



RURAL SCOTLAND'S PRIORITIES

PUBLIC ATTITUDES SURVEY ON
RURAL POLICY -
POLLING AND ANALYSIS





ABOUT SLE

We envision a prosperous, sustainable future for rural Scotland, benefiting everyone. For over 100 years, we've championed rural businesses - from campsites to community owners to country estates - supporting those who deliver economic, social, and environmental value.

Our diverse members span all aspects of rural land and property management. We help them thrive by offering expert advice, insights and connections, while also representing their interests to policymakers, highlighting opportunities and risks, and celebrating rural success.

OUR MEMBERS



GROWING THE RURAL ECONOMY

The businesses SLE represents are at the heart of Scotland's rural economy. Rural estates add £2.4 billion to Scotland's economy, directly providing 1 in 10 rural jobs and land for over 14,000 rural enterprises. In total, rural Scotland makes up 24% of our economy, despite only accounting for 17% of the population.



TACKLING CLIMATE CHANGE

Scotland's rural estates are at the vanguard of our efforts to tackle climate change. They account for a remarkable 57% of renewable energy generation, 75% of peatland restoration projects, and more than half of all new woodland creation. Rural estates are taking the greatest strides of anyone to help us reach Net Zero.



RESTORING NATURE

The rural businesses we represent take their responsibility as the stewards of our natural environment incredibly seriously. Nature loss is a significant challenge facing rural Scotland, exacerbated by the climate emergency. Conservation and restoration work is a core part of a huge number of our members.



BUILDING COMMUNITIES

Availability of housing and other key parts of community infrastructure is integral to sustaining the critical mass of our rural communities. Rural estates provide homes for over 13,000 families, with the building of new affordable homes becoming an important part of many of the rural businesses we represent.



FOREWORD



Scottish Land and Estates commissioned polling in April 2025, to provide information to MSPs on public attitudes towards rural priorities and the use of rural land.

We are heartened by the insights from the poll, which demonstrate a very clear correlation between what the public want to see happening on Scotland's land, and the good practice that we know is already happening on land managed by our members throughout Scotland: wildlife and nature restoration, production of food and green energy, provision of affordable housing and vital public infrastructure, and investment in climate change mitigation.

The rural land managers we work with take their responsibilities extremely seriously; our members create significant public benefits that extend much further beyond the croft, farm or estate, all the way to improving livelihoods and expanding the public purse.

The rural economy delivers a huge amount to Scotland, but we can do more. Representing rural businesses across Scotland that are integral to our rural communities, we're committed to championing people, jobs and nature - and doing it in a way that delivers real solutions to Scotland's biggest national challenges: the climate emergency, biodiversity loss and the housing crisis.

However in order to realise the potential of rural Scotland, we need policymakers to reset some of their current thinking. Policy should be aligned to match the people's priorities of people - rural and urban - rather than political priorities.

Scotland's economic powerhouses - such as renewables - are increasingly to be found in rural Scotland. In order for us to continue to deliver on the priorities the people have clearly outlined in this polling - producing food, protecting the natural environment, providing homes in our rural communities, accelerating economic growth and contributing so much to our shared priorities for the future - we need policy to enable, not to stifle.

Patrick Culquhoun
Vice-Chair, Policy



We would love to discuss this work in more detail with you in the run up to the 2026 Scottish Elections either in Holyrood, or perhaps somewhere in rural Scotland. Please email our Head of External Affairs, Cameron Gillies, at cameron.gillies@scottishlandandestates.co.uk if you would like to meet.



OUR RESEARCH

THINKING RURAL

In April 2025, the Diffley Partnership conducted a public attitudes survey of 1266 people living across Scotland to assess their views on priorities for rural Scotland. The sample was a mix of urban and rural demographics, weighted by gender and age to adult population estimates.

The aim of the research was to establish what people consider to be the key priorities for rural Scotland ahead of the upcoming Scottish elections in 2026. During the passage of several major pieces of rural legislation, understanding these priorities is useful for decision makers to ensure their work aligns with that of the people they serve.

The survey also incorporated some questions about legislation currently being considered by MSPs. This allowed us to gather views on whether people living and working in rural Scotland believe the direction of travel for rural policy is in line with their priorities. It also provided an insight in to their understanding of the problems the Scottish Government perceive to exist, and the changes they want to make to land management practices.

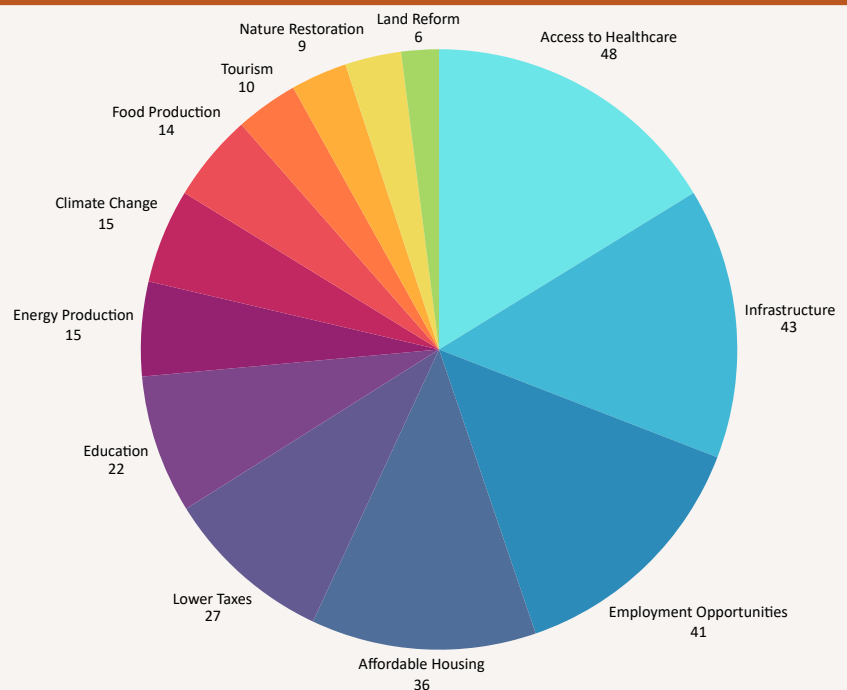
FINDINGS

RURAL PRIORITIES ARE NATIONAL PRIORITIES

Economic growth (93%); education (92%); and the NHS and healthcare (98%) are the top three issues for Scots over the next five years

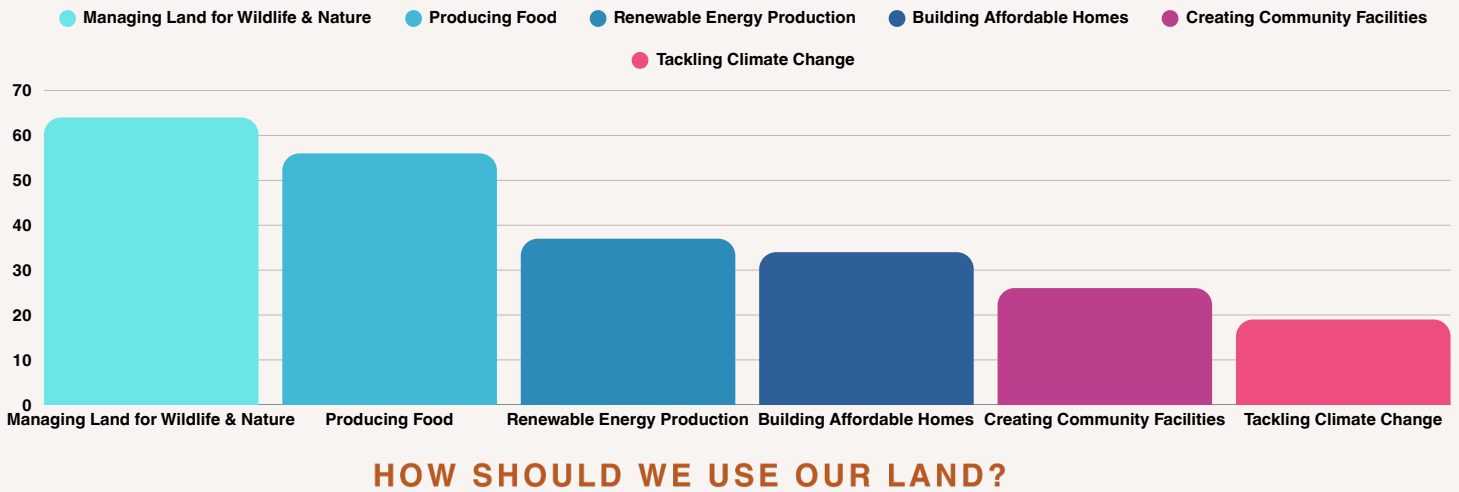
In rural Scotland, people believe that the future prosperity of communities and businesses would be best served by better access to healthcare (48%); improvements to infrastructure such as roads and broadband (43%); employment opportunities (41%); and more affordable homes (36%).

Of all the policy areas listed, Land Reform was considered the lowest priority, with only 6% of respondents considering this to be important.



WHAT POLICY AREAS SHOULD THE SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT PRIORITISE FOR THE FUTURE OF RURAL COMMUNITIES AND BUSINESSES?

FINDINGS



HOW DO PEOPLE WANT OUR LAND TO BE USED?

- Demonstrating environmental benefits is a clear priority for the public from landowners, with 64% supporting management of the land for wildlife and nature
- 56% of respondents want to see landowners using their land for production of food
- 37% support land use for the production of renewable energy
- 34% of respondents want to see landowners build affordable housing
- 26% of respondents want to see land utilised for the creation of community facilities

ANALYSIS

The results of our polling provide several useful insights for policy makers. There is a clear mix of areas where government priorities are aligned and misaligned with public attitudes. The 'big ticket' issues of healthcare, infrastructure such as roads, transport and broadband, housing and the economy all come to the fore.

In some respects, these issues are being debated and legislated on regularly. However significant amounts of parliamentary time is also being spent on issues that people have less of an interest in, like land reform. When we asked respondents whether land reform should be considered an important part of the future for rural communities and businesses, only 6% agreed.

When it comes to land use, it is clear that a balance must be struck between putting food on our tables, protecting our natural environment, and delivering new homes and community infrastructure. Overleaf, we will take a look at how Scotland's rural businesses are already delivering this.

CASE STUDIES



ADL NATURE - HIGHLANDS



19% of respondents said they want land to deliver on climate mitigation measures like peatland restoration.

ADL Nature work with landowners to deliver landscape scale peatland restoration projects. As a team they have delivered the restoration of over 5500 ha of degraded peatland within the Highlands and Islands.

The business says its motivation dates from being a small rural consultancy in 2017 who were looking to build sustainability into their business model.



PEELHAM FARM - SOUTH EAST



56% of respondents want to ensure land is used to produce high quality food.

Peelham is a family run organic farm based in the Scottish Borders. It produces grass-fed beef, lamb and free-range pork, with onsite processing facilities allowing it to supply its produce direct to consumers.

Peelham contributes significantly to the region's food production whilst maintaining a strong commitment to sustainable self-reliance with no pesticides, herbicides or petro-chemical fertilisers, encouraging biodiversity on the farm.



STRACATHRO ESTATE - NORTH EAST



34% of respondents want landowners to provide land for affordable new homes.

Recognising the lack of affordable housing in Angus, Stracathro Estates built eleven homes to let at affordable rents, around 40% less than open market to young local working families.

The motivation for building these houses was to ensure the community was sufficiently large and diverse in age to sustain the social capital of the school, village hall and the church. As a result of this development, the closure of the primary school is no longer on the table



GROSVENOR REAY FOREST ESTATE - HIGHLANDS



64% of respondents said they want land to be managed for wildlife and nature.

One of the largest catchment-wide restoration projects nationally, Project Laxford at Reay Forest Estate will restore 118 km² of the landscape and plant up to a million trees, enhancing biodiversity and benefiting the whole ecosystem.

Grounded in science and monitoring, the aim is to establish the Laxford as an index river and support the development of more similarly designated rivers in Scotland.



KIRKDALE MEN'S SHED - SOUTH WEST



34% of respondents would like to see land used for the creation of community facilities.

Kirkdale Men's Shed provides a meeting place and workspace to support the health and wellbeing of men in the Creetown area. Located in the old sawmill on the Kirkdale Estate, KMS has around 15 members.

KMS is one of over 200 Men's Sheds across Scotland with around 10,000 "shedders" and is open to all men aged 18 and over. The Scottish Government has co-funded the project since 2016, and continues to support it in coordination with Kirkdale Estate.



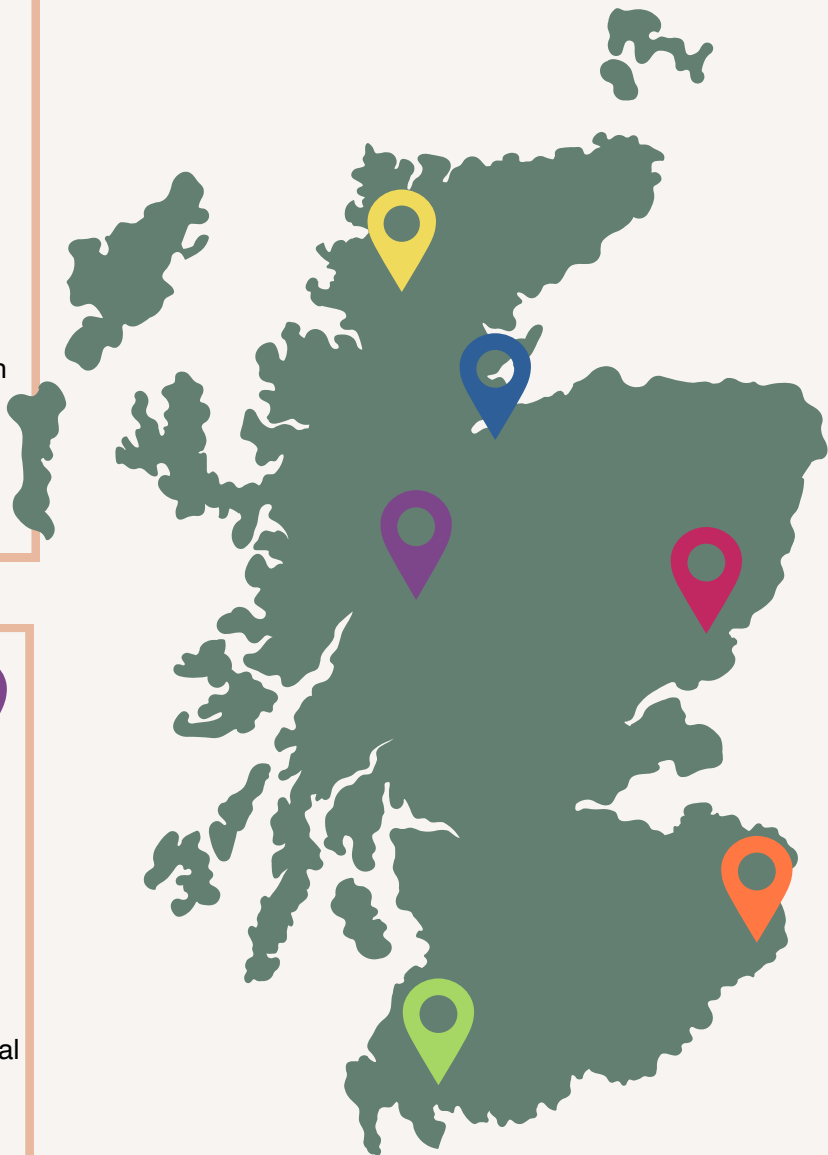
ALLT MOR HYDRO SCHEME - CENTRAL



37% of respondents highlighted the need for land to be used for renewable energy production.

The Allt Mor Hydro Scheme in Kinloch Rannoch, a joint venture between Dunalastair Estate and Mor Hydro financed by Clydesdale Bank, is more than a means of providing renewable energy for 325 homes. It is also a useful educational resource and delivers free power to local people who drive electric vehicles.

Opened in November 2015, the electricity generated by the fast-flowing water of the Allt Mor burn is sold to the grid. The building is situated on a popular walking route close to the centre of Kinloch Rannoch. Although it would have been easier and cheaper to erect a standard power house, the estate and Mor Hydro believed the location offered a rare opportunity.



WORKING WITH YOU

Landowners and managers are delivering the outcomes that the public value most:

- Economic stability and growth
- Environmental stewardship
- Food production
- Vibrant and sustainable rural communities

Future rural policy should support the alliance which already exists between public desire, and rural delivery and empower those already making a positive impact: enabling them to do more, and for others to follow their lead.

A supportive policy framework is required, which inspires confidence in landowners to invest and work in partnership with others to deliver projects at scale - whether that be for nature recovery, climate change mitigation, production of renewable energy, house building, tree planting, or other shared rural development goals.

Rural Scotland provides the backbone of Scotland's economy. We are walking shoulder-to-shoulder with the people, delivering what this polling proves they want.

Will you support rural businesses to deliver for Scotland's future?



Sarah-Jane Laing
Chief Executive

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "S. Laing".



Dee Ward
Chairman

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "D. Ward".

