

Consultation Title	Safeguarding Scotland's remote rural communities
Date	31 January 2020
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Scottish Land & Estates (SLE) is the voice of rural businesses throughout Scotland. We are a membership-based organisation representing a wide range of rural businesses, including farmers, foresters, tourism operators, housing providers, leisure companies, and renewable energy providers.

Our members provide a wide range of economic, environmental and social benefits which are vital to the success and survival of communities throughout remote rural Scotland. They play a critical role in ensuring sustainable, healthy and empowered rural communities, providing housing, employment and a wide range of economic, environmental and social benefits.

Q1. Which of the following best expresses your view of legislating to enhance the consideration given to remote rural mainland communities by public bodies in Scotland?

Fully supportive

Partially supportive

Neutral (neither supportive nor oppose)

Partially opposed

Fully opposed

Unsure

SLE considers that any move to ensure that greater consideration is given to remote rural mainland communities by public bodies in their decision making process should be welcomed. The only cautionary note we would make at this stage is to ensure that the definition the Bill will use for "remote rural" will not disadvantage any areas not included in that definition, but which also require specific consideration. This is an issue which would not have been an issue in the Islands Bill. It is also important to recognise that there are people in areas considered 'accessible rural' who will feel remote and isolated. We therefore suggest it might be appropriate to reconsider the definition for remote rural in this context.

Q2. What do you think would be the main practical advantages and disadvantages of the proposed Bill?

We consider the main practical advantages to be early consideration of remote rural communities in decision making, ensuring that their needs will not be overlooked which can often occur when a local authorities are motivated by their bottom line. We also consider this Bill will help to promote a sense of place within public institutions which could add value in the long term.

In terms of disadvantages, the proposals may require a significant increase in workload for local authorities already under considerable resource pressure. We also reiterate the point that where a community sits just outside a remote rural 'designation' there is a risk that it will become disenfranchised.

Q3. Which of the following best expresses your view of placing the concept of Remote Rural Proofing into legislation?

Fully supportive
Partially supportive
Neutral (neither supportive nor oppose)
Partially opposed
Fully opposed
Unsure

We welcome this as a recognition of the unique issues faced by many in remote rural Scotland.

Q4. Which of the following best expresses your view of giving Scottish Ministers power to issue statutory guidance to other relevant public bodies related to Remote Rural Proofing which they would be required to adhere to in exercising their functions and duties?

Fully Supportive
Partially supportive
Neutral (neither supportive nor oppose)
Partially opposed
Fully opposed
Unsure

We would support the principle of ensuring that all public bodies are required to 'Remote Rural Proof' when exercising their functions. However, we recognise that this might not be necessary in every case. Measures could be taken to ensure that significant public sector contracts or procurement activity, undertaken using public money, are subject to a remote rural impact assessment where appropriate.

Q5. If Scottish Ministers had such a power, which public bodies should it apply to, and in relation to which of their functions and duties?

N/A

Q6. Do you agree that councils that serve remote rural areas currently have sufficient powers to deliver positive outcomes for their communities?

Yes
No
Don't know

In general, SLE consider that the powers held by local authorities are sufficient, however, there could be more of a concerted effort to ensure that positive outcomes are delivered for remote rural communities.

Q7. Which of the following best expresses your view of requiring the Scottish Government to prepare a 'National Remote Rural Plan'?

Fully supportive
Partially supportive
Neutral (neither support nor oppose)
Partially opposed
Fully opposed
Unsure

We welcome this proposal as it will bring clarity of a strategic direction as well as setting out practical steps to delivery. Such an approach should apply to priority policy areas as identified in the report and in any other areas highlighted by rural communities and other stakeholders following comprehensive consultation. The priorities of the plan should reflect the priorities of those who live in the area.

Q8. How often should the plan be reviewed?

Every 10 years
Every 5 years
Every 3 years
Every year
Other frequency (please specify)
No need for regular reviews
Don't know

Every 5 years would be most suitable. There should also be a requirement to submit an annual report on progress to the Parliament. The annual report should contain detail on any mitigation action the Scottish Government will take in the eventuality that a lack of progress is identified in any aspect of the plan.

Q9. The Boundary Commission is normally required to ensure that all constituencies and wards contain similar populations, even if that results in rural constituencies and wards being much larger than urban ones. At present, the only exceptions are for a few island areas (e.g. Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles must remain separate constituencies, despite their relatively small populations). Do you believe further exceptions should be made for mainland remote rural areas?

Yes
No
Don't know

There is a coherent argument to be made for having some form of geographical limit for constituency boundaries within mainland Scotland in order to ensure that the people's representative is not too far from their place of residence. The alternative is seeking to achieve a standard constituency in terms of population size, which results in the likelihood that some very large (and diverse) geographical areas are covered by one representative. An appropriate balance should be found, and this is a subject which should be carefully considered by the Boundary Commission. While welcoming the principle of increased flexibility that such a proposal could provide, there may be unintended consequences to consider.

Q10. Taking account of both costs and potential savings, what financial impact would you expect the proposed Bill to have on:

(a) Government and the public sector

Significant increase in cost
Some increase in cost
Broadly cost-neutral
Some reduction in cost
Significant reduction in cost
Unsure

(b) Businesses

Significant increase in cost
Some increase in cost
Broadly cost-neutral
Some reduction in cost
Significant reduction in cost
Unsure

(c) Individuals

Significant increase in cost
Some increase in cost
Broadly cost-neutral
Some reduction in cost
Significant reduction in cost
Unsure

In delivering cost savings for individuals, SLE expects there will be an increase in costs for government and the public sector. This increase in cost will also include the Rural Plan and impact assessments etc. There also needs to be clearer indication of whether financial and other resources will be available, from across Scottish Government, to ensure the achievement of the Islands Plan.

There was some concern among SLE members that local authorities may chose to pass on costs to businesses, such as developers etc. We would welcome assurances that this would not be the case.

Q11. Are there ways in which the Bill could achieve its aims more cost-effectively (e.g. by reducing costs or increasing savings)?

To ensure viability, Scottish Government could consider publishing detail on the financial resources available to achieve the plan. It can also make public bodies and other organisations aware of the existing funding streams or other sources of support which may be available to remote rural communities to mitigate any negative impacts which become apparent through the 'rural-proofing' process.

We also suggest that Scottish Government require that all impact assessments should include a cost/benefit analysis in addition to an estimate of the costs associated with any proposed mitigation.

Q14. Do you consider that the proposed Bill can be delivered sustainably, i.e. without having likely future disproportionate economic, social and/or environmental impacts?

Yes

No

Don't know

The only areas we would suggest could be impacted are local authority resources on implementing the powers. SLE considers it important to remember the unique nature of what should be considered 'sustainable' in a remote rural context. For example, car ownership is often the only sustainable option for people who live and work in isolated areas – policy decisions must reflect this reality.

In delivering sustainability for remote rural Scotland through this Bill, Scottish Government must be vigilant that doing so does not negatively impact those rural areas that are not considered remote.