

**Consultation Title: National Council of Rural Advisers ‘A Rural Conversation: Together We Can, Together We Will’**

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**To: Scottish Government**

**From: Scottish Land & Estates**

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Scottish Land & Estates (SLE) is a membership organisation representing the interests of owners and managers of land and business across rural Scotland and we welcome this opportunity to contribute to the development of Scotland’s rural economic strategy.

While we are encouraged by this fresh look at the rural economy and development of a strategy we urge the National Council of Rural Advisers to regard the excellent work which has taken place in the past of which much remains unactioned.

Although now 18 years old, Mark Shucksmith’s *Exclusive countryside? Social inclusion and regeneration in rural areas* (July 2000) is still relevant today. Professor Shucksmith suggests “undertaking rural ‘exclusion proofing’ of new and existing policy”. He goes on to propose that such universal rural exclusion proofing would ensure that the potential impact of any policy on excluded groups would have to be considered prior to its implementation. SLE would welcome further study of this proposal.

<https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/exclusive-countryside-social-inclusion-and-regeneration-rural-areas>

In 2008 the Rural Development Council was set up to consider how best rural Scotland can contribute to increasing sustainable economic growth. The Council’s Speak Up for Rural Scotland consultation and was followed by Scottish Government’s response ‘Our Rural Future’ in March 2011 which identified key priorities and commitments to action these. Issues were very similar to those still being experienced today – broadband, affordable housing, transport, skills etc.

<https://www.gov.scot/Publications/2011/03/08135330/0>

We also direct the NCRA to SRUC's recent report 'Recharging Rural – Creating Sustainable Communities to 2030 and beyond' which was commissioned by the Prince's Countryside Fund. This is a UK level piece of research which echoes many of the questions asked below.

<http://www.princescountrysidefund.org.uk/research/recharging-rural>

**1. The development of relevant Scottish Government mainstream policies should consider the effect upon the Rural Economic Strategy and its consequent policies.**

**a. How should policy makers in Government make sure that the economic needs of rural Scotland are taken into account?**

As noted above there is some concern that rural Scotland has been here before. There have been several previous examinations of the challenges and potential solutions to ensure rural areas have the same opportunities and are supported in a manner which promotes economic growth.

SLE has always advocated a strategy which ensures rural-proofing of policies and a 'rural priority' approach in areas where a specific need can be identified, for example, in housing, digital connectivity or transport. Simply taking the time to consider how policies will impact upon rural areas would be beneficial and would likely mitigate some of the unintended consequences which have been experienced when a one-size-fits all or urban-centric policy decision has been made.

We also encourage greater recognition that rural communities have different characteristics, challenges and needs for example tourist hotspots, commuter settlements or post industrial villages.

**b. Should there be an ability to call to account Scottish Government and their Agencies to ensure collaboration and actions to meet the objectives of the Rural Economic Strategy?**

Yes, we see little point in having a Rural Economic Strategy if it is not actioned and performance measured regularly to ensure progress towards the strategy objectives.

**2. Create quality job opportunities (that are well paid, flexible, and purposeful) to promote skilled and opportunities, but also deal with inequalities in the rural labour market (such as gender pay gap).**

**a. What employment opportunities do we need to meet the current and future needs of our changing economy? Where should these be? (either by location or sector?)**

The requirement will be different in different areas, and any approach should have flexibility to allow this regional variation to be taken into account. We note below three areas which our members regularly experience in their rural communities.

Rural areas often rely heavily on land based jobs such as those in farming, forestry and country sports. These then support further jobs such as vets, timber processing, and accommodation providers. These employment prospects need to be nurtured as post-Brexit policies develop.

With the rising opportunities for rural tourism due to initiatives such as NC500, many communities are becoming victims of their own success as transport and other infrastructure struggle to meet demand. This needs to be managed to ensure economies are spread across several viable industries and villages do not become tourist attractions in the summer and ghost towns in the winter. Tourism jobs are often low paid and seasonal bringing challenges of affording local housing and having stable incomes. Housing may move from long term lets into self-catering accommodation if the long term letting policies are high risk and there is demand for self-catering properties. While a proportion of holiday accommodation is welcomed it may also restrict supply of long term homes and push up property prices (see 8b). Year-round tourism should be encouraged and incentives for long term letting will balance the pull to self-catering.

There are also a number of existing opportunities which are not fully utilised. [Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere](#), for example, does not appear to have had the success and impact that it potentially could. Raising awareness of these existing opportunities and making the most of them would help support sustainable rural development and jobs.

**b. How do we tackle the inequalities we face in rural Scotland? i.e. challenges faced due to age, gender, socio-economic, educational and ethnic background?**

By shifting policy focus to become more rural-centric where appropriate, better decisions can be made that will tackle inequalities in those areas. For example, policy that encourages the availability of more affordable housing in a rural context (which can be delivered in a number of tenures) will improve access to housing for young people stay or migrate to the area, and older people to move into more suitable housing within their rural communities.

More knowledge of what is currently available and what is needed at a local level is essential. Rural needs are often less obvious than those in urban areas.

If there are to be socio-economic opportunities for all in rural Scotland, we must aim for a living and working countryside. A flexible and enabling planning system that is fit for purpose in a rural context is crucial to combatting inequality and delivering this aim. There is a need to ensure planning is not a barrier to economic growth but as an enabler of sensitive development.

A well-resourced local authority would be well placed to understand its rural areas and implement appropriate local policies to contribute to the reduction in inequalities. At this scale there should be scope for a long term vision and strategy.

### **3. Build on existing work to gather evidence and data to measure the true value of the rural economy and monitor its growth**

- a. Going beyond the economic contribution of rural businesses, what positive examples of social (i.e. community cohesion), cultural (i.e. protection of heritage and traditions) and environmental (i.e. carbon reducing) impact of rural businesses can you think of?**

As SLE members are land based rural businesses of varying nature across Scotland the social, cultural and environmental value they deliver is extensive. A few high level areas are noted below but please see [www.helpingithappen.co.uk](http://www.helpingithappen.co.uk) for stories of how individual rural businesses are providing these benefits.

#### Social

Health – promotion of public access, creation and maintenance of paths and marked walks, country sports opportunities

Offering land for free or minimal rent for community based activities such as football pitches, showgrounds, golf courses, allotments and community gardens.

Charity events

Provision of affordable housing – often the largest providers in rural areas

Reducing fuel poverty through estate subsidised wood supplies and energy efficiency works

Provision of commercial property often at low rent to assist start-up businesses

Estate staff coming together to help communities in extreme incidents - floods, snow, wild fires etc.

Estates delivering employment opportunities and inward investment

#### Cultural

Investment in historic buildings – from castles to bothies.

Opening privately owned buildings and gardens to the public.  
Country sports  
Care of archaeological sites  
Tourism – history of landscapes, film based tourism, attractions.  
Hosting events such as festivals  
Working with local schools

### Environmental

Forestry and woodlands  
Agriculture  
Habitat restoration  
Peatland restoration  
Renewable energy  
Energy efficiency of rural properties  
Local food initiatives  
Management of protected areas (SACs, SSSIs etc)  
Clearing of litter and fly-tipping debris  
Species management – deer control, reintroductions, protection etc.  
Education – hosting educational visits, installing educational information boards.

#### **b. What specific outcomes of rural businesses should be measured and why?**

Economic contribution can be measured by looking at the number of employees, profitability, etc. The number of business start-ups (and their long-term sustainability) should be monitored. Government funded activity should be monitored to ensure support is resulting in the intended outcomes.

Our members land-based businesses often require continual investment and are not profitable. The value of this should be considered. If this private investment is to decrease the benefits noted in 3a would likely diminish.

The social, environmental and cultural outcomes of rural businesses are more difficult to quantify but are equally valuable. For example, the quality of life or the management of a landscape.

#### **4. Encourage future entrepreneurship by ensuring the Scottish Government's rural skills action plan meets the needs of the Rural Economic Strategy.**

##### **a. What skills are required to have a vibrant rural economy?**

Flexibility – in the smallest communities people will often have to take on multiple roles to sustain the community and ensure their income meets their needs. There is also a need to be flexible to meet changing demands of visitors, take advantage of new opportunities and adapt to changing policies.

Creativity/entrepreneurship – A low population will often mean there are less jobs available to service it. It is important people think creatively as to how they can take advantage of the benefits of rural life to make a living.

Self motivation – lone working is prevalent in rural areas and the ability to be self-motivated is important. People may have to make opportunities for themselves.

Problem solving – an ability to adapt to new challenges using skills and resources available can be extremely useful in rural communities.

Collaboration – Working together is vital for rural communities.

Digital – having digital skills can overcome geographic distances. It can help with access to markets, promotion of businesses, education, and social connections.

Leadership – there is a need for greater leadership from local authorities and others in order to improve productivity and wellbeing in rural areas. Robust rural policies and the ability to motivate and groups and individuals and to ultimately make things happen is required.

**b. How do we best ensure that people of all ages, genders, areas, socio-economic, educational and ethnic backgrounds receive appropriate support?**

Further opportunities for life-long learning in rural areas – for example, work based courses or online courses. This will ensure that people have the opportunity to use practical experience and/or remote based learning to gain knowledge and skills required to progress their ideas.

Ensure national and local policies consider rural needs and delivery.

**5. Develop opportunities for the businesses of urban and rural Scotland to share ideas and work together.**

**a. How do you think we could do this? (for example through schools or membership organisation groups).**

SLE has a key role in linking rural businesses with the information and services of other companies through our professional and trade memberships. The Scottish Chambers of Commerce also plays an important role as does Highlands and Island Enterprise and Scottish Enterprise.

Educational links and partnerships already work well but could be expanded. We believe this should not just be about business-to-business links but to include schools, colleges and other community groups too.

Examples of existing initiatives and collaborations include:

- Projects such as Imbewu enable young people to spend time in rural areas learning new skills.
- Angus schools game meat initiative educating students about deer management, butchery and cookery.
- RHET
- Countryside Learning
- Deeside Estates partnership with Aboyne Academy's S3 pupils resulting in greater engagement about the forestry sector.
- Forest Nurseries across the country are fully booked and fantastic at getting children involved in their rural surroundings at a young age.
- in the technology sector Edinburgh University is involved with Humble Broadband bringing satellite broadband to a rural area.

**b. Facilitating learning/sharing between urban and rural areas to improve and have better understanding of the opportunities that are available would be new for Scotland. What would interest you in this approach? Are there any benefits/drawbacks?**

SLE does not believe this is entirely new as there are already existing relationships. However, expansion of this is welcomed as a significant proportion of rural dwellers do not fully understand rural land management or rural businesses.

A benefit of this type of relationship can be generating greater understanding of rural issues such as responsible access throughout urban communities. For example, misunderstandings of what is responsible access is evident in places such as Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park due to its proximity to the central belt. Facilitating learning and sharing knowledge through partnership building can help overcome these problems and is something that SLE fully supports.

**6. Create communities of interest (digital, physical) where businesses and people can come together to solve problems, share ideas and understand opportunities.**

**a. Is there a place that you can think of in your community where people already do this?  
Can you please tell us about it?**

SLE already tries to bring members together to share experiences and work collectively to overcome problems or make the most of opportunities. Other membership organisations are also doing this within their remits.

The planning system has a role to play in bringing people with an interest in a particular area together. Community Action Plans, Estates Plans and the Place Standard tool are just a few mechanisms which can help bring communities together in order to improve their place. Unfortunately, at the moment, the planning system can also be a source of friction and can be divisive in communities. It is important that these processes are inclusive so all voices in a community are heard and not only the loudest.

A large number of Community Benefit Companies have developed in response to community benefit funds from renewable energy developments. These have opened new opportunities for communities to invest and develop.

**b. What might be the benefits of this approach?**

Bringing people together helps to encourage the exchange of knowledge and experiences. This can save people effort, time and money trying to 'reinvent the wheel'. Using skills and expertise collectively can result in more positive outcomes.

Upfront engagement in the planning system creates more inclusive communities where people feel empowered about the decisions that are made that affect their place. This early engagement usually results in less controversy at a later stage as more people buy-in to the decisions that are ultimately taken forward.

**c. What things would your local community need to help people in your local area come together?**

As a membership organisation we cannot comment on the needs of an individual community, but communities will ultimately need resources such as a facilitator's time. This could be in the form of awareness raising about opportunities for community involvement through, for example, Community Action Plans or the possibility of Local Place Plans. The

employment of development officers has been a key success of Community Benefit Companies as this person can encourage and support a community which will likely have a limited volunteer pool and a number of unengaged individuals.

- 7. Help ensure there are the same opportunities and access to services between urban and rural areas.**
- a. For people living and working in rural areas there are often big differences compared to urban areas in what services might be available (things like broadband, childcare, transport, community development etc). What do you need to enable you to choose to live and work in rural Scotland?**

Services and opportunities will always be different in urban and rural settings. It is unrealistic to expect there will be the same frequency of buses, or availability of fast food restaurants for example. This difference is, however, not always negative for rural populations. Rural dwellers have the access to fresh air, to woodlands, to beaches, to silence, to quality local food, to a safe community, and to different social activity. However, there are challenges and there remain issues with exclusion. Again, Professor Shucksmith (2000) offers failings of transport, childcare, social housing and the ineffectiveness of the welfare state in reaching rural dwellers as factors leading to social exclusion.

### *Technology*

Technology can overcome some of the barriers to exclusion in rural areas. SLE supports the Scottish Government's commitment for every property to have access to superfast broadband by 2021. We are concerned that rural areas continue to still significantly lag in term of digital connectivity (both in the home and on the move) and delivering significantly improved reliable and quality coverage should be part of any rural economic strategy. We hope this initiative will be supported with availability of local training and encouragement to help people of all ages get connected. In the future, the use of drones, apps or other technology could also assist in rural areas.

### *Transport*

Due to the nature of rural settlement there is normally a requirement for a car. This is problematic if budgets are tight or for those who need to access educations and jobs but are unable to drive due to age or other restriction. Central government policies to incentivise electric cars and disincentive petrol and diesel cars may disadvantage rural communities which currently have fewer charging points and have to travel longer distances.

Cycling and walking routes can offer a safe alternative over short distances but are often lacking or the geography and weather conditions can result in these not being well used. There is also ongoing maintenance which is often neglected. Some communities could make better use of water transport opportunities which results in less pressure on roads, creates a tourist attraction, and can accommodate bikes. There is need for flexible public transport options such as community buses or volunteer drivers for things like medical appointments which do not fit around bus timetables. Those relying on ferries appreciate when bus and train timetables synchronise allowing for onward travel so communication and coordination between providers is encouraged.

### *Housing*

There is a need for an adequate proportion of long term housing, and affordable housing, for people to live and work in the rural area. There are often fewer housing options in rural communities and particularly young working age people are struggling to find suitable accommodation.

First, it is important to know what stock is available and monitor how policies impact on this. For example, SLE members provide the majority of the rented housing in the most rural areas but policies are currently acting as a disincentive to continue or to expand the provision. The new Private Residential Tenancy has not been rural proofed and lacks flexibility which may lead to decrease in supply of long term affordable housing – exactly the opposite of what is required.

The new tenancy along with other regulatory changes in the sector has led to huge pressure on rural landlords which does not incentivise the outputs the community needs. We would welcome policies to be rural proofed which would encourage continued provision of housing and incentivise the delivery of new housing especially at an affordable level. Other barriers such as planning, infrastructure and taxation must all be considered to ensure rural sites are deliverable. Having a greater supply of affordable rural housing would allow young, working people to stay or move to the area.

Lack of suitable accommodation for the older generation is also a problem in rural areas which results in people staying in their homes longer than they may otherwise choose to do. Retired rural workers are often reluctant to leave their rural communities to move to more suitable accommodation. Some of our members try to help older residents move home within the estate's property portfolio to be closer to a bus route, a shop, or to relatives. If the older generation are not moving on from their family homes, this prevents younger families moving in.

The recent changes to Private Rented Sector policies may reduce the availability of long term affordable housing but there is currently no robust way to track this change. Likewise, there is a lack of data on rural demand which can lead to local authorities believing there is no demand so do not support the development of new housing.

## *Services*

Options for services such as banking and libraries may not be as they are in urban settlements, but a viable service can often be delivered by mobile services or by being innovative – for example, using defunct [red telephone boxes as mini libraries](#), or having multi-functional spaces. Rural banking has received significant press coverage recently. Where rural shops do not accept card payment and there are no ATM facilities, options become restricted for both the consumer and the retailer. Having ATM machines which can be used by all bank customers and have more functions than a cash machine would help significantly – for example scanning cheques and making transfers.

The postal service is a lifeline for many rural residents and businesses. Surcharges and delivery times can be problematic.

Creative and flexible delivery of health and dental care are required and can work well. Sharing services between an area is common and could be expanded. For example, specialist teachers working across a number of schools. The expansion of the areas in which supermarkets will deliver groceries is continuing and local initiatives to assist with this have also been successful. Local shops, honesty stores and ability to buy directly from the producers are also methods which need encouragement and support.

## *Cultural and social activities*

Opportunities to visit theatres, cinemas, the bingo and nightclubs will not be delivered in the same way as they are in towns and cities but lots of rural communities have developed their own way to increase opportunities. For example, some have set up cinema clubs and local theatre groups to run their own screening and events or to coordinate transport to the nearest town to reduce costs. Events and activities in community halls or at outdoor locations within small communities such as gala days, sheep dog trials and music nights remain popular. Local websites and brochures promoting services, events and attractions for both locals and visitors help to boost the viability of locally led cultural and social activity.

- 8. Make sure Government policies, regulations, planning and support mechanisms help local businesses.**

**a. What type of policies, regulations, planning and business support need to be strengthened or removed to help a wide variety of small and micro businesses in rural areas?**

Local authorities now have powers to introduce local rates reliefs but very few are using them.

Funding regimes from Scottish Government and local authorities are often short lived. A longer term commitment which breaks down barriers of parliamentary sessions would give greater stability and certainty. Projects often require a long lead in time which these short life funds do not accommodate.

The role of Highland and Islands Enterprise, South of Scotland Economic Partnership, Scottish Enterprise, and Business Gateway should not be underestimated.

Business support which brings micro businesses together to deliver skills training are important. These help to spread the cost and deliver training where it is required. Online courses are also helpful as travelling to the central belt for training is costly and time consuming.

Support for the creation of shared workspaces, such as small units would be welcomed but demand is often hidden. A proactive approach to assessing demand and creating spaces with good broadband, meeting spaces, social aspect, etc. This spreads the costs across shared facilities and services.

The importance of rural subsidiarity to development should be adequately reflected in the next and subsequent iterations of Scottish Planning Policy (SPP). An enabling and flexible planning system can be a catalyst for opportunity in areas that might otherwise struggle. SLE is of the opinion that the current SPP does not adequately reflect the specific needs of planning for rural development and we would expect this to change if we are to create a living and working countryside that is inclusive to all.

**b. Can you think of any problems in transport, housing, social care and digital infrastructure that prevent economic growth for our industry sector, business or community?**

The lack of access to digital infrastructure/social care/housing/transport in some areas restricts the flexibility of businesses to operate in areas that would otherwise be favourable.

*Please see answer to 7a.*

The lack of data available about the impacts of policies or needs of rural communities can stifle rural economic growth.

**9. Make sure that community resources that contribute to our economy (like tourist attractions) also deliver benefits to their communities.**

**a. Can you think of any examples of resources in your community e.g. that attract visitors and make money but do not benefit communities?**

Any business which is based in the area and makes money will benefit the community. This may be through the payment of taxes, employment, spending the earned income in the area, or bringing people to the area.

Some opportunities struggle to bring income such walkers and cyclists who often bring their own supplies and do day trips. It is important to make it easy for them to spend their money locally in shops, accommodation, and other facilities. Promotion is vital so they know there are facilities before they come to the area.

Tour guides and companies which are based outwith the area are often making use of estate business assets but pay very little back in. For example, members have been experiencing an increase of tours visiting sites which feature in Outlander. No fee is taken, and often the buses move on to the next site without contributing to local businesses. These visits have begun to have a detrimental impact on the historical site, the access roads, people who live in adjacent properties, and the workings of the surrounding agricultural business.

**b. Are there examples of attractions in your community that you would like to promote? What could help you do this?**

As a membership organisation we have no comment on this, although our members will undoubtedly have a variety of examples pertaining to their community.

**10. Please tell us below if there are any key issues you believe we may have missed.**

We urge caution that there has been significant work completed on this issue in the past and there are now several organisations working individually towards a similar goal. It is important to work together building on each other's expertise and findings and being careful to avoid the creation of new organisations which duplicate work and lack joined up thinking.

To attract investment and confidence to achieve a 'vibrant and flourishing rural economy', risks must be addressed. We stress the importance of collaboration and having a united approach from a government level and down to grassroots organisations for this to be achieved. At times, politics and agendas, such as Land Reform, can work against this, creating division rather than nurturing relationships and collaboration to reach the shared goals in a low risk environment.

We have called for this within our above answers but emphasise the need for robust data collection and research on a regional and local scale. If the needs of rural communities are to be met, we must understand what is happening, what is not happening and why.

SLE would like to ensure the NCRA recognises the complexity of 'the community'. When trying to engage with those that live locally our members often find there are several subsets of 'the community' and it is very rare that everybody will engage or that everybody will agree what is required, where it is required and how it should be delivered. It is also important to recognise that our members and their businesses are part of their local communities.