balanced population.

HIE's **Strategy 2023-28** highlights several once in-a-generation opportunities for the Highlands and Islands. These are prospects of a scale and potential to transform the region and make a lasting positive impact on Scotland's economy, often capitalising on our enviable natural assets and previous investments in world-class strategic infrastructure.

SOSE's **5-year plan 2023-28** also presents the South as **"a place that embraces innovation, efficiency and circular economic approaches"**, and presents the case for strengthening the region's role as a hub for innovation, resolving challenges and achieving more for less through continual improvement, greater collaboration and knowledge transfer.

Embracing and fulfilling this potential requires collaboration across all sectors, and governments. Positive progress is being made through a number of Growth Deals and new opportunities such as our Green Free Ports.

Islands Growth Deal

The Scottish and UK Governments have both committed to investing £50m in the Islands Growth Deal over 10 years from the signing of the Full Deal agreement with Shetland Islands Council, Orkney Islands Council, and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar in January 2023.

The Deal will drive sustainable and inclusive economic growth across the three island authorities by investing in local people, projects, and priorities in partnership with the island authorities and UK Government to spread the benefits of inclusive economic growth across the three island groups, increasing opportunities for all.

The Deal is built on effective partnership working and co-operation and will build on the islands'

existing strengths, help to address demographic and economic challenges, and support the islands in their Net Zero ambitions through the delivery of 16 projects grouped in three themes: **Thriving Sustainable Communities; Growth and Future Industries; and Net Zero**. All three themes are aligned to our ambition to address depopulation over the longer term within affected communities within these three island local authority areas. Regional partners anticipate that the Deal is likely to create up to 1,300 sustainable jobs aimed at retaining and attracting young talent.

Borderlands Inclusive Growth Deal

The Scottish Government has committed to investment of up to £85 million and UK Government has committed up to £65 million for the Scottish part of this Deal, over 10 years, from the signing of the Full Deal agreement in March 2021. A further £200 million has been committed by UK Government for England components of the deal, over 15 years.

The Deal has been shaped by a partnership between the five local authorities in the south of Scotland and north of England. It aims to build on the region's significant strengths in tourism, harness its land and marine resources to create high quality jobs, support business innovation and expansion, improve regional connectivity, create attractive places for people to live in, and equip people with the skills to thrive in their careers and contribute to communities. Regional partners anticipate that the Deal is likely to create up to up to 5,500 jobs across the whole Borderlands area.



River Dee near Castle Douglas, Dumfries and Galloway

Argyll and Bute

The Scottish and UK Governments have each committed to investing up to £25 million in the Argyll and Bute Growth Deal over 10 years. This investment will drive sustainable and inclusive economic growth, benefitting individuals, businesses, and communities across the area. The proposed projects span sustainable tourism development, digital, business innovation, housing, skills, aquaculture, low carbon and regeneration.



A key focus is on strengthening communities by making Argyll and Bute a more attractive place to live and work. The Scottish Government is working with UK Government and partners to agree a full deal, with good progress being made and regular contact with partners regarding progress. The Scottish Government is working closely with Argyll and Bute Council to encourage and facilitate progress and there is a shared ambition to conclude the Full Deal as soon as possible.

Inverness and Highland City Region Deal

The Full Deal agreement for the £315 million Inverness and Highland City Region Deal was formally signed on 30 January 2017. This comprises £135 million from the Scottish Government, £53.1 million committed by the UK Government and a further £127 million from The Highland Council and regional partners over the 10-year life-span of the Deal.

Projects supported will deliver affordable housing, boost innovation, Life Sciences, Tourism, and Food and Drink, foster STEM skills in school children, and deliver transport improvements. The Deal's 12 projects will help rebalance the population of the Highlands, aiming to attract and retain an additional 1,500 young people, and create 1,125 direct jobs and a further 2,200 in construction.

The Deal's Affordable Housing project has the specific aim of constructing new homes to attract and retain economically active people to live and work in the Highlands. The total number of units approved to date is 526 new homes, with 284 new homes having been completed to date.

Additionally, the Deal aims to upskill the labour market and create a high wage, high skill economy; and lever in £800 million pounds of private sector investment to the region over a 20-year period.

Actions

- We will deliver Growth Deals across their agreed delivery period, and at an appropriate point evaluate the projects delivered as part of the Deal.
- We will continue working with UK Government and partners to progress to Full Growth Deal signing for Argyll and Bute.
- We will seek to open Inverness Castle to the public by Financial Year 2025/26, as part of the Inverness and Highland City Region Deal.
- We will continue to construct new homes as part of the Deal's Affordable Housing Project, to attract and retain economically active people to live and work in the Highlands.

Green Freeports

Working in partnership with the UK Government, the Scottish Government will establish two Green Freeports in Scotland. Each Green Freeport will be supported by up to £26 million in start-up funding and will benefit from tax reliefs and other incentives through a combination of devolved and reserved powers. Once operational, the Green Freeports will support businesses to create high-quality, well-paid new jobs, promote growth and regeneration, and make a significant contribution to achieving our net zero ambitions. In particular, Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport has identified the decline of local working-age population within the Highlands as a key strategic challenge. With aspirations to develop Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport into the largest European hub for the development of the offshore wind industry, the Green Freeport aspires to create 16,250 jobs across the UK (of which more than 10,000 are estimated to be created in the Highlands) and attract over £3bn in investment in green energy projects. Working closely with Highland Council and other public and private sector partners across the region, the Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport will aim to create opportunities which can support young people to stay, live and work within the Highlands.

Action

We will continue to work closely with the two selected Green Freeports in Scotland, to ensure that they deliver maximum positive impact as soon as possible.

Local enterprise

Scottish Government recognises the crucial link between local economies and population retention. Working aged population not only contribute to local spend, but ensure the sustainability of our communities through, for example, volunteering in emergency services. **Research on International interventions to support population retention** further demonstrates this important link between local economies and community viability.

In our rural and island communities, there is a narrow business base with just under half of employment being within four sectors; health; agriculture, forestry and fishing, retail and accommodation and food services sectors.⁵ With wages being typically lower than average in these communities, they also have further to stretch with significant additional costs of living and of doing business in rural areas, particularly transport and fuel costs. Therefore, the health and performance of the local economy is of vital importance to local community sustainability.

Supporting local enterprise would help to strengthen the local economy, which could lead to greater local spend that, in turn, supports community regeneration and, potentially, population stability. Furthermore, working to support local enterprise demonstrates Scottish Government's recognition that rural and island communities are important areas of economic potential. It is crucial, however, that economic support as a route to addressing depopulation has a strong evidence base.

Action

We will continue to explore opportunities to support local enterprise in order to strengthen the evidence base for the relationship between diverse, healthy local economies and sustainable populations.

5. [Highlands and Islands Enterprise \(2022\), Rural and Regional Disadvantage in the Highlands and Islands, Executive Summary](#)

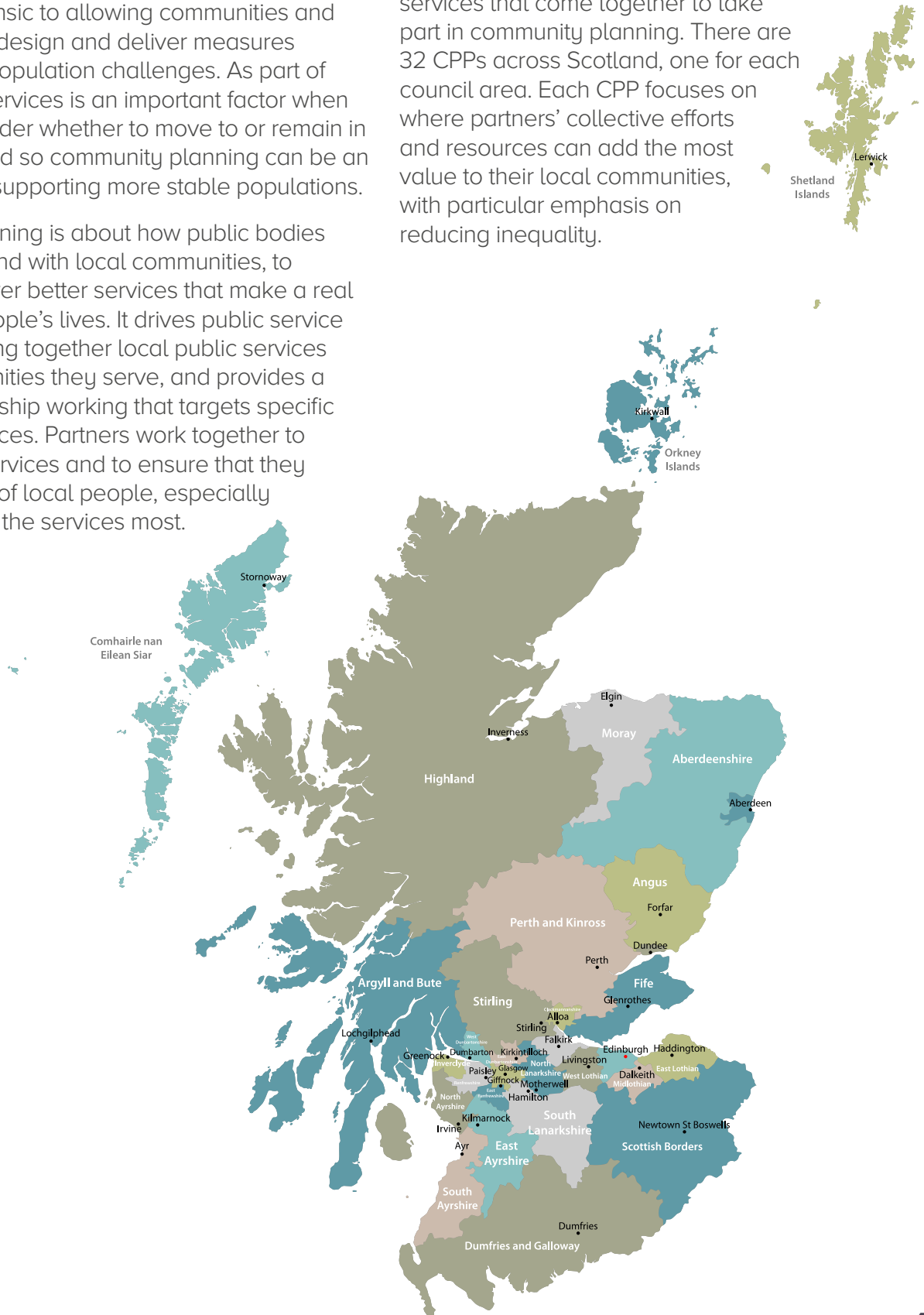
5.5 Local delivery

Community Planning Partnerships

Maximising the impact of local decision-making structures is intrinsic to allowing communities and stakeholders to design and deliver measures which address population challenges. As part of this, access to services is an important factor when individuals consider whether to move to or remain in a community, and so community planning can be an effective tool in supporting more stable populations.

Community planning is about how public bodies work together, and with local communities, to design and deliver better services that make a real difference to people’s lives. It drives public service reform by bringing together local public services with the communities they serve, and provides a focus for partnership working that targets specific local circumstances. Partners work together to improve local services and to ensure that they meet the needs of local people, especially those who need the services most.

A Community Planning Partnership (or CPP) is the name given to all those services that come together to take part in community planning. There are 32 CPPs across Scotland, one for each council area. Each CPP focuses on where partners’ collective efforts and resources can add the most value to their local communities, with particular emphasis on reducing inequality.



The Verity House Agreement, published in June 2023, states that CPPs will be recognised as a critical mechanism for the alignment of resource locally, focused on prevention and early intervention, and delivering shared priorities. The Verity House Agreement also highlights that Scottish Government Place Directors will continue to act as ambassadors for Local Government and CPPs across portfolios and will build a strong understanding about place-based leadership and local plans that focus on shared priorities.

The Scottish Government is committed to continued collaboration with all partners to improve community planning further and will engage further with COSLA, the CPIB, the Community Planning Network to agree collective next steps.

Actions

- We will engage further with COSLA, the CPIB, the Community Planning Network to agree collective next steps around community planning.
- We will support local government and community planning, including through Scottish Government Place Directors, aligned to the ambitions set out in the Verity House Agreement, including supporting areas which are facing issues relating to population.

Community delivery

This Action Plan is clear that community buy-in, gained through delivery which involves them from the start, is intrinsic to our collective success in addressing depopulation. A range of organisations have been consulted during the development of this Action Plan and ongoing community engagement, particularly during the design of Phase Two of this programme of work, will enable us to harness the variety of different perspectives present within affected communities. For example, Community Councils, Community Planning Partnerships, Local Action Groups, and the breadth of third sector organisations all play a crucial role in maximising the potential within areas affected by population decline.

Rural Communities are continuing the LEADER grassroots-based approach to make decisions about the local projects and priorities that support the Scottish Government's national objectives. However, if local community structures are to thrive and grasp new economic opportunities to encourage population retention and growth, they need support as rural Scotland emerges from the challenges of rurality, exacerbated by the problems caused by Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ongoing cost crisis.

In 2022/23 Scottish Government invested £11.6m in our rural communities to allow them to address local challenges and opportunities, through our Rural and Islands Communities Ideas into Action fund. A further initial £9.6m of funding is ringfenced for use by Local Action Groups in 2023/24.

However, for communities to capitalise on the support and resource that the Scottish Government provides requires an understanding of **how** local anchor organisations operate, their priorities and what is needed to genuinely empower them to deliver change. This includes how anchor organisations are resourced to deliver projects and services that sustain their communities.

Peer support, networking and expert advice are crucial in supporting capacity and capability within communities. **Development Trusts Association Scotland (DTAS)** is a member-led organisation that provides support to communities across Scotland to set up, develop and grow development trusts. Development Trusts can be at the centre of their community's regeneration and/or can develop a strong community infrastructure which meets the needs of people and place.

Supporting and working with organisations such as DTAS and their membership, ensuring the knowledge of anchor organisations embedded within their communities is fully utilised, will be key in creating places that people want to live in by meeting the needs and demands of local people.

The following case studies highlight how this action, with the right support, can allow communities to shape their own futures.

Case Studies – Capacity Support

Communities have highlighted that a challenge in delivering transformational infrastructure projects is a lack of organisational capacity and/or expertise. In 2022/23, the Scottish Government supported a range of island communities through projects focusing on empowering the community to shape their own individual and collective futures. These were delivered in **Rum**, **Tiree**, and **Arran**.

In **Rum**, the Isle of Rum Community Trust (IRCT) undertook a project focused on carrying out feasibility studies for potential local development proposals, and an options appraisal in relation to potential models of ownership for Kinloch Castle, including innovative governance and leasing options.

One of the intended outcomes of the project was to demonstrate how communities can engage with their own, and the Scottish Government's ambitions for their wellbeing and that of the environment they live in.

IRCT encountered issues in progressing the projects as originally intended, reporting difficulties including limited staffing and Board resources, as well as limited availability of contractor resources to take on the proposed work in the short delivery timescale dictated by the grant offer. These are issues often reported from those undertaking community development projects.

Whilst some aspects of the projects were able to be progressed, the issues IRCT experienced ultimately meant the projects could not be concluded within the original timescale. This further highlights an important issue for communities and grant funders alike. When empowering communities to deliver projects, it is essential that the capacity of community staff and volunteer directors are factored in.

Whilst restrictions around grant spend timescales meant IRCT were unable to complete this project, it has still been valuable in demonstrating that resource issues for communities do not always solely concern financial resource and that when considering empowering communities through increasing resources, financial project/capital funding alone is not always sufficient or the best form of support. In this instance, the community would have benefited from additional people resource.

In **Tiree**, small, targeted financial support was provided to the Hebridean Trust to support the redevelopment of Hynish, Tiree – a project bringing existing buildings into use for long-term housing, worker accommodation and business/enterprise space. By including flexibility in the funding to enable the delivery partner to use it to meet the proposed objectives of the project as they saw best, this allowed for a mix of specialists and experts to be brought on board to then work with the local community to take forward this project.

In **Arran**, support was provided to the Arran Development Trust to increase their organisational capacity for a limited period in order to allow staff to focus on progressing the final processes required to begin developing 18 new homes in Lamlash.

The Arran Development Trust had secured investment from the Scottish Government and engaged with a range of Private Financial Companies to support the development of this project. The additional funding on increasing organisational capacity, ensured they had the security and time to focus on this specific project, securing the required permissions and agreement to finally see site works begin.

Community Councils

Community councils are the most local tier of statutory representation in Scotland. They bridge the gap between local authorities and communities and help to make public bodies aware of the opinions and needs of the communities they represent.

Community councils act as a voice for their local area. However, their specific role and size (area and population) can differ. Community councils should establish and communicate the views and priorities of their community to local authorities and other public bodies. Whilst not part of local government, they can have a positive and productive role in complementing the role of the local authority, and are, therefore, a crucial vehicle for democratically-driven local delivery.

To effectively represent their community, community councils must be proactive in consulting and engaging with local residents. Increasingly, this may require a combination of in-person and digitally enabled engagement.

Actions

- We will work to increase rural youth participation in community councils, to empower young people to inform improvements to services in their area, making rural communities more attractive places to live and work.
- We will support Social Media/Content Creation Training for local community council members to encourage greater engagement and a stronger voice in improving local services. This will include the provision of 10 websites for rural- and islands-based community councils, that meet accessibility legislation and will be of particular benefit to local people who have additional needs because of disability.
- We will develop specific rural and islands website content to improve access to opportunities for education, training, or employment.

Community Hubs and Spaces

Community hubs benefit residents and visitors alike and are proven to enable community spaces to be at the forefront of rural regeneration and development. They have the potential to provide opportunities of growth and development as well as offer a safe space for those in need. Shared spaces such as centres and village halls have always and will continue to be a key aspect of any rural and island communities.

SRUC's Rural Policy Centre has recently published a blog and a Policy Spotlight on the subject of Hubs. More resources on Rural Enterprise Hubs are available from the National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise [website](#).

North Coast Connections – Wellbeing Hub

North Coast Connections provides a wellbeing hub in Tongue for the rural and scattered communities of North Sutherland. The origins of the Hub were founded in concerns about the continuation of the local day care services being delivered by The Highland Council from the Kyle Centre.

Following the transfer of ownership of the Kyle Centre from the council and the provision of a service level agreement from NHS Highland, this enabled the group to seek funding to expand and develop the Hub into a busy and vibrant community facility providing a wide range of services from a lunch club 3 days per week, meal delivery, crafting sessions, toddler groups to family days and walking groups.

The centre currently has 6 part-time employees.

In summer 2023, a learning exchange between [Rural Housing Scotland](#) and the Department of Rural and Community Development within the Irish Government highlighted the importance of rural development through the regeneration of community spaces into digital hubs. County Clare Council have enabled rural communities to flourish and repopulate [through access to Broadband Connection Points in spaces that have been](#)

Ard Dhubh, Applecross



creatively supported. Digital connectivity is at the forefront of rural development, supporting sustainable communities, enterprise and employment as well as maximising the full potential through tourism and recreation.

The **Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO)** has been funded to: improve the provision of entry level information on compliance for running a community space (with particular focus on the unique requirements of rural and island communities); and to provide best practice in order to support people who give their time and energy to run community spaces.

Actions

- We will build on engagement with international stakeholders on remote working and hub networks, such as the Government of Ireland’s Connected Hubs Programme, to identify potential benefits of a more strategic approach to rural hub development, and consider their application in Scotland.

Support structures – network and resource generation for other communities

While the drivers of depopulation differ across the three communities currently housing the aforementioned Community Settlement Officers, this Action Plan sets out our understanding of the wider phenomenon occurring across many areas in Scotland. In doing so, this represents the start of targeted action being supported by the Scottish Government which will explore and start to address the phenomenon where it is occurring in other parts of the country.

To support those other areas across Scotland in developing their own locally identified actions to address their specific population challenges, we intend to bring together learning and experience to develop a “Route Map” as part of this Action Plan. This will be a resource for sharing best practice for community-driven partnership working across Scotland.

Action

We will develop a “Route Map” for sharing best practice for community-driven partnership working across Scotland.

06 Addressing depopulation: a national response, locally delivered

The Scottish Government recognises its role and responsibility, as part of a wider system, to proactively seek to address depopulation, both directly and indirectly, through the delivery of policy interventions across its range of responsibilities, especially where these are linked to identified drivers of population decline.

This section therefore sets out:

- A wide range of national-level policy which already explicitly supports the addressing of depopulation.
- Next steps and actions which will be delivered at a national level, reflecting learning from case studies, policy pilots and research.
- The baseline from which the Scottish Government intends to support outcomes in this area of work, and where national policy delivery structures operate, local impact being maximised by these structures.

However, national policy often has to consider a broad range of interests and factors. Stakeholders regularly state that, as a result of this, national policy has a challenge with local delivery. We, as national government, cannot replicate the experience of regional and local partners. National level policy can support and recognise the importance of place-based decision making, but cannot make decisions at a local level on prioritising resources.

A key role for Scottish Government in our national response to depopulation being delivered locally, is to work with partners once they have decided on policy or geographical prioritisation.

The following policy areas included in this section of the Action Plan are not intended to be presented as the only policies of relevance to addressing depopulation. This non-exhaustive list focuses on those areas that communities and stakeholders have consistently highlighted as key, and should be viewed as building the core foundations within Phase One of this programme of work, from which Scotland can build a more sustainable approach to delivering a more balanced population.

These enabling policies can be grouped into the following themes:



Land and Marine

- including Methods of Land Ownership, Crofting, Blue Economy, Just Transition



Infrastructure

- including Housing, Transport, Digital Connectivity



Services

- including Education, Childcare, Health & Social Care



Culture

- including Gaelic, Community Wealth Building, Workforce Dispersal



Economy

- including Migration, Talent Attraction, Skills

6.1 Housing

Throughout the development of this Action Plan, stakeholders have told us of the importance of housing in enabling population retention, and for people to be able to newly move to communities facing population challenges.

The Scottish Government approach to the planning and delivery of new housing is focussed on providing the **“right homes in the right places”**, achieved by working closely with local authorities in their role as strategic housing and planning authorities. This underlying principle applies as much to rural as urban areas and forms the basis for our approach to the prioritisation and delivery of housing solutions across Scotland.

Housing to 2040 is Scotland’s long-term housing strategy and sets out a vision for what we want homes and communities to look and feel like for the people of Scotland, no matter where they live or their circumstances in life. It is the culmination of extensive engagement with the housing sector, wider stakeholders, and the public, including young people. Supporting affordable housing priorities in different areas requires flexibility. For example, regeneration initiatives linked to tenure diversification, providing Mid-Market Rented homes in high demand areas, or low-cost home ownership in rural communities.

Housing is, and will remain, a priority for this Government. Access to good quality housing is the focus of Housing to 2040 strategy and a vital part of our drive to secure economic growth, promote social justice, strengthen communities, and tackle inequality. To support this, the Scottish Government has set out our ambition to deliver 110,000 affordable homes, of which 70% will be for social rent and 10% in rural and island communities.

Between April 2016 and March 2023, the Scottish Government has supported the delivery of over 10,000 affordable homes across rural and island areas. In addition to housing delivery by local authorities and Registered Social Landlords through the mainstream affordable housing supply programme, we are continuing to support of **up to £30 million over the lifetime of the Parliament for the continuation of the demand-led Rural and Island Housing Fund**, offering support to communities, landowners, and other eligible organisations in the provision of additional affordable housing, through early feasibility funding as well as grant support for the delivery of affordable homes.

In October 2023, the Scottish Government published a **Rural and Islands Housing Action Plan (RIHAP)** to support the delivery of its affordable housing ambitions and the delivery of housing in rural and island communities. RIHAP will support delivery of our commitment to deliver 110,000 affordable homes, 10% of which will be in rural and island areas. It represents an important step in tackling the challenges and reinforcing the systems and support for the delivery of homes in rural and island areas.

The RIHAP recognises that it is essential to the economic vitality of rural and island areas that employers can attract and retain the key workers they require, not only to support service delivery for communities but also to support economic growth and prosperity. As such, the RIHAP includes a commitment to provide up to £25 million from our affordable housing supply programme budget over the period 2023-2028 in the form of the demand-led Rural Affordable Homes for Key Workers Fund. The fund will enable local authorities and registered social landlords to purchase existing suitable properties in rural and island areas which can be rented directly or leased to employers to provide affordable homes for key workers. This can include bringing empty properties back into use or acquiring properties on the open market to increase the supply of affordable homes for key workers.

Local authorities are expected to engage with a range of organisations in their localities including public sector employers, key agencies including Highlands and Islands Enterprise and South of Scotland Enterprise, as well as local businesses and registered local landlords to identify requirements and proposals.

RIHAP includes a focus on community-led housing and includes a three-year joint funding package that has been agreed between the Scottish Government and Nationwide Foundation of almost £1 million to support the capacity of Communities Housing Trust and South of Scotland Community Housing that will ensure that they can continue to support the delivery of rural homes within our rural and island communities.

Finally, RIHAP includes a strong focus on collaboration highlighting that the Scottish Government will work collaboratively with South of Scotland and Highlands and Islands Enterprise through the housing sub-groups of the Regional Economic Partnerships including consideration of future economic growth opportunities, housing delivery, construction and skills capacity and the broader role of the private sector in supporting and responding to housing requirements.

Actions

- We will deliver 110,000 affordable homes of which at least 70% will be for social rent and 10% in rural and island areas, supported by our Rural and Island Housing Action Plan, to help attract and retain people to communities.
- We will make available up to £25 million from our Affordable Housing Supply Programme budget over the period 2023-2028 for the demand-led Rural Affordable Housing for Key Workers Fund, to enable local authorities and registered social landlords to purchase properties in rural and island areas which can be rented directly or leased to employers to provide affordable homes for key workers.
- We will work with local authorities, enterprise agencies and business representatives including private developers to improve understanding of housing requirements arising from key sectors. We will seek to enable more housing provision through sharing of good practice and collaboration between employers and housing providers.
- We will work with the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership, local authorities and owners to bring more empty homes in rural and island areas back into use, promoting available funding options, sharing best practice and identify opportunities for stronger collaboration.
- We will invest £566 million in 2024-25 through our Affordable Housing Supply Programme as we continue to support the delivery of affordable homes to meet housing needs across Scotland.

- We will continue to provide support of up to £30 million for the continuation of the demand-led Rural and Island Housing Fund, supporting communities, landowners and other eligible organisations in the provision of affordable housing, through early feasibility funding as well as grant support. This is in addition to housing delivery by local authorities and Registered Social Landlords through the mainstream Affordable Housing Supply Programme.
- We will develop guidance to support communities, local authorities and others to undertake local housing assessments based on best practice and robust methodology.



6.2 Transport

With the evidence telling us that the concept of perceived peripherality is a strong driver of population decline in some communities, we recognise the importance of a strong transport system which supports and sustains people to locate themselves where they wish to build and live their lives. This section covers the strategic underpinning regarding national level transport decision making and explores next steps to be undertaken in support of these decisions, through a population outcomes lens.

Building an accessible, available, and affordable transport system for all of Scotland, with the costs shared more equally across Government, business and society, the **National Transport Strategy** sets out our vision through four key priorities: **reducing inequalities; taking climate action; helping to deliver inclusive economic growth; and improving our health and wellbeing.** The Strategy, through the approach to planning and delivery, accounts for our different regional differences, as recognised in the National Islands Plan and the National Council of Rural Advisers, and adopts targeted approaches that align with local needs. Importantly, the Strategy looks to ensure that those living in rural or island communities are well connected and have equitable access to services making a positive contribution to maintaining and growing the populations in these areas.

In December 2023, we published the National Transport Strategy: Third Annual Delivery Plan, which sets out the key actions taken by the Scottish Government to deliver the Strategy's vision and priorities for 2023-24.

Alignment with local needs will be crucial if we are to realise our ambition of working to build and grow a sustainable, inclusive, safe and accessible transport system, that will support healthier, fairer and more prosperous Scotland. That will require engagement and collaboration across all sectors to identify and understand how transport systems and infrastructure can unlock and embrace the many potential economic opportunities from new Green Freeports to Space Ports and future renewable generation schemes.

The **Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR2)** provides an overview of transport investment to 2042 and considers the needs of our communities from national and regional perspectives to reflect their different geographies, travel patterns, and demands. In December 2022, we published 45 recommendations for our investment in strategic transport and work is ongoing to enhance rail corridors, connectivity to island communities, freight facilities, and ferry vessel renewal and replacement. STPR2 recognises that much of our rural population resides in towns and villages and there are a number of active travel recommendations for these settlements, including long distance active travel networks, and for improvements to trunk roads between communities.

The **Scottish Transport Appraisal Guidance (STAG)** and **Development Planning and Management Guidance (DPMTAG)** consider the problems and opportunities relevant to an area. Transport

access, alongside spatial and digital access, are important components that impact on where people, households and businesses choose to locate. Appraisals must also consider the current policy context and ambitions at national, regional, and local levels which should include issues on population and demography.

We are providing targeted support for bus services on the longer and less commercially viable routes in rural and island communities through the **Network Support Grant**.

The 2019 Transport Act made provisions to **empower local authorities with the flexible tools** they need to respond to their own transport challenges. This allows local transport authorities to run their own bus services or franchise bus services in their areas. The Act also introduces new regulations covering the way in which bus operators must provide information to local authorities when they plan to reduce or withdraw the services they provide. By giving local authorities the flexible tools they need to respond to their own transport challenges, we can deliver a more responsive and sustainable transport system for communities.

We are currently progressing the **Fair Fares Review** to ensure a sustainable and integrated approach to public transport fares that supports the future long-term viability of a public transport system that is accessible, available, and affordable for people throughout Scotland.



We are committed to ensuring that **ferry services** in Scotland fulfil a critical function within the wider transport system and support the delivery of the National Transport Strategy and the National Islands Plan. Providing transport connectivity supports the sustainability and growth of island and peninsula populations and supports local businesses to achieve sustainable economic growth. Fares on the Clyde & Hebridean and Northern Isles networks will be held at current levels until March 2024 to help people and businesses from Scotland's rural and island communities. The strategic Islands Connectivity Plan will set a vision and priorities for delivery of ferry services in Scotland which will support development of local authority delivery plans and identify benefits to communities and the wider economy. This will build on the recent NZET Committee's report calling for the Scottish Government to ensure true value is being achieved from spend on ferry services, including socio-economic factors such as depopulation.

We are committed to addressing the landslide challenges at the **Rest and Be Thankful** section of the A83. The announcement on 2 June 2023 of the preferred route option through the Glen Croe Valley is a very important milestone in finding a solution to this long-standing problem. The proposed new debris flow shelter will help protect the road and road users from future landslides. The scheme will help improve connectivity across the region, enhancing the region's attractiveness as a place to work, live and visit, supporting sustainable economic growth. The improvements could also remove barriers to investment and improve access to labour markets, potentially helping support growth in a number of key sectors in the region and helping to arrest population decline.

The **A9 Dualling Perth to Inverness** programme will unlock the economic potential of the Highlands and Islands and we will work with contractors and local partners to create meaningful and lasting social value benefits wherever possible. The works are designed to deliver economic growth through improved road safety and reliable and quicker journey times, as well as better links to pedestrian, cycling, and public transport facilities. This

underlines the Scottish Government's commitment to connecting Scotland's cities with a high-quality transport system that is safer for users and generates economic growth, whilst also improving connectivity for our rural communities who rely on essential road infrastructure to thrive.

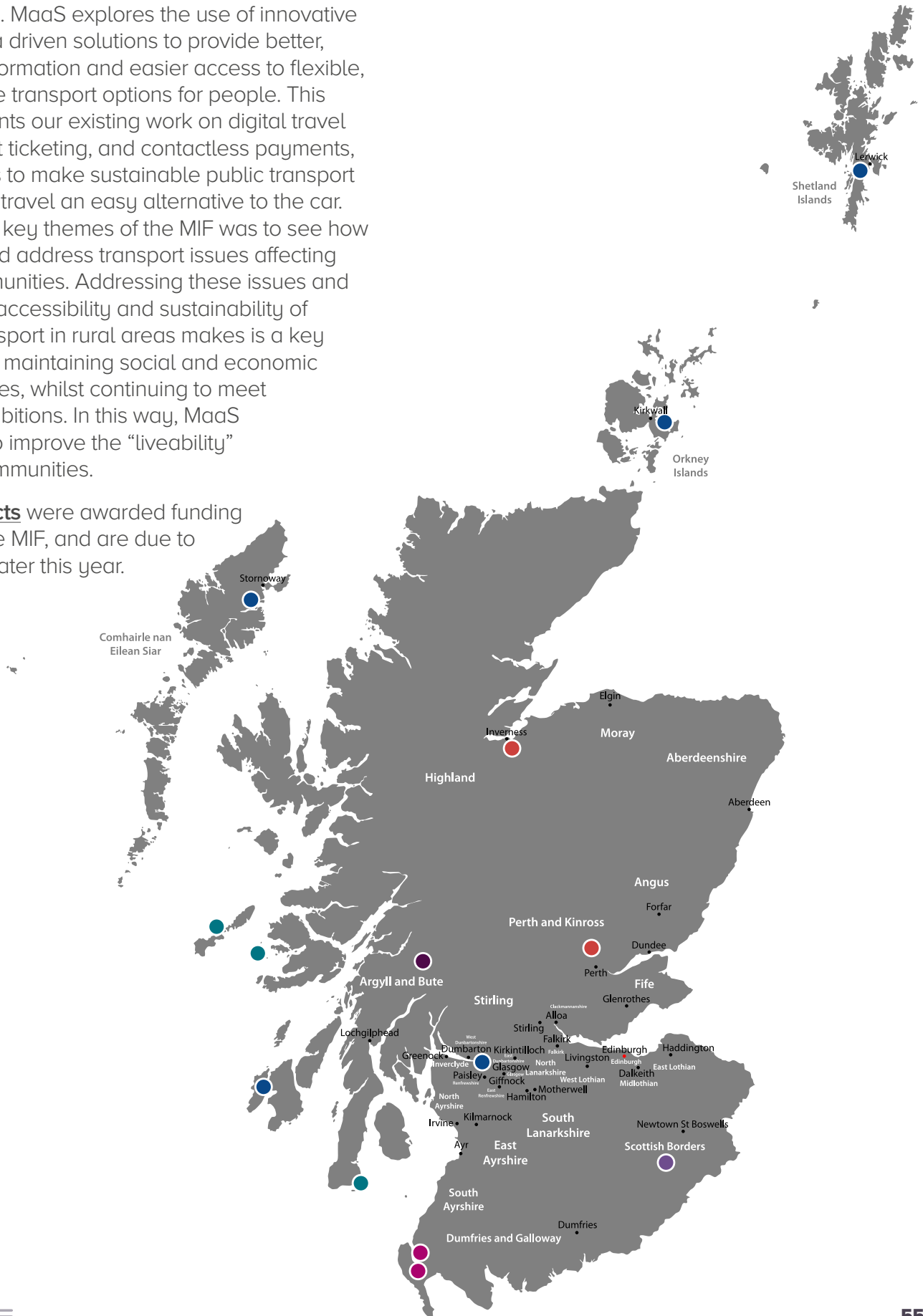
The Scottish Government directly subsidises the Glasgow to Campbeltown, Tiree and Barra **air services** as we recognise the importance of these services in maintaining viable communities. Due to low passenger numbers the services cannot operate on a commercial basis but are important for residents of these areas to enable them to quickly access services that cannot be provided locally, for example specialist healthcare. Maintaining population levels, particularly through retaining younger working-age people in the age range of 16-44 is essential to the continued viability of these communities. Improved accessibility to goods, services and social/leisure travel enhances quality of life, increases community confidence and helps maintain population levels.

STPR2 recognises that **Stranraer and the ports at Cairnryan** act as an important gateway to Scotland for ferry passengers and freight, and that improving the transport assets in this location would support regeneration of South West of Scotland to benefit the economy and local communities. The Review recommends that safety, resilience and reliability improvements are made on the A75 and A77 strategic road corridors, in turn supporting placemaking opportunities, and that consideration should also be given to upgrading or relocating Stranraer railway station to encourage greater use of public transport and support wider town regeneration proposals.

Of relevance to the **Scottish Borders Region**, STPR2 also recognises that sufficient provision of rail freight terminals is critical to achieving a significant shift of freight from road to rail, and improving the sustainability and competitiveness of Scotland's supply chain. In supporting economic growth in the region, these improvements could be expected to have a positive impact on population through increasing opportunities to live and work in the area.

In 2019, the Scottish Government launched the £2 million **Mobility as a Service (MaaS) Investment Fund (MIF)**. MaaS explores the use of innovative digital data driven solutions to provide better, tailored information and easier access to flexible, sustainable transport options for people. This complements our existing work on digital travel data, smart ticketing, and contactless payments, which aims to make sustainable public transport and active travel an easy alternative to the car. One of the key themes of the MIF was to see how MaaS could address transport issues affecting rural communities. Addressing these issues and improving accessibility and sustainability of public transport in rural areas makes is a key element of maintaining social and economic opportunities, whilst continuing to meet climate ambitions. In this way, MaaS can help to improve the “liveability” of rural communities.

Five projects were awarded funding through the MIF, and are due to complete later this year.



Case Study: Population and Household Location Research

The Ministerial Population Taskforce commissioned research in November 2022 to enhance the evidence base around transport and digital connectivity, and their respective links to local level population and household location choice experienced at a community level across parts of Scotland.

As set out across this Action Plan, a wide range of complex factors contribute to household location decisions. Research considered the potential role played by connectivity improvements in enabling policy responses, with improvements in transport and more recently digital connectivity shown to expand the search area people consider when choosing where to live. Good transport and digital connectivity may therefore be regarded as pre-requisite rather than a determinant of location decisions.

It also examined the interactions between digital and transport links, and the scope for digital substitution of physical connectivity. Accelerated by COVID-19, partial digital substitution has become reality in many workplaces and in the delivery of many services. However, complete substitution is rare and, more often, digital and transport connectivity were highlighted as complementary.

When looking specifically at rural depopulation, literature shows that digitally enabled remote working has reversed population decline in some locations, without formal policy intervention. However, a coherent picture of the distribution of these effects was not available at the time of writing. Neither was consistent quantitative data on the demographic composition of these population movements.

Digital and transport connectivity were shown to be essential to the development of sustainable communities. However, in order to develop connectivity interventions that can best support local community sustainability, further research is required to better articulate **where** improvements are needed, by **whom** and to **what** purpose.

The report also highlighted the need to consider potential unintended consequences of wider trends or policy interventions including an ageing population, access to affordable housing, and adverse impacts on rural foundation industries, essential services and digital inequalities.

Learning from this research will be used to inform our approach to infrastructure decision making and investment, and further inform our understanding about how to address wider challenges about all aspects of connectivity as a driver for successfully addressing challenges around population decline.

Actions

- We will consider how to take forward the STPR2 recommendations as part of the **STPR2 Delivery Plan**.
 - We will publish the **Fair Fares Review** which will recommend a package of measures which can be considered for implementation from 2024-25 and onwards. These will provide opportunities to address the wider issues for the cost and availability of public transport services across all modes of public transport.
 - We will publish the report on Population and Household Location research commissioned by the Scottish Government, completed in August 2023. This will be followed by further research to better understand where digital and transport connectivity improvements are needed, by whom and for what purpose, to inform potential future decision-making concerning digital connectivity as a substitute for physical transport connectivity.
 - We will utilise the evaluation of the five MIF projects as the evidence base for future policy and investment in MaaS in Scotland.
- We will progress the dualling of the A9 between Perth and Inverness in line with the delivery plan announced on 20 December 2023, including taking forward the procurement of the Tomatin to Moy project.
 - We will make improvements to the A96, including dualling Inverness to Nairn and the Nairn bypass, and publish the review of the A96 Dualling Programme.
 - We will continue to develop both a long term solution and medium term improvements to the landslip risks at the A83 Rest and Be Thankful, and to press the UK Government to fulfil its commitments to contribute to funding improvements to the A75.
 - We will invest in ferry services to support our island communities, including continuing the construction of six major vessels, port improvements at Lochmaddy and Uig, port enabling works on the Islay routes, and consulting on and completing the Long Term Plan for Vessels and Ports to support our Islands Connectivity Plan.

6.3 Digital

Closely linked to the physical connectivity needs of Scotland's population, and as highlighted through the research mentioned in the previous section, is the enablement delivered through enhanced digital connectivity for Scotland's population. Across a range of key commitments, the Scottish Government is supporting this objective.



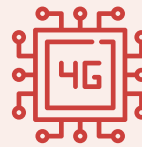
The Scottish Government's **Reaching 100% (R100) programme** is delivering future-proofed broadband infrastructure that will underpin economic growth and transform the economic prospects of communities across Scotland.



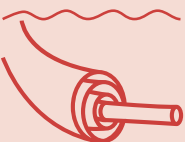
R100 is being delivered through **three key strands of activity** – the **Scottish Government's £600 million R100 contracts**, the **R100 Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme (R100 SBVS)** and ongoing **commercial coverage**.



Around **70%** of the **114,000** premises expected to be connected through the R100 contracts are in rural Scotland, with around **12,000** of these premises located in island communities. Once connected these premises are likely to have access to future-proofed gigabit capable infrastructure, which can provide download speeds of up to **1 Gigabit (1,000 Megabits)** per second.



Through the **Scottish 4G Infill (S4GI) programme**, the Scottish Government is investing **£28.75 million** in future-proofed infrastructure to improve rural 4G mobile coverage.



The R100 programme has already delivered **16** new fibre optic subsea cables providing resilient, future-proofed connectivity to **15** Scottish islands for decades to come. This is in addition to **20** fibre optic subsea cables delivered through our previous Digital Scotland Superfast Broadband (DSSB) programme.



All of the 55 sites to be delivered through S4GI are located on islands or in rural Scotland. S4GI is improving everyday life for the communities the masts serve, through directly supporting wider plans for digitally enabled economic opportunities, including local tourism, and enabling residents to access services and stay in touch with families and friends more easily.



Work is being taken forward by Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) to develop an overview of the current connectivity position in the Convention of the Highlands and Islands Population Working Group "repopulation zone" areas. Additional work is also being taken forward by the Scottish, Welsh and UK Governments to collaborate further on data sharing and to consolidate all coverage data, alongside information about future planned infrastructure investment, on islands.

Actions

- R100 contract build is actively delivering at pace across Scotland. Over 43,000 premises have been connected as a result of the R100 contracts (as at 30 November 2023 and including contractual overspill) with a further 3,639 connections delivered through the Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme (as at 01 December 2023).
- An R100 SBVS funded project to connect almost all properties on Papa Westray to full fibre has concluded and uses innovative fibre in water pipes technology as part of the build solution.
- Currently 54 masts in the Scottish 4G Infill programme are live and providing 4G connectivity at rural sites, with the final mast expected to be activated later this year.
- We will work with areas covered by existing Community Settlement Officers to consider local connectivity options and how we can support communities to access these.
- We will continue to invest over £600 million in the broadband networks of the future, through the Reaching 100% (R100) broadband programme.
- We will utilise HIE's review of digital connectivity and further data sharing among Scottish, Welsh and UK Governments to inform further discussions on what connectivity options exist, and how relevant stakeholders can work together to support communities to access these.

6.4 Education

Seeking educational opportunities has been cited as a driver of depopulation across a number of nations,⁶ and a lack of educational opportunities (perceived or real) was also highlighted in the [responses to the Islands Bond in 2022](#) as negatively impacting on decisions to remain in island communities. It is not uncommon for rural and island stakeholders in particular to present the existence and future viability of local schools as a key indicator of community sustainability.

The Scottish Government is responsible for overseeing the process local authorities are required to undertake in relation to consultations on significant changes to school provision in their area, including in relation to school openings and closures and changes to catchment areas. All of these factors can impact on, or influence, demographic challenges at a community level, and we recognise the importance of education provision as a key factor influencing community attractiveness and sustainability.

Scottish Ministers have statutory obligations in relation to school closures, specifically around reviewing local authority school closures proposals to ensure they have met the requirements of the Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010 within statutory timeframes and if necessary, passing such proposals to an independent panel for further review. The Scottish Government also oversees the statutory guidance and related support materials provided to local authorities to guide them through the process and their statutory obligations.

6. Scotland's Rural College (2020), "[Case Studies of Repopulation Initiatives Final Report](#)"

In Scotland, there is a presumption against closure of rural schools and there are special protections set out in the 2010 Act. Local authorities must undertake specific additional steps when they propose to close a rural school. These include clearly demonstrating that they have considered alternatives to closure, an assessment of the likely impact on the community and impact on travel to school arrangements for local pupils.

The local authority must also set out the educational benefit of the closure and respond to Education Scotland's assessment of the educational impact on those affected. If a proposal to close a school is rejected, then the local authority cannot repeat the process for five years, providing stability for the local community. These protections are intended to ensure that local authorities think very carefully before closing a rural school and consult extensively with the local community about their proposal.

The Scottish Government has commenced a series of online training sessions for local authority officers who lead on such consultations. This will cover issues such as the statutory requirements as they relate to rural schools, mothballing schools, and Education Scotland's role in the process. The Scottish Government also plans to, in future, review and revise the 2010 Act statutory guidance.

The Scottish Government has published its **Learning Estate Strategy** – which sets out the Scottish Government's strategic vision for the learning estate in Scotland. The Scottish Government, in partnership with local authorities, is also responsible for the £2bn Learning Estate Investment Programme (LEIP). LEIP prioritises schools in need of updating, as identified by local authorities, to ensure rapid progress where most required and will benefit tens of thousands of pupils across Scotland. Demographic factors sit alongside other factors such as condition and suitability of existing buildings in informing decision making about where to build new schools or refurbish existing schools. LEIP projects complement local authorities' activities in relation to their learning estate and local authorities will oversee and fund their own school building/refurbishment projects. On 30 October 2023, Scottish Government announced that ten local authorities, including Argyll and Bute, Orkney, and Shetland, are to be awarded funding in the **third phase of the LEIP**, which will be worth

£450-500 million. The Scottish Government will continue working with COSLA, local authorities and Scottish Futures Trust to explore how we can deliver further improvements in the school estate.

Alongside supporting the provision of school infrastructure, work continues to support General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) qualified teachers to remain and return to Scotland's islands and rural areas whilst continuing to teach through the continued development of **e-Sgoil**.

E-Sgoil is currently delivering live online learning opportunities across Na h-Eileanan Siar, the **Northern Alliance**, and the whole of Scotland, employing teachers from island and rural communities across Scotland, including Depute Head Teacher posts in Lewis, Argyll and Bute, Orkney, and Shetland. This offers teaching, leadership and even national leadership opportunities and experience to educators and staff located in rural and island communities.

E-Sgoil is also supporting children and young people who live in rural and island communities through their offer of Gaelic learner, Gaelic Medium, and all-subjects supply offer to all 32 local authorities across Scotland. This allows schools and settings to offer their learners an equitable curriculum despite their geography.

Further information on the impacts of e-Sgoil is available on **[their website](#)**.

Case Study

Teachers returning or moving to the islands to teach online have expressed their appreciation for the opportunity through a range of testimonials:

- Gaelic Medium Teacher who returned to Harris – page 7: **[e-Sgoil newsletter - September 2022](#)**
- David Downham, Depute Head Teacher who moved to North Uist – page 5: **[e-Sgoil newsletter - Feb 22](#)**
- Newly qualified Art & Design Teacher who returned to the Isle of Barra – page 5: **[e-Sgoil newsletter - Feb 22](#)**

University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI)

UHI is a tertiary institution with a partnership of colleges, internationally recognised research institutions and specialist teaching centres. UHI delivers further education, higher education and research to over 36,000 students per year, across their campus of 70 teaching and learning centres.

The **UHI strategic plan 2030** sets out a vision to “**attract, nurture and retain talent in our communities, supporting innovation and social and economic prosperity. We will do this through the innovative delivery of flexible lifelong learning focused on employability and skills and impactful research**”.

Their specialisms can attract young people to the region. e.g. adventure tourism, textile, archaeology, while at the same time UHI can also provide work based learning pathways into further and higher education, linked to employment which if grown, can increase the retention of talent in the region.

However, in some areas (for example Fort William), the resultant lack of available accommodation has been raised by UHI as impacting on their ability to offer places to students who want to move to the area to study.

Particularly in rural and island areas, further and higher education can be understood as key sectors for supporting population stability and growth. For example, islands stakeholders have indicated that Orkney’s population growth in recent years is primarily founded on young people’s re-location to the area to support a vibrant science and innovation sector – with a significant proportion of these people settling in the area.

Through the Rural and Islands Housing Action Plan, Scottish Government have committed to working with local authorities, enterprise agencies and business representatives including private developers to improve understanding of housing requirements arising from key sectors.

6.5 Access to health and social care

Access to health and social care services is key to ensuring that communities remain resilient but also attractive for potential new arrivals. This section sets out, across key areas such as population health, primary care, and access to social care services, how we will harness the strength of our institutions and services to support communities facing population decline across Scotland.

Role of Institutions

The Scottish Government’s Place and Wellbeing Programme includes the Anchors workstream,, which in part aims to help address population and demographic challenges in rural areas through its work with NHS Boards. NHS Boards have a major presence and impact in their local area as they employ a large number of people, spend a lot on goods and services, and have multiple buildings, land, and other assets. NHS Scotland employs over 180,000 people in a wide variety of jobs, accounting for over 15% of all employment, and spends over £3.3 billion on goods and services each year.

This workstream has the potential to address population and demographic challenges through a range of action currently being taken forward:

- Supporting NHS Boards, which are significant employers in rural regions, to recruit and retain local people into fair employment opportunities.
- Addressing any barriers at a national level which prevent NHS Boards from procuring more local goods and services so they can make more of a contribution to their local economy.
- Exploring how the NHS can: share more of its assets with community and voluntary organisations, by for example, opening up green spaces or providing building space for community use and disposing of its land and properties for community benefit, for example, to support affordable housing.

As part of the NHS Scotland Delivery Plan Guidance, which was issued by the Scottish Government in February 2023, NHS national and territorial Boards have been asked to develop an:

“Anchors strategic plan by October 2023 which sets out governance and partnership arrangements to progress anchor activity; current and planned anchor activity and a clear baseline in relation to workforce; local procurement; and if relevant, use or disposal of land and assets for the benefit of the community.”

Further guidance has been issued to all NHS Boards to support them with the development of their Anchor Strategic Plans and the workstream has developed a set of metrics to enable NHS Boards to baseline their contribution as anchor institutions. This includes establishing a baseline on target groups within the workforce.

The Anchors Workforce Strategic Group, which met for the first time in March 2023, established a Local Employability Partnership-Health Board Interface Task and Finish Group. This group will explore the partnership arrangements between Local Employability Partnerships and Health Boards, including Boards which have issues around employment in rural areas.

In the Scottish Government’s Proactive and Preventative Care Programme, we currently have Getting It Right For Everyone (GIRFE) pathfinders and enhanced community care and treatment centres. Some of these are relevant to addressing community need in areas facing demographic change.

GIRFE is a proposed multi-agency approach of support and services from young adulthood to end-of-life care, aimed to support improved co-ordination and joined up support across principle, enhanced or specialist teams. It will form the future practice model of all health and social care professionals and shape the design and delivery of services, ensuring that people’s needs are met.

GIRFE is about providing a more personalised way to access help and support when it is needed. There are currently eight GIRFE place-based pathfinders and two GIRFE partners representing 10 Health and Social Care Partnerships (HSCPs). They are aligned to five thematic areas and the pathfinder in Orkney is focused on frailty and older people, looking at individual support services and finding a way to improve and support access through a person-centred approach. GIRFE has now completed the national sensemaking process and is moving into idea generation sessions with lived experience and staff from Summer 2023 and planning partner open days to engage HSCPs interested in becoming GIRFE Partners.

Since 2018 we have significantly expanded primary care multi-disciplinary teams, with total staff of 4731 WTE working in services including physiotherapy, pharmacy and phlebotomy at March 2023. We are supporting development of these teams through investment of £190 million in 2023-24 through the Primary Care Improvement Fund. The multi-disciplinary team workforce are supporting GPs and practice teams, ensuring more people get the right care in the right place at the right time. While we have made significant progress, we know that implementation gaps remain. That is why we are introducing an additional ‘phased investment programme’ working with a small number of areas to demonstrate what a model multidisciplinary team can look like in practice.

The programme will strengthen the evidence base on the national context for the implementation of primary care MDTs and inform future long term Scottish Government investment. Working collaboratively with the Scottish Government and the Demonstrator Sites in this programme, Healthcare Improvement Scotland (HIS) will be responsible for supporting the sites in improving services at a system level and to improving understanding of the impact of MDT working. Following an established selection process, the four sites have been chosen to ensure we obtain evidence across a range of settings including urban and rural areas and areas with significant levels of deprivation. Working in parallel to this programme, Healthcare Improvement Scotland's new National Primary Care Improvement Collaborative will provide support for local teams to implement quality improvement (QI) approaches in improving access to primary care, pharmacotherapy and CTAC services.

Social Care: Self-Directed Support and the Independent Living Fund

Self-Directed Support

The Self-Directed Support (SDS) Improvement Plan 2023-2027 was published in June 2023 in collaboration with COSLA, with the objective of closing the gap between what was promised in the 2013 SDS Act and the current reality of people supported by SDS across Scotland.

This Plan builds on the successes of previous efforts to improve SDS availability and relies on the continuing work that local authorities do every day to make flexible, personalised care available to thousands of people across Scotland.

The “golden threads” of the plan are a number of cross-cutting issues which are fundamental to the full delivery of SDS as intended by the SDS Act and other relevant legislation. The golden threads are areas that all activity related to SDS improvement should consider in implementation. One of these golden threads is the needs of rural and island communities.

The Support in the Right Direction (SiRD) programme is funded by the Scottish Government and provides local independent support, advice and advocacy in line with the Scottish Government's vision for Self-Directed Support.

The new phase of the programme, SiRD 2024-2027, includes updated aims and outcomes and will distribute in the region of £3 million per year investing up to £100,000 per local authority area.

The SiRDs programme works with people and carers at every stage of their social care journey, providing independent support that is integral to social care. They ensure a person-centred approach and respond flexibly to individual circumstances to provide direct, end-to-end, independent support for all social care user groups, including those in rural communities.

Independent Living Fund

We will reopen the Independent Living Fund on a phased basis, with an initial £9 million in 2024-25 to enable up to 1,000 of the most disabled people in Scotland who face the greatest barriers to independent living to access the support they need to lead independent lives. The Independent Living Fund supports individuals who have complex disabilities to live independently in Scotland by providing additional funding for recipients to purchase support over and above that provided by Local Authorities, helping them to live where and how they wish, and giving them more choice and control over their lives. ILF recipients can employ relatives as personal assistants, which is of particular value in rural communities where the local workforce may be stretched. Over the coming months, we will continue to work with disabled people's organisations and other stakeholders, including those from rural areas, to co-design the reopened Fund, including developing access principles that will ensure funding is targeted at those who will benefit from it the most.

Rural Primary Care

The Scottish Government is committed to supporting and developing rural primary care.

We are taking forward a range of initiatives to support recruitment and retention of workforce in rural General Practice. These include a Golden Hello scheme to attract new rural GPs, and SCOTGEM, a scheme that provides a graduate-entry medical degree with a rural focus.



The Scottish Government is also supporting an innovative recruitment campaign called Rediscover The Joy (RTJ). RTJ aims to recruit experienced GPs to provide support for rural practices.

The Scottish Government is working to develop a Workforce Recruitment Strategy by the end of 2024 which will support employers to ensure that the Health and Social Care needs of people who live in rural and island communities are met.

We are working closely with NHS Education for Scotland on delivery of the National Centre for Remote and Rural Health and Care, launched in October 2023. The Centre has an initial focus on Primary Care in rural and island communities and will play a key role in maintaining a rural focus on Recruitment and Retention, Education and Training, Research and Evaluation, Leadership and Good Practice.

Actions

Social Care

- We will begin work on local SDS improvement plans with local authorities, in order to improve choice, address barriers to flexible use of SDS and to support local authority leaders to innovate, embed and implement SDS in a way that is beneficial to their population.
- We will distribute in the region of £3 million per year through the Support in the Right Direction programme 2024-2027, investing up to £100,000 per local authority area.
- We will reopen the Independent Living Fund on a phased basis, with an initial £9 million in 2024-25 to enable up to 1,000 of the most disabled people in Scotland who face the greatest barriers to independent living to access the support they need to lead independent lives.

Rural Primary Care

- We will progress the National Centre for Remote and Rural Health and Care, launched in October 2023 to improve primary and community services.

6.6 Childcare

As set out in the Programme for Government, affordable and accessible childcare supports employment and the economy, and secure and sustainable employment helps lift families out of poverty. We recognise that the provision of childcare is a key factor to support more people to enter and sustain training, employment, or to start a business, and that there are specific challenges for rural and island communities. It is also critical for children to be able to access the high quality funded Early Learning and Childcare they are entitled to in Scotland, which extensive evidence has shown will benefit their development and support good outcomes over their lifetime. The following sets out a range of work being taken forward by the Scottish Government to enhance our childcare offering, in the context of communities facing population decline.

Through our childcare **Early Adopter Communities**, we are testing new models of targeted childcare provision as part of our national mission to tackle child poverty. We have committed to work in specific communities in six local authority areas to develop the local infrastructure and services needed to provide childcare for families who need it most. We are funding school age childcare offers in Inverclyde, Glasgow, Dundee and Clackmannanshire and have recently established two new Early Adopter Communities in Fife and Shetland, recognising the specific challenges of setting up and sustaining childcare provision in rural and island communities.

Our Shetland project in particular will help us to better understand the challenges and opportunities of childcare provision in rural and island communities.

Within this project we will work with identified communities in Shetland, where there are currently no school age childcare services, to design and develop childcare provision which take into account

the unique needs and circumstances of the families and communities.

In the first phase of the project, a dedicated local co-ordinator will undertake engagement and scoping activities to understand the needs within each community. This will include individual childcare needs, specific local infrastructure, and the range of services needed to sustain childcare for families – including challenges such as transport and appropriate workforce.

Phase 2 will begin to design and test new models of childcare provision to suit the needs of local families. Services will be designed and delivered using a people-centred, place-based approach to ensure that the needs of families are met, in order to support parents and carers to improve their circumstances and increase their incomes. This will also consider how provision of childcare impacts decisions about the viability of working life for families within these communities.

Understanding childcare needs and solutions at a community level in these areas will allow us to consider the flexibility, affordability and accessibility of childcare and will inform the design of future national policy.

Scottish Rural Childminding Partnership

The Scottish Childminding Association (SCMA) is working in partnership with Highland and Islands Enterprise, South of Scotland Enterprise and Skills Development Scotland to deliver a project aiming to support the recruitment and training of 100 new professional childminders in specific communities within 10 defined areas of Scotland.

The areas the project focusses on are in Argyll and Bute, Dumfries and Galloway, the Highlands, Moray, North Ayrshire (Arran and Cumbrae), Orkney, Scottish Borders, Shetland, Stirling, and Na h-Eileanan Siar.

The Scottish Government has provided funding to support this campaign and the pilot involves the development of new marketing materials targeted at female career changers in specific age groups; the deployment of traditional and digital marketing approaches; provision of intensive support throughout

the registration process; access to professional learning courses; and a £750 start-up grant for those who complete their registration to help with buying equipment and preparing their homes.

The pilot has gathered valuable lessons about effective recruitment to these roles – in particular, the need to allow more time for people to decide on a career change; how best to make information available; and the importance of local knowledge and networks in targeting recruitment activity. As this supported recruitment model has proven to be effective the Scottish Government has provided additional funding to support the next phase of this pilot to trial the model in urban areas. The second phase also includes some further follow-up recruitment across rural areas.

In the 2023 Programme for Government, the Scottish Government committed to scaling up these innovative pilots to grow this essential part of our workforce by 1,000 more. We will also implement a range of measures to address retention issues, ensuring that childminders are supported with their workloads and professional development. These will include trialling a new mentoring scheme and models of funded ‘time off the floor’ to allow childminders to undertake activity such as planning and continuous professional learning. The learning from the retention support activity will be evaluated at the end of the programme to inform future work.

Early learning – targeted offer for 2 year olds

In parallel to the work set out above in the early adopter communities, this year’s Programme for Government set out our commitment that, we will begin work to phase in an expanded national offer for families with two-year-olds, focused on those who will benefit most. This will build on the foundations of the existing 1140 programme, which already makes high quality early learning and childcare available to around a quarter of families with two-year olds on the lowest incomes.

Through existing evidence and research, we know that the needs of one and two year old children are different from those aged three and four. In expanding our offer further we will be guided by what families experiencing poverty tell us they need and what the evidence tells us is best for younger children.

We recognise that childcare is a significant challenge for communities in some rural and island areas and that these communities may face specific challenges in the context of delivering a new offer. We will therefore seek to take a place-based approach to developing the new offer, with a focus on the development and planning phase in 2024-25. As part of this we will use the early adopter communities to understand what families want and need for younger children.

School age childcare

We are committed to building a system of school age childcare, which will be funded for those families on the lowest incomes.

We are investing in communities across Scotland, including island and rural, through our Early Adopter Communities, Access to Childcare Fund projects and a partnership with the Scottish Football Association to understand the role of local football clubs in providing after school and holiday clubs. We are also working with the Scottish Childminding Association to ensure that childminders are key partners in a future system of school age childcare.

Last year, we published a report on Accessing School Age Childcare in Rural and Island Settings. This research reinforces our evidence base and confirms the importance of flexible, affordable, accessible school age childcare to the rural economy. It recognises the specific challenges for rural and island communities and the recommendations within this report are supporting the development of new school-age childcare policies.

Our ongoing work in delivering the National Strategy for Economic Transformation recognises the importance of childcare as we build and sustain



thriving rural businesses and communities, and in addressing child poverty.

Our work across rural Scotland recognises that the combined provision of childcare, employability support and transport is a key factor in supporting more people into training, employment, and business start-ups.

This research complements the testing we are already carrying out through our Access to Childcare Fund, which has been supporting services across Scotland, including in rural areas, to deliver childcare for families on low incomes. This includes work in Angus to test provision of funded school age childcare in a rural area. We will continue to explore models of childcare in different rural contexts.

In developing our future system of school age childcare, we are taking a people-centred design approach. The future system will be co-designed with the people who will use it, and those who will deliver it, including those from rural and island communities.

In October 2023, we published The National Children's Charter for School Age Childcare which was co-designed by A Place in Childhood (APiC), Scottish Government, and children from five schools and one young carers group in Dingwall, Dundee, Alloa, Mid Yell, and Aberdeen. Schools were chosen to represent the different types of areas (urban, rural, and island) and diverse experiences across Scotland. The Charter sets out the children's views about why we need school age childcare, how school age childcare should be run and by whom, where it should take place, and what activities should be on offer. It also sets out six principles which the children agreed should be respected in school age childcare settings. These are kindness, community, fairness, happiness, fun and choice. We will use the Charter to make sure that when we make decisions about school age childcare, we think about what is really important to children.

Work is also currently underway with our People Panel, which has worked across Scotland (including in rural and island areas) to understand parents and carers needs from the future system of school-age childcare.

Case Study:

In the Kinlochbervie area, Highland Council officers carried out a scoping exercise at a local community level, rather than at a Local Authority level to understand the provision, demand (current and potential), challenges, and opportunities for models of delivery across the spectrum of childcare from under 3s to school age, formal to informal childcare, nursery to childminding.

Working with a range of partners and local service providers, discussions were held with representatives from Transport, Health and Social Work, local headteachers and school staff, Highlife Highland, The Forestry Ranger service, Employability, Skills Development Scotland, University of the Highlands, SCMA, CALA, and The Anne Duchess of Westminster Foundation.

Officers met with local parents and families within the community and gathered community views via an online childcare survey. The resultant report highlights some of the key challenges and barriers to service and concludes with costings and projections for possible service provision moving forward.

In Mull, work was undertaken by Mull and Iona Community Trust and Community Enterprise Scotland to investigate the feasibility of using existing physical spaces at Iona, Bunesan, Salen, and Tobermory Pre-5 Units for for 2, 3, and 4 year-olds (additional childcare beyond the 1140 hours statutory provision), and childcare for 0 to 2 year olds. This included an exploration of the required staffing levels, fees required to make such care viable, and whether that charge would be affordable for local families who wish to use it.

The study also explored the same considerations with regard to school age childcare for children age 5-12+. The purpose of this project was to understand whether better utilising the public sector estate could present an opportunity to deliver additional childcare in rural and island settings where there may not be a reasonable expectation of purpose-built facilities being provided.

Actions

- We will continue our work to design funded all-age childcare, that meets families' childcare needs, through our early adopter communities, including those in rural and island locations.
- We will scale up our innovative childminder recruitment pilots to grow this essential part of our workforce by 1,000 more across Scotland.
- We will continue to fund a range of childcare projects in rural and island areas to improve our understanding of how to deliver more affordable and accessible childcare to support families in rural communities.

6.7 Migration, Talent Attraction and Skills

Stakeholders and communities across Scotland have repeatedly highlighted that the current UK immigration system – particularly following the ending of Freedom of Movement – does not meet the needs of rural and island communities. Since the publication of the paper [Migration: Helping Scotland Prosper](#), the Scottish Government has called for a more targeted policy approach to facilitate rural migration to be trialled. This position was supported by the UK Government’s own Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) in 2019, who noted that the current immigration system is ‘not very effective’ in encouraging migration to rural areas and recommended that the UK Government trial a bespoke scheme to address this; a recommendation which was accepted by the then-Home Secretary, Sajid Javid. A commitment to develop migration solutions for rural and island areas was included in the Scottish Government’s 2021 Programme for Government, along within the [2021 Population Strategy](#).

Rural migration Rural Visa Pilot

Throughout 2022, the Scottish Government worked with our independent Expert Advisory Group (EAG) on Migration and Population and key stakeholders across Scotland to **develop a proposal** for a Rural Visa Pilot which is designed to meet the needs of rural and island communities. The proposal was developed by a working group which constituted 12 local authorities and nine key industry representatives, which supported the development of the proposal through Spring/Summer 2022.

The proposal calls for the establishment of a Scottish Rural Community Immigration Pilot (SRCIP). This would represent a new community-driven approach to local migration modelled on successful immigration schemes in Canada, which would allow rural communities to attract migrants in line with their distinct needs. Underpinning the scheme is a ‘Strategic Skills Plan’, which would be developed with input from the local authority, local employers, and other community representatives, which would set out both skills which are in shortage in the local area, and those which have potential for strategic growth. These would be further enhanced by providing a robust and consistent evidence base such as those provided by Skills Development Scotland. Another key component of the scheme is the integration support which would be provided to migrants after their arrival in the area, in order to promote and support long-term settlement in rural and island communities.

Following the proposal’s endorsement in the Scottish Parliament in September 2022 during a parliamentary debate on Scotland’s population, Mairi Gougeon MSP, now Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands, wrote to the Home Secretary about the proposal, requesting that the UK Government work with the Scottish Government and partners to trial the scheme.

A range of stakeholders both in Scotland and the wider UK have publicly expressed their support for the proposal, including the MAC who described the proposal as **“sensible and clear in terms of scale and deliverability”**, and we will continue to urge the UK Government to work with the Scottish Government, local authorities, and communities to deliver a tailored migration scheme which meets the needs of Scotland’s rural and island communities.

Migration Strategy

A range of additional priority work is being taken forward by the Scottish Government in line with our migration strategy objectives, all of which offer discrete opportunities to support the wider

sustainability of communities in Scotland, including those facing population decline.

Asylum seeker right to work pilot

We commissioned the independent Expert Advisory Group (EAG) on Migration and Population and the National Institute for Economic and Social Research to undertake research to underpin the development of a pilot proposal for expanding the scope for asylum seekers resident in Scotland to work. Currently asylum seekers are only allowed to work if their asylum application has been lodged for 12+ months and only in roles on the Shortage Occupation List (SOL). This research explores the impact employment has on individual integration and wellbeing as well as on Scotland's economy and communities. This is in line with the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) recommendation for the UK Government to review its policy on allowing asylum seekers to work more easily. The [report was published](#) in December 2023.

The findings show that allowing asylum seekers the right to work could help them settle into communities better while boosting Scotland's economy and workforce. Enabling asylum seekers to gain employment could improve health and wellbeing and reduce the risk of exploitation. Changes to the current rules could also benefit the Scottish economy, help fill gaps in the workforce and see increased council tax paid directly to local authorities which host asylum seekers. The report will underpin the development of proposals for a Scottish Asylum Right to Work pilot, to be submitted for consideration to the Home Office in 2024.

Displaced Talent Pilot – working with partners in Talent Beyond Boundaries and spreading awareness of the opportunities amongst employers across Scotland

The UK Government is currently running two pilots with Talent Beyond Boundaries that seek to support people displaced in migrant camps to come to the UK through skilled migration routes. There are two pilots in the UK, a displaced talent mobility scheme and a route focusing on the skills needs of the NHS. These complementary pathways

are an essential component to the international community's response to the global displacement crisis. The former First Minister committed £83,000 to Talent Beyond Boundaries to support approximately 50 displaced individuals to make their home in Scotland. This pilot increases the availability of safe and legal routes to the UK for people in need of protection and affords refugees the dignity of being able to work to support their families and contribute to their new communities. We are currently exploring options to expand TBB's capacity in Scotland.

UK Government Engagement

The Scottish Government will continue to engage with the UK Government through official channels such as Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) and Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI) calls for evidence to support their scrutiny of the UK immigration system. Scottish Government Ministers also participate in the four nations Inter-Ministerial Group on Safety, Security and Migration which meets approximately three times a year.

The Worker Support Centre (WSC)

The WSC, which is funded by the Scottish Government, assists all migrants in Scotland who are on the Seasonal Worker visa to access free, impartial & confidential information about their workplace rights, support, and advice. It follows models used around the world to offer temporary migrant workers advice and support. In countries from Canada to Germany, temporary migrant workers are offered a similar service – this support can help prevent workers ending up in situations of human trafficking and is an important step forward for Scotland and contributes to the sustainability of the horticulture sector, which is a key employer in some rural parts of Scotland. The aims of the WSC also align with commitments on fair work, good food, community wealth building, and economic growth, and contribute to Scotland being seen as a global leader in protecting the welfare of migrant agricultural workers. We are exploring the strategic expansion of the Centre to support migrant workers in other high-risk sectors, such as fisheries, which are crucial to the sustainability of rural communities.

Talent Attraction and Migration Service

We have committed to launching a **Talent Attraction and Migration Service** (TAMS) in response to employers and individuals telling us that the UK's immigration system is expensive, complex, and bureaucratic. We also know the importance of attracting and retaining talent to our economy and our communities. TAMS will:



1 Attract people to Scotland.

Help employers to effectively and efficiently use the immigration system to help meet their skills and labour needs.



3 Provide information and advice to people moving to Scotland to help them successfully settle into their communities.

Be delivered through a single online digital platform.



TAMS will aim to deliver a range of benefits to Scotland, including: more people moving to Scotland; people staying longer once they arrive here; in time, more people choosing to settle permanently here; and increased tax revenue.

TAMS will enable employers to use the immigration system effectively and efficiently to help meet their skills and labour needs, and people will be able to access good quality information and advice to help them move to Scotland and settle into their communities.

We are keen to harness the strength of TAMS in support of our rural and island communities, where specific current and future skills needs may differ from other parts of Scotland. For example, delivering a just transition to net zero will require a broad range of new or expanded skills within the workforce. To enable this, and in line with wider Skills objectives, set out below, we will aim to provide support to employers and key local stakeholders to utilise TAMS in support of delivering local strategic objectives.

Skills

The Scottish Government is continuing to work with business organisations and industry representatives to better understand the challenges employers face in recruiting and retaining workers with the skills they need and to support them take action to address labour and skills shortages.

As part of this, the Scottish Government has committed through the National Strategy for Economic Transformation (NSET) to implement a Talent Attraction programme to attract key skills and talent from the rest of the UK (rUK). Currently around 50% of inward migration to Scotland comes from rUK.

An Industry Advisory Group (IAG) for rUK Talent Attraction has been formed to share talent attraction expertise, to identify and develop effective approaches to attracting talent from rUK. This Industry Advisory Group has been exploring how best to shape a talent attraction programme which can expand Scotland's talent pool at all levels, to give employers the skills pipeline needed to take advantage of opportunities, and ultimately benefit our economy. It is initially focusing on priority growth sectors, which will bring benefits to Scotland's regions and wider economy.

Outputs from the work of the IAG to date include a collaboration with Brand Scotland to develop a recruitment toolkit for employers to use to support the attraction of talent to their sector, and a programme of activity aimed at attracting talent into the Space, Aerospace, and Allied Sectors (including AI, Photonics, and Advanced Manufacture). Activity includes a mentoring programme, a careers event, and targeted messaging to support talent attraction.



Attracting and retaining students

According to analysis done by London Economics for the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), the economic benefit arising from international students is clear, with the contribution of the 2018/19 cohort of international students in Scotland to the UK economy estimated to be £4.21 billion.

In the face of increasing competition from other countries for the best global talent, we are clear that the UK's immigration system must be improved to allow Scotland to retain students after graduation and allow them to join the workforce or to set up their own businesses, through an inclusive migration system which meets Scotland's future needs.

The Scottish Government continues to support the Skills Recognition Scotland project, a process which has been created to support individuals who have migrated to Scotland with valuable skills, experience, and qualifications obtained outside the UK, by benchmarking their skills against the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF), and support employers to recruit talent and help address current or emerging skills shortage.

Rural skills

The Scottish Government is taking action to support the skills needs of our rural communities and businesses to attract people to, and retain people in, rural areas and ensure that they have the necessary skills to take advantage of employment opportunities and contribute to population retention.

For example, research on the Highlands and Islands that found some young people, who may want to stay in the region, leave so they can study, and it can be hard to return (SAPRS, 2019). Therefore delivery of targeted, relevant local learning opportunities can support wider ambitions to retain population within an area.

The Scottish Government and its partners, through the national programmes on skills they develop and deliver, are committed to ensuring that people in rural Scotland have the skills they need at every stage of life to have rewarding careers and meet the demands of an ever-changing economy and society.

The independent **Commission to Review Land-Based Learning** submitted their **report** to Scottish Ministers in January 2023. The Scottish Government has committed to producing a response to the 22 recommendations in the land-based learning review, with the recommendations that Ministers accept informing the Actions to attract and improve learning pathways to equip more people with the skills and knowledge needed to work in Scotland's land-based and aquaculture sectors. This is expected to be published in early 2024.

The **Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland** (SAPRS) sets out our strategic, partnership approach to support the skills needs of the rural economy and has delivered considerable progress across all five priority areas of the Plan. It has resulted in better alignment of skills delivery to skills needs in the rural economy. It was a 2-year plan that reached maturity in 2021 and was extended to 2023 to allow its future direction to be relevant to current and future needs. Options for the next steps to support skills in rural Scotland are being prepared. This future direction for rural skills needs to take account of the broader skills landscape and the likely changes that will come forward from recent activity, notably the Skills Delivery Landscape Review, work underway to develop a Rural Delivery Plan, the Scottish Government response to the Land-based Learning Review, and the update of the Climate Emergency Skills Action Plan (CESAP). All these, and other policies and agendas, will encompass rural skills planning and we must now consider how we take this forward as effectively as possible.

At a local level, Scottish Government funding has supported organisations such as **Inspiralba** to drive economic growth and deliver social and environmental benefits for communities across Scotland through, amongst other services, employability and learning pathways, with a focus on rural social enterprise. Working with partners from across the third sector, Inspiralba encourage individuals with a range of barriers to work, to access opportunities and progress to achieve their potential through access and progression routes. These different routeways can ensure access and inclusion for young people who may face barriers due to distance and rurality, or because traditional academic routeways have not aligned with their

personal circumstances. This also ensures access and progression routes that can attract and retain young people in our rural communities, where depopulation and demographic shift are significant issues. In-work training also helps to build capacity in the rural social economy with the increased skills and confidence gained through accredited learning increasing knowledge and skills within businesses which are often micro in size but diverse and scaling deep in their local economy.

Case Study: Island Skills & Repopulation Project

The Island Skills and Repopulation Project was delivered in partnership with the Convention of the Highlands and Islands (CoHI) Population Working Group, which includes HIE, SDS, and CnES.

The pilot responds to a 2020 CoHI evidence paper about communities suffering acute population challenges and will test the impact of a targeted, place-based approach, which aligns with and responds to local skills and employment needs. The ambition is to support island-level population stability and sustainability and develop a better understanding of the potential to encourage repopulation trends in the longer term.

Following the delivery of the **Island Skills and Repopulation Pilot**, the Scottish Government is working with partners to commission an analysis of the three pilot areas in Argyll and Bute, Arran and Cumbrae, and Uist, to better understand the impact of developing a more bespoke, place-based approach to matching locally identified need with relevant skills development. The learning from this will help to inform future skills delivery across rural and island areas. Furthermore, through the Rural and Islands Housing Action Plan, work will be taken forward to explore how learning can be applied from Island Skills and Repopulation projects delivered in Argyll and Bute, North Ayrshire, and the Western Isles to address skills and capacity issues in construction supply chains.

Actions

Skills

- We will publish evaluation of the Island Skills and Repopulation Pilot, including recommendations for next steps.
- We will publish our response to the report of the **independent Commission to Review Land-Based Learning** in early 2024.

Talent Attraction and Migration Service

- We will launch the Talent Attraction and Migration Service.
- We will scope options around supporting local attraction programmes delivered by local authorities through the TAMS digital platform, to signpost people interested in moving to specific parts of Scotland to relevant local information.
- We will support local authorities and employers (e.g. through chambers of commerce and Regional Economic Partnerships) to harness TAMS in support of their local objectives.
- We will enable local authorities to use Brand Scotland assets where they may support local talent attraction initiatives, building on an existing offer made by the Scottish Government in Spring 2023. The Scottish Government will work with COSLA and local authorities to identify how it can best support these initiatives in line with local priorities.

Migration

- We will continue to advocate for a Rural Visa Pilot scheme.
- We will commission further research on achieving an effective worker voice for migrant workers in agriculture.

6.8 Community Wealth Building

The Community Wealth Building (CWB) approach to economic development is a key tool to transform our local and regional economies, supporting the ownership of local assets – whether those are business, land or property – to provide communities with a greater stake in the economy and support economic resilience.

Work taken forward by the Scottish Government in this space, so far, has focussed on the economic development role of local authorities and Community Planning Partnerships to spend in their local communities through increased local procurement, local recruitment, training, and greater use of SME and inclusive business models to service demand.

Community Wealth Building encourages actions that support local economies to be resilient and thrive by developing local supply chains, stimulating procurement opportunities, supporting the flows of finance, offering businesses the opportunity to grow, and ensuring fair employment opportunities are available for people. The CWB economic development model promotes actions to support community ownership of assets and employee ownership of businesses, helping to keep wealth local.

These Community Wealth Building actions and the wider economic transformation it offers can support areas to retain and attract people to their localities, and in doing so provides a framework for harnessing local economic opportunities to address a range of challenges linked to addressing depopulation, regardless of whether affected communities are found in rural and island or urban areas.

Working with community anchor organisations, DTAS support the implementation of Community Wealth Building principles through local delivery.

Their Community Ownership Support Service (COSS) provides support to communities throughout Scotland to take ownership, management or lease of assets including land and buildings that are currently in public and private ownership. This adviser-led service helps communities navigate the process with access to advice, training and expert help. COSS also supports public bodies to develop appropriate processes to support the sustainable transfer of assets to communities. The DTAS Community Shares Scotland (CSS)/Local Democratic Finance (LDF) teams provide advice and support to communities across Scotland to

raise finance through community shares, bonds, crowdfunding and other alternative finance models and a way for people to invest in what matters to them. This support includes guidance on setting up the necessary legal structures, tailored support to launch community share offers, financial planning, micro grant access and business plan review.

Action

We will introduce legislation on Community Wealth Building during this Parliamentary term.

6.9 Blue Economy

The Blue Economy Vision was published in March 2022 and sets out the need for transformational change to create fairer, more prosperous, nature-positive marine sectors and communities. It sets out our long-term ambition for Scotland’s Blue Economy to 2045 by aiming to “create a shared stewardship of our marine environment supporting ecosystem health, improved livelihoods, economic prosperity, social inclusion and wellbeing”. At its core, the vision recognises that economic prosperity and wellbeing are embedded within nature, and in order to harness blue opportunities, we must transform our economy and society to thrive within the planet’s sustainable limits.

Under this Vision for 2045, we defined six interconnected outcomes to achieve collective social, environmental, and economic goals for our seas, coasts, and interlinked freshwater habitats. By setting out these six outcomes to 2045, this will provide a context for the development and delivery of future and existing strategies and plans and

inform areas of development. Our outcomes will help provide focus on areas for investment and help establish shared goals with stakeholders in the public, private and third sectors.

A successful Blue Economy approach will mean pursuing all six outcomes in tandem, and ultimately, a transition away from conventional thinking that stipulates we must always trade off economic production against environmental protection, to instead recognising that we can achieve both.

Actions

- We will work to build a collective ownership of our Blue Economy and empower key actors to support delivery and mobilise resources.
- We will support leadership to drive cultural transformation to mainstream a Blue Economy approach across Government, and wider.
- We will award up to £14 million of grant funding through the Marine Fund Scotland to support projects to deliver improved social, environmental, and economic outcomes in line with our Blue Economy Vision.

6.10 Workforce dispersal

The 2021 Population Strategy acknowledges the role of workforce dispersal in addressing population challenges, and commits to undertaking ‘a strategic consideration of [our] workforce footprint and consider the opportunities of a more location neutral workforce, with a specific action to ‘explore opportunities to distribute our workforce across the country’.

The Scottish Government has policy functions concentrated in Edinburgh and Glasgow, but delivery functions and public bodies have a much wider geographical footprint, thus stimulating local economies and communities across Scotland. The Scottish Government will continue to consider opportunities to optimise the benefits of locating public bodies across Scotland, whilst at the same time ensuring best value for the public finances and optimum service delivery. Our estate is under review to allow us to ensure we have the right buildings we need in the right locations, meeting

our changing needs and net zero ambitions, while also maximising opportunities for sharing across public sector estate.

We are also committed to flexible hybrid working for our workforce, enabling staff to work from a range of locations and thereby facilitating our workforce to be much more geographically spread across the country.

Actions

- We will consider how to best utilise our estate to support the ambitions set out within the Population Strategy, while harnessing the opportunities that hybrid working presents to distribute our workforce.
- We will develop an Estate Strategy allowing us to set out a route map to achieve net zero and ensure buildings are right sized and in the right location, while maximising public sector sharing opportunities.

Gourock, Inverclyde



6.11 Methods of Land Ownership

Land is a vital resource that underpins the wealth, and the well-being, of our nation as a whole. The use and ownership of Scotland's land is one of the central issues for the future of our environment, our society and our economy. As outlined in the First Minister's Policy Prospectus, the Scottish Government is committed to introducing Land Reform legislation. It is proposed that the Bill should include three key measures that will apply to large-scale landholdings:

While the **2022 consultation on the proposals** did not refer directly to addressing depopulation, **some of the responses noted** that there were possible socioeconomic benefits which might stem from the Bill's proposals, such as through "empowerment, innovation and community ownership". The body of research from the Scottish Land Commission, on which the Land Reform Bill proposals are based, note potential benefits to maintaining rural populations through ensuring better transparency of information, community engagement, and through the role of the public interest test on sales or transfers. Impact assessments, including Equalities Impact Assessments (EQIAs) and Island Communities Impact Assessments are being developed to support the Bill and will consider potential population and demographic impacts of the Bill proposals.

1

The strengthening of obligations on owners to comply with the Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement (LRRS);

2

The introduction of compulsory land management plans;

3

New measures to regulate the market in large-scale landholdings, including the introduction of a Public Interest Test, and requirements for community bodies to receive prior notification of impending sales or transfers.

Community Owned Land

Published on 3 October 2023, the latest Community Ownership in Scotland Annual Report highlights that Remote rural areas (as defined by the Urban Rural Classification Index) contain 60% of community owned assets (456) and 98% of community owned land. A further 143 assets (19%) are in accessible rural areas, comprising just over 1% of the land area. While 21% of assets (155) are located in urban areas, these assets only comprise less than 0.5% of the area in community ownership.

The vast majority of community owned land is in Highland (24%) and Na h-Eileanan Siar (72%). All four of the largest community owned assets (over 20,000 hectares) are in Na h-Eileanan Siar.

Many communities pursue ownership of land both to increase local decision-making power in relation to the use of land and assets, but also to enable the delivery of locally identified priorities such as developing affordable housing. Community Land Scotland have provided **multiple case studies** of their members' experience with delivering housing in their communities.

Rural Estates

In 2023, **Scottish Land & Estates** (SLE) published a report into the **Contribution of Rural Estates to Scotland's Wellbeing Economy**. The report, undertaken by **BiGGAR Economics**, concluded that Scotland's 1,125 rural estates (covering a combined area of approximately 4.1 million hectares, around 57% of Scotland's rural land) have a significant impact on seven of Scotland's National Outcomes and add substantial value to economic, human, social and (especially) natural capital stocks.

The report indicates that rural estates support rural population in a number of ways, including through the provision of homes (existing and new build affordable properties). Using previous SLE surveys and Scottish Government data, the report suggests that rural estates provide homes for nearly 13,000 households across Scotland. The report also includes a number of case studies highlighting how estate owned land has enabled the delivery of affordable homes such as in **Rothiemurchus**.

Action

As set out in the Programme for Government 2023 to 2024, we will introduce a Land Reform Bill to the Scottish Parliament.

Research

Throughout the course of summer 2023, the Scottish Government undertook preliminary research to explore the impacts of different types and scale of land use and ownership on depopulation outcomes in rural areas, particularly with regards to people of working age and young people.

Concentrated land ownership leads to monopoly effects over land use, which can be to the detriment of economic opportunities for local communities. Communities often, but not exclusively, have negative perceptions of large and concentrated landownership. Importantly, these issues are not restricted to private landowners.

Community buyouts are linked to enhanced community confidence and empowerment. Case study research demonstrates that, post-buyout, a number of communities have been able to improve their socioeconomic and demographic wellbeing, such as supporting new housing and enterprises. Within rural areas of Scotland, the prevalence of community ownership represents a real success story despite a range of challenges and limitations, such as volunteer resources and the high prices of rural land. The Scottish Government greatly welcomes these positive outcomes, be those economic, social, demographic, or in relation to housing and other local infrastructure, and recognises their ability to sustain local communities and enable population retention over the longer term. In addition, these outcomes can positively impact on informing people's desire to move to a location.

Crofts can provide the foundations of environmentally and demographically sustainable communities, supported by their pluri-active nature, but may be vulnerable to the withdrawal of state support for agriculture. Furthermore, while the crofting right to buy has provided valuable security of tenure for crofters, it may also have exposed crofting communities to the effects of a competitive rural land market.

Scotland's rural land market is experiencing strong demand, and this is partly driven by natural capital buyers. This may introduce more commercial organisations to landownership in Scotland. As part of the journey to net zero there is also potential for largescale land use change in Scotland, for the purposes of carbon sequestration

or nature restoration. These trends may impact on communities' relationships with landowners and may lead to rural job creation or job loss. This is an emerging area of research, with research commissioned by the Scottish Government due to be published later this year.

The research put forward the following recommendations which Scottish Government will consider next steps around:



Commission comparative research of the population outcomes of different types of land ownership.



Explore potential to combine recent 2022 Census and Land Register of Scotland data.



Collate evidence of best practice of community empowerment through land ownership and land use, outwith community buy-outs.



Commission research examining land-related population issues with a focus on working-age families.



Consider further research into the relationship between crofting and depopulation.



Engage with forthcoming research into the socio-economic impacts of land use change and green land investment, when available.

6.12 Crofting

Crofting exists in some areas of Scotland with the lowest population density. Our [National Development Plan for Crofting](#) recognises that, with over 750,000 hectares of land in crofting tenure in Scotland, almost 22,000 crofts and approximately 33,000 people living in crofting households, crofting plays a vital role in maintaining the population in our rural and island areas, including the retention of young people and families. Crofts provide a home base from which all manner of economic activities may take place, including agriculture, tourism, and maintaining the natural environment.

Unlike other forms of land tenure, crofters are subject to a number of statutory duties.⁷ Failure to comply with these duties can result in a crofter losing their croft. In return for compliance with these legislative duties, the Scottish Government supports crofting through legislation, such as security of tenure, and through schemes such as the Crofting Agricultural Grant Scheme (CAGS) and the Croft House Grant (CHG).

The CAGS and the CHG play a key role in supporting rural and island croft businesses and communities and indirectly support population retention. The CAGS is designed to aid and develop agricultural production on crofting businesses, thereby sustaining the economic basis of crofting. The CHG provides support to improve and maintain the standards of crofter housing, with the aim of attracting and retaining people within our island communities, allowing them to achieve the full potential of their crofts while generating economic activity.

Absenteeism

The [National Development Plan for Crofting](#) highlights the core elements necessary to ensure that crofting remains at the heart of rural and island communities. The Plan recognises the importance of full occupancy and use of crofts and the significant contribution this would make to securing a prosperous future for crofting.

The Crofting Commission's Residency and Land Use Team work to ensure that both tenanted and owner-occupied crofts are occupied and worked. Resources within this team have been increased in recent years, which has enabled the work carried out to be extended.

7. Both tenant and owner occupier crofters have a duty: (i) to be ordinarily resident on, or within 32 kilometres of, the croft (ii) to cultivate and maintain the croft, and (iii) not to misuse and neglect the croft – [Crofters Duties | Crofting Commission \(scotland.gov.uk\)](#)



South Uist

In writing to tenant crofters and owner-occupier crofters who have either indicated on their Crofting Census Return that they are in breach of one or more of their statutory duties, or who have not returned their census but it is clear that they are in breach of their residency duty, available options are provided to the crofter for resolving the breach at their own hands. Should they fail to do so, the Commission will then take enforcement action in relation to the breach.

In addition to the above, the Crofting Commission will soon expand the current scope of the Residency and Land Use Team to include **owner-occupiers of vacant crofts**, and will subsequently take action against those who are not resident on their croft and/or not cultivating it.⁸

Tackling absenteeism in crofting will make more crofts available for potential new entrants, thereby supporting both population retention and the local economy of the area.

The Crofting Commission has also created a Crofting Development Team and has employed officers based in the Western Isles who will continue to engage with crofting communities and grazings committees to encourage active croft use and identify opportunities for new entrants.

8. Whilst owner-occupiers of vacant crofts do not have statutory duties, the Commission in 2021 adopted a policy that all vacant crofts should be occupied and cultivated, or put to another purposeful use. Although the duties enforcement provisions set out at section 26A to section 26K of the Crofters (Scotland) Act 1993 [“the 1993 Act”] do not apply to owner-occupiers of vacant crofts, the Commission do have the statutory authority under section 23(5) of the 1993 Act to give notice requiring both landlords and owner-occupiers of vacant crofts to submit proposals for letting the croft whether as a separate croft or as an enlargement of another croft.

Following adoption of the above policy the Commission allocated additional resources to its Residency and Land Use Team, which has allowed them to develop processes that will enable them to deal with cases where reports have been received regarding owner-occupiers of vacant crofts that are not resident on and/or not working their crofts.

Case Study: Croft Succession pilot

Crofts are in great demand, and so crofts which are not being used are a lost opportunity. The longer that a croft is not being worked, the more the land, the fencing, buildings, and drainage will deteriorate. This can make it more difficult and expensive for the next crofter to bring the croft back into use.

During the 2021 Islands Bond consultation, access to crofts was highlighted as an issue directly affecting population retention in the crofting counties. In October 2023, the Crofting Commission launched a pilot project to encourage crofters to consider the succession of their croft, particularly living succession.

The project aims to evidence the barriers to the transfer of crofts during a crofter's lifetime whilst exploring how to encourage the transfer of them. In doing so, this will hopefully help direct crofts to people who are or would become ordinarily resident and actively utilise the croft land, including, where applicable, as participants in the management of common grazings.

As a precursor to this project, the Crofting Commission ran a crofting activity survey alongside their annual census for 2023 in which they asked crofters if they have a formal succession plan in place for their croft. Of 1,828 responses received, 44% said they did have a plan in place and 56% said they did not. This provides a further strong evidence base for this project. The survey will be undertaken again in three years.

Actions

- We will reform the law, subject to agreement by the Scottish Parliament, to support the future of crofting.
- The Crofting Commission will further expand its Residency and Land Use Team, and its remit, enabling it to increase its work in addressing absenteeism and bringing crofts back into active use, which will create opportunities for new entrants.
- The Crofting Commission launched a croft succession pilot in Uist & Barra and North-West Sutherland in Autumn/Winter 2023/24. The findings from the succession pilot will enable the Commission to determine a targeted approach to successfully meet the actions in the National Development Plan for Crofting. The Commission will undertake a repeat of the crofting activity survey in 2025, to determine if the number of crofters with a formal succession plan in place has increased.
- We will develop and consult on proposals to reform crofting law, create new opportunities for new entrants, encourage the active management and use of crofts and common grazings, and support rural population retention through action on non-residency.

6.13 Just Transition

Just Transition is about ensuring that the rapid transformation needed to end our contribution to climate change and create a climate-resilient society happens in a way that involves and supports our communities. We have committed to key just transition outcomes that include supporting thriving and sustainable communities and places throughout Scotland. Addressing outcomes such as depopulation is, therefore, an important component in a whole-society just transition.

The National Just Transition Planning Framework, published in 2021, outlines our approach to just transition planning. This underlines that our work in tackling the climate emergency must not exacerbate existing inequalities and must actively seek to improve them. We have committed to delivering Just Transition Plans for sectors, sites and regions throughout Scotland.

Earlier this year, a public consultation was held on the draft Energy Strategy and Just Transition Plan and work is currently underway on sectoral plans for Built Environment and Construction, Land Use and Agriculture and Transport. These plans will provide further greater certainty for businesses and communities on the journey to net zero.

Further ahead we will be developing our approach to regional Just Transition Plans. These will aim to outline challenges and opportunities faced by regions and identify appropriate action to both mitigate and realise these. All our plans are underpinned by a commitment to co-design, ensuring that those who stand to be most impacted by the transition, including communities, businesses and workers are engaged throughout the process.

The independent Just Transition Commission will continue to advise and scrutinise our ongoing work. This will ensure we gather and listen to the best available evidence throughout.

Actions

- We will develop our approach to regional Just Transition Plans which will engage communities, business and workers to ensure that we support the sustainability of communities including those affected by population decline.
- We will embed the work of the independent Just Transition Commission as we gather and listen to the best available evidence when designing our approach.

6.14 Gaelic

The Scottish Government supports a number of Gaelic projects and initiatives in areas of low population and recognises that a lack of support for the language in these areas is linked to infrastructural and economic challenges. For this reason, the Scottish Government is supporting a range of Gaelic initiatives which contribute to local economies and regeneration, and recognises that Gaelic activity adds value to many aspects of Scottish public life. In addition, we recognise there is a role for bodies and authorities that have statutory functions relating to transport, housing, employment, connectivity, and culture to demonstrate what steps they are taking to support Gaelic as part of the delivery of their functions.

The Scottish Government welcomes the independent report on economic and social opportunities for Gaelic prepared by the Short Life Working Group, established by Kate Forbes MSP and chaired by Arthur Cormack. The report contained a number of recommendations which have been allocated to different SG business areas to consider.

The Scottish Government has also introduced a Scottish Languages Bill to the Scottish Parliament. This includes a range of provisions which will aim to support Gaelic-speaking areas of often low population density.



Isle of Mull

Actions

- We will co-ordinate a response to the independent report on Economic and Social Opportunities for Gaelic, for the members of the Short Life Working Group which produced the report.
- We will, through our independent Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population, scope future research about the ways in which Gaelic language and culture and its close association with land, places of learning and socio-economic opportunities can help towards retention of young people.

07 Annex A – List of actions

Page	Action	Owner
10	We will harness sub-local authority data from the 2022 Scottish Census, when it becomes available in 2024, to review this plan to further inform the development and delivery of targeted, community-level interventions.	Scottish Government
12	As required by the Act, the National Islands Plan will be fully reviewed in 2023-2024 to make sure it is fit for purpose. This will help us to ensure our islands policy and support continues to prioritise the actions which will best improve outcomes for communities. If the analysis of the review determines it appropriate, the Scottish Government will develop a revised National Islands Plan in 2024-2025 that will help to ensure that we continue to deliver our ambitions and to realise our vision for thriving, sustainable and successful island communities.	Scottish Government
17	With only minor exceptions when it provides a statistical, and very specific role, such as the Urban-Rural Classification Index , the Scottish Government will no longer refer to rural and island communities as “remote”.	Scottish Government
24	We will harness the expertise of the Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population to develop evaluation criteria grounded in the reality of the operating environment of the actions and interventions newly set out within this Action Plan.	Scottish Government
24	We will work with partners and communities to collectively set agreed parameters for evaluation, reflecting that the Scottish Government’s idea of a successful intervention may differ from the priorities identified by a community or local delivery partners.	Scottish Government
24	We will establish an Addressing Depopulation Delivery Group to monitor and report on the delivery of the actions outlined within this Action Plan. We will invite the broad range of partners involved in delivery to participate, including: the Scottish Government, COSLA, local authorities involved in the delivery of Community Settlement Officer roles, enterprise agencies, and community interest representatives.	Scottish Government
24	We will work with partners to design a Population Impact Assessment , to be used by decision-makers across the public sector to meaningfully assess the impact of new investment or interventions, including considering the direct impact (i.e. of an intervention in the place where it is being delivered), but also indirect impacts (whether interventions would be better delivered elsewhere in line with overarching population strategic aims).	Scottish Government
24	We will evaluate the outputs and outcomes of this Action Plan, and engage the Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population, and wider stakeholders, to independently consider and advise on potential next steps to further support effective evaluation of this work.	Scottish Government

Page	Action	Owner
27	We will build on existing agreements with the academic community in Aragón in pursuit of shared objectives in addressing demographic challenges. Harnessing the feedback from stakeholders and building on learning from the evidence base, we will proactively implement a flexible, community-driven approach to the design and delivery of policy interventions.	Scottish Government
27	We will, with Scottish partners, harness opportunities and maintain linkages with the NSPA to inform domestic policy making.	Scottish Government
29	We will continue to support locally-led repopulation initiatives in areas like Argyll and Bute, Na h-Eileanan Siar, the Highlands, and North Ayrshire, and work with local and regional partners through the Convention of the Highlands and Islands. Furthermore, we will look to support local initiatives in the South of Scotland and work with the Convention of the South of Scotland to ensure success for this area.	Scottish Government
29	We will work with Youth Scotland and the Young Islanders Network to meet the Network's commitment to consider “how to best address population decline through co-developing ideas and actions to support and encourage young people to remain on, move to or return to the islands” . We will also explore opportunities to engage with young people in other areas affected by population decline, to better understand why young people are leaving certain communities for elsewhere.	Scottish Government
34	We will work with COSLA to design and deliver solutions, ensuring the strengths of both local and national government are used to best effect to make the biggest possible positive difference to areas facing challenges around population.	Scottish Government COSLA
34	We will jointly fund the continuation of existing Community Settlement Officer roles for the 2023/24 financial year, in partnership with local authorities. Highlands and Islands Enterprise will continue to support delivery through existing programmes in operation within Community Settlement Officer geographies.	Scottish Government Local Authorities
34	We will partner with Inverclyde Council to deliver a Community Settlement Officer focused on addressing depopulation in Inverclyde.	Scottish Government
34	We will provide funding for Dumfries & Galloway Council to undertake research with regards to local population outcomes.	Scottish Government
34	We will also establish an Addressing Depopulation Fund , to support local authorities to implement varied pathfinder measures to address depopulation challenges. In keeping with the ambitions within this Action Plan and the Verity House Agreement, we will be flexible in enabling local government to use the funding to address local need.	Scottish Government
40	We will take forward the Regional Economic Policy review recommendation to develop a more nuanced allocation methodology for regional funding.	Scottish Government

Page	Action	Owner
40	We will, when developing new regional economic strategies, engage with and support Regional Economic Partnerships which are facing challenges around population decline, to note relevant work ongoing across the regions that would contribute to national outcomes and support population attraction and retention.	Scottish Government
40	We will support regional empowerment and growth by acting on the recommendations of the Regional Economic Policy Review, and working with Local Government and other partners to develop Scotland's network of Regional Economic Partnerships, supporting our rural and island businesses, including tourism.	Scottish Government
40	We will work with community partners in developing a Rural Movement that will ensure all voices are heard and able to effect change.	Scottish Government
42	We will deliver Growth Deals across their agreed delivery period, and at an appropriate point evaluate the projects delivered as part of the Deal.	Scottish Government
42	We will continue working with UK Government and partners to progress to Full Growth Deal signing for Argyll and Bute.	Scottish Government
42	We will seek to open Inverness Castle to the public by Financial Year 2025/26, as part of the Inverness and Highland City Region Deal.	Scottish Government
42	We will continue to construct new homes as part of the Deal's Affordable Housing Project, to attract and retain economically active people to live and work in the Highlands.	Scottish Government
43	We will continue to work closely with the two selected Green Freeports in Scotland (Forth and Inverness and Cromarty Firth), to ensure that they deliver maximum positive impact as soon as possible.	Scottish Government
43	We will continue to explore opportunities to support local enterprise in order to strengthen the evidence base for the relationship between diverse, healthy local economies and sustainable populations.	Scottish Government
45	We will engage further with COSLA, the CPIB, the Community Planning Network to agree collective next steps around community planning.	Scottish Government
45	We will support local government and community planning, including through Scottish Government Place Directors, aligned to the ambitions set out in the Verity House Agreement, including supporting areas which are facing issues relating to population.	Scottish Government
47	We will work to increase rural youth participation in community councils, to empower young people to inform improvements to services in their area, making rural communities more attractive places to live and work.	Scottish Government
47	We will support Social Media/Content Creation Training for local community council members to encourage greater engagement and a stronger voice in improving local services. This will include the provision of 10 websites for rurall- and islands-based community councils, that meet accessibility legislation and will be of particular benefit to local people who have additional needs because of disability.	Scottish Government

Page	Action	Owner
47	We will develop specific rural and islands website content to improve access to opportunities for education, training, or employment.	Scottish Government
48	We will build on engagement with international stakeholders on remote working and hub networks, such as the Government of Ireland's Connected Hubs Programme, to identify potential benefits of a more strategic approach to rural hub development, and consider their application in Scotland.	Scottish Government
48	We will develop a "Route Map" for sharing best practice for community-driven partnership working across Scotland.	Scottish Government
51	We will deliver 110,000 affordable homes of which at least 70% will be for social rent and 10% in rural and island areas, supported by our Rural and Island Housing Action Plan, to help attract and retain people to communities.	Scottish Government
51	We will make available up to £25 million from our Affordable Housing Supply Programme budget over the period 2023-2028, for the demand-led Rural Affordable Housing for Key Workers Fund, to enable local authorities and registered social landlords to purchase properties in rural and island areas which can be rented directly or leased to employers to provide affordable homes for key workers.	Scottish Government
51	We will work with local authorities, enterprise agencies and business representatives including private developers to improve understanding of housing requirements arising from key sectors. We will seek to enable more housing provision through sharing of good practice and collaboration between employers and housing providers.	Scottish Government
51	We will work with the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership, local authorities and owners to bring more empty homes in rural and island areas back into use, promoting available funding options, sharing best practice and identify opportunities for stronger collaboration.	Scottish Government
51	We will invest £566 million in 2024-25 through our Affordable Housing Supply Programme as we continue to support the delivery of affordable homes to meet housing needs across Scotland.	Scottish Government
52	We will continue to provide support of up to £30 million for the continuation of the demand-led Rural and Island Housing Fund , supporting communities, landowners and other eligible organisations in the provision of affordable housing, through early feasibility funding as well as grant support. This is in addition to housing delivery by local authorities and Registered Social Landlords through the mainstream Affordable Housing Supply Programme.	Scottish Government
52	We will develop guidance to support communities, local authorities and others to undertake local housing assessments based on best practice and robust methodology.	Scottish Government
57	We will consider how to take forward the STPR2 recommendations as part of the STPR2 Delivery Plan .	Scottish Government

Page	Action	Owner
57	We will publish the Fair Fares Review which will recommend a package of measures which can be considered for implementation from 2024-25 and onwards. These will provide opportunities to address the wider issues for the cost and availability of public transport services across all modes of public transport.	Scottish Government
57	We will publish the report on Population and Household Location research commissioned by the Scottish Government, completed in August 2023. This will be followed by further research to better understand where digital and transport connectivity improvements are needed, by whom and for what purpose, to inform potential future decision-making concerning digital connectivity as a substitute for physical transport connectivity.	Scottish Government
57	We will utilise the evaluation of the five MIF projects as the evidence base for future policy and investment in MaaS in Scotland.	Scottish Government
57	We will progress the dualling of the A9 between Perth and Inverness in line with the delivery plan announced on 20 December 2023, including taking forward the procurement of the Tomatin to Moy project.	Scottish Government
57	We will make improvements to the A96, including dualling Inverness to Nairn and the Nairn bypass, and publish the review of the A96 Dualling Programme.	Scottish Government
57	We will continue to develop both a long term solution and medium term improvements to the landslip risks at the A83 Rest and Be Thankful, and to press the UK Government to fulfil its commitments to contribute to funding improvements to the A75.	Scottish Government
57	We will invest in ferry services to support our island communities, including continuing the construction of six major vessels, port improvements at Lochmaddy and Uig, port enabling works on the Islay routes, and consulting on and completing the Long Term Plan for Vessels and Ports to support our Islands Connectivity Plan.	Scottish Government
59	R100 contract build is actively delivering at pace across Scotland. Over 43,000 premises have been connected as a result of the R100 contracts (as at 30 November 2023) with a further 3,639 connections delivered through the Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme (as at 01 December 2023).	Scottish Government
59	An R100 SBVS funded project to connect almost all properties on Papa Westray to full fibre is using innovative fibre in water pipes technology as part of the build solution.	Scottish Government
59	Currently 54 masts in the Scottish 4G Infill programme are live and providing 4G connectivity at rural sites, with the final mast expected to be activated this year.	Scottish Government
59	We will work with areas covered by existing Community Settlement Officers to consider local connectivity options and how we can support communities to access these.	Scottish Government

Page	Action	Owner
59	We will continue to invest over £600 million in the broadband networks of the future, through the Reaching 100% (R100) broadband programme.	Scottish Government
59	We will utilise HIE's review of digital connectivity and further data sharing among Scottish, Welsh and UK Governments to inform further discussions on what connectivity options exist, and how relevant stakeholders can work together to support communities to access these.	Scottish Government Other
64	We will begin work on local SDS improvement plans with local authorities, in order to improve choice, address barriers to flexible use of SDS and to support local authority leaders to innovate, embed and implement SDS in a way that is beneficial to their population.	Scottish Government Local Authorities
64	We will distribute in the region of £3 million per year through the Support in the Right Direction programme 2024-2027, investing up to £100,000 per local authority area.	Scottish Government
64	We will reopen the Independent Living Fund on a phased basis, with an initial £9 million in 2024-25 to enable up to 1,000 of the most disabled people in Scotland who face the greatest barriers to independent living to access the support they need to lead independent lives.	Scottish Government
64	We will progress the National Centre for Remote and Rural Health and Care, launched in October 2023, to improve primary and community services.	Scottish Government
67	We will continue our work to design funded all-age childcare, that meets families' childcare needs, through our early adopter communities, including those in rural and island locations.	Scottish Government
67	We will scale up our innovative childminder recruitment pilots to grow this essential part of our workforce by 1,000 more across Scotland.	Scottish Government
73	We will publish evaluation of the Island Skills and Repopulation Pilot, including recommendations for next steps.	Scottish Government
73	We will publish our response to the report of the independent Commission to Review Land-Based Learning in early 2024.	Scottish Government
73	We will launch the Talent Attraction and Migration Service.	Scottish Government
73	We will scope options around supporting local attraction programmes delivered by local authorities through the TAMS digital platform, to signpost people interested in moving to specific parts of Scotland to relevant local information.	Scottish Government
73	We will support local authorities and employers (e.g. through chambers of commerce and Regional Economic Partnerships) to harness TAMS in support of their local objectives.	Scottish Government

Page	Action	Owner
73	We will enable local authorities to use Brand Scotland assets where they may support local talent attraction initiatives, building on an existing offer made by the Scottish Government in Spring 2023. The Scottish Government will work with COSLA and local authorities to identify how it can best support these initiatives in line with local priorities.	Scottish Government
73	We will continue to advocate for a Rural Visa Pilot scheme.	Scottish Government
73	We will commission further research on achieving an effective worker voice for migrant workers in agriculture	Scottish Government
74	We will introduce legislation on Community Wealth Building during this Parliamentary term.	Scottish Government
74	We will work to build a collective ownership of our Blue Economy and empower key actors to support delivery and mobilise resources.	Scottish Government
74	We will support leadership to drive cultural transformation to mainstream a Blue Economy approach across Government, and wider.	Scottish Government
74	We will award up to £14 million of grant funding through the Marine Fund Scotland to support projects to deliver improved social, environmental, and economic outcomes in line with our Blue Economy Vision.	Scottish Government
75	We will consider how to best utilise our estate to support the ambitions set out within the Population Strategy, while harnessing the opportunities that hybrid working presents to distribute our workforce.	Scottish Government
75	We will develop an Estate Strategy allowing us to set out a route map to achieve net zero and ensure buildings are right sized and in the right location, while maximising public sector sharing opportunities.	Scottish Government
77	As set out in the Programme for Government 2023 to 2024 we will introduce a Land Reform Bill to the Scottish Parliament.	Scottish Government
81	We will reform the law, subject to agreement by the Scottish Parliament, to support the future of crofting.	Scottish Government
81	The Crofting Commission will further expand its Residency and Land Use Team, and its remit, enabling it to increase its work in addressing absenteeism and bringing crofts back into active use, which will create opportunities for new entrants.	Crofting Commission
81	The Crofting Commission launched a croft succession pilot in Uist & Barra and North-West Sutherland in Autumn/Winter 2023/24. The findings from the succession pilot will enable the Commission to determine a targeted approach to successfully meet the actions in the National Development Plan for Crofting. The Commission will undertake a repeat of the crofting activity survey in 2025, to determine if the number of crofters with a formal succession plan in place has increased.	Crofting Commission

Page	Action	Owner
81	We will develop and consult on proposals to reform crofting law, create new opportunities for new entrants, encourage the active management and use of crofts and common grazings, and support rural population retention through action on non-residency.	Scottish Government
82	We will develop our approach to regional Just Transition plans which will engage communities, business and workers to ensure that we support the sustainability of communities including those affected by population decline.	Scottish Government
82	We will embed the work of the independent Just Transition Commission as we gather and listen to the best available evidence when designing our approach.	Scottish Government
83	We will co-ordinate a response to the independent report on Economic and Social Opportunities for Gaelic, for the members of the Short Life Working Group which produced the report.	Scottish Government
83	We will, through our independent Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population, scope future research about the ways in which Gaelic language and culture and its close association with land, places of learning and socio-economic opportunities can help towards retention of young people.	Scottish Government

08 Annex B: Research – supporting and informing policy development

The Scottish Government is committed to harnessing the strength of the research community in support of the design and delivery of interventions aiming to address depopulation. This is evidenced by the work of the independent Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population, and its report on **Place-Based Approaches to Population Challenges underpinning the strategic intent of this Action Plan**. As set out within this document, we intend to fully harness the expertise of this Group in future, including around enhancing our understanding around Gaelic-speaking communities in the context of population decline. Further to this, a range of research work being undertaken across the country supports this agenda:

Scottish Government Strategic Research Programme – Rural Communities and Rural Economy projects

The Scottish Government’s vision for the Strategic Research Programme (SRP) 2022 to 2027 is “to support research that is relevant, respected and responsive to Scotland’s environment, communities, its people and to the rural economy”. Through this programme, the James Hutton Institute (JHI) and Scotland’s Rural College (SRUC) are taking forward a series of projects, under Theme E: Rural Futures of the SRP, that will inform actions being taken forward through this Plan, as well as helping to shape future interventions aimed at understanding and addressing depopulation.

JHI SRP 2022-27 Projects

JHI’s “[Realising change: working with communities to inform a resilient recovery process in remote, rural and island communities](#)” aims to understand the distinct characteristics and needs of rural and island communities, how they change over time, and how we can ensure that we have a reliable evidence base to understand the diversity of rural communities. This research should help develop a better understanding of the changing population dynamics of Scotland’s rural and island communities.

JHI have a suite of eight case studies across rural and island Scotland, with depopulation an underpinning theme that will help to shape work to address depopulation in these specific areas, whilst also building an evidence base of approaches that may be replicable across other communities.

In September 2023, JHI launched surveys to understand the factors influencing the decision-making of rural and urban residents on places to live, and rural residents’ decision-making around transport and local food. Detailed spatial datasets representing the assets of places and people which can support a wellbeing-focused recovery are being developed to support this work, and understand their links with community outcomes (including population trends). This is one component of the project “[Informing a socially and spatially just future for the Scottish rural economy: pinpointing opportunities, assets and support needs](#)”, and will provide useful insight into the challenges and opportunities facing rural people, helping to shape more effective policy.

Previously, JHI had undertaken extensive research on demographic change and population projections in the 2016-22 SRP, including the definition of

Sparsely Populated Areas and evaluating diversity in population projections and ‘untapped potential’ for repopulation within Sparsely Populated Areas. This work continues to help inform policy, including our understanding of rurality and influencing the language we use when referring to rural Scotland. Through the 2016-22 SRP, JHI also collaborated with Highlands and Islands Enterprise to identify how inclusive growth can be understood, and measured, at a spatially detailed level, within the Highlands and Islands region.⁹ The resulting analysis influenced the locations of the Convention of the Highlands and Islands choice of “Repopulation Zones”.

SRUC SRP 2022-27 Projects

SRUC’s “**Reimagined policy futures: Shaping sustainable, inclusive and just rural and island communities in Scotland (ReRIC)**” project is undertaking an in-depth exploration of three persistent ‘wicked’ challenges facing rural and island communities in Scotland: (i) demographic decline and ageing and out-migration; (ii) the lack of affordable housing and; (iii) exclusion and marginalisation.

The research team is collating and reviewing the existing evidence on each of these topics, and gathering new evidence through both primary and secondary research. Taking account of current and likely future policy drivers and socio-economic changes, the project will provide recommendations for future policy responses to address these challenges.

Work so far has included a review of the evolution of rural and island policy in Scotland since the Second World War. This review is expected to be published in 2023/24.

SRUC’s “**Project SRUC-E1-1 ‘Novel insights on Scotland’s rural and island economies’**” focuses on generating new insights on rural and island economies and businesses. Quantitative analysis of existing secondary data sources is combined with qualitative sector-focused interviews and targeted surveys (e.g. on digital connectivity) to generate a deeper understanding of rural and island enterprises. The project also includes work packages focused on community wealth-building, future agricultural policy and its impacts, and regional food economies.

This project...

Work so far has included in-depth analysis of accommodation sector businesses and the publication of the **Rural and Islands Insights Report 2023**. Work has also been undertaken to develop a **new analytical framework** and to explore new ways of defining peripherality. The latter, for example, takes data on the supply chains of businesses to explore their peripherality to their supply chain, rather than to e.g. Inverness, as an urban centre to which a business may only have limited links.

NISRIE team members are developing a policy brief on ‘Economic Infrastructure: Transport, Housing and Connectivity in Scotland’. The aim of this brief is to assess infrastructural barriers to rural and island economic performance (including relating to housing and digital connectivity) and how these impact on the lived experiences of rural and island business owners and employees.

9. James Hutton Institute, Biomathematics and Statistics Scotland, Highlands and Islands Enterprise (2021), **Measuring inclusive growth in the Highlands and Islands: a typology**.

JHI and SRUC Projects contributing to our understanding of Migration

Current PhD students, under the supervision of JHI and academic partners, are exploring island migration, and the National Islands Plan. This includes an investigation into the potential for the islands diaspora to contribute to healthy and balanced population levels, and how multiple coinciding crises are affecting island migration. These PhD projects may help to better inform understanding of migration to, from and within island geographies, allowing for a more nuanced exploration of policy.

A Royal Society of Edinburgh-funded Research Network on [“Covid-19 and shifting mobilities: Exploring new migration flows into rural, island and coastal communities”](#), led by Jane Atterton (SRUC) and Ruth Wilson (James Hutton Institute) will be bringing together researchers from countries across the globe (including New Zealand, Japan, Turkey, Sweden, Scotland, Ireland, the Faroe Islands and Canada) working on migration flows into and out of rural, island and coastal communities related to the Covid-19 pandemic.

A series of topic-based webinars will bring researchers together to discuss and compare the situations in different countries. Topics of focus will include ‘multi-local working’, relations with the diaspora and other related populations, the integration of new migrants into receiving communities and a range of other issues. The aim is to build strong collaborative research relationships on this theme in order to seek further research funding in future and to inform related policies.





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