

Scottish Rural Communities Policy Review: Stage 4 Final Report

Scottish Government

To: All Chief Executives, Main Contacts and APSE Contacts in Scotland. For information only England, Northern Ireland and Wales.

1. Executive Summary

The Scottish Government commissioned a review of the [Scottish Rural Network](#) (SRN), [Scottish Rural Action](#) (SRA) and Community Led Local Development (CLLD) to assess their effectiveness and future role within Scotland's rural policy landscape. The review concludes that all three play distinct but complementary roles in supporting rural communities and recommends a more integrated approach to their future development.

The review identifies opportunities to strengthen governance arrangements, improve transparency, enhance rural proofing across government, develop more sustainable funding models, and increase collaboration between organisations involved in rural development. It also proposes a number of more ambitious reforms, including the development of a shared vision for rural Scotland, the establishment of a Rural Communities Taskforce, and consideration of an independent Rural Commissioner.

For local authorities, the review has particular relevance in relation to Community Led Local Development, place-based policy, participatory governance, community empowerment, and the future design and delivery of rural funding programmes.

[Click here](#) to read the full report.

2. Background

Rural areas constitute 98% of Scotland's landmass and 17% of its population. The Scottish Government's core definition of rurality classifies areas with a population of fewer than 3,000 people to be rural.

The review examined three key elements of Scotland's rural support infrastructure:

- **Scottish Rural Network (SRN)** – A Scottish Government-led mechanism focused on rural engagement, communications, knowledge exchange, and support for rural proofing.
- **Scottish Rural Action (SRA)** – An independent organisation supporting the development of a ‘rural movement’, facilitating participation, advocacy, and rural voices in policy processes.
- **Community Led Local Development (CLLD)** – A funding and delivery mechanism (building on the [EU’s LEADER model](#)) supporting community-led priorities through Local Action Groups and associated governance structures.

Collectively, these initiatives aim to support rural communities, facilitate community participation, strengthen rural voices within policymaking, and deliver local development activity.

The review considered both the operational delivery of each programme and their wider strategic contribution to rural policy. In doing so, it examined how these arrangements fit alongside wider policy developments including community empowerment, public service reform, rural proofing, community wealth building and place-based approaches.

Alongside recommendations aimed at improving programme delivery, the review also explored opportunities for wider structural reform to strengthen rural policy coordination and improve accountability across government.

3. Key Findings from the Review

Fragmentation within a shared system. A central finding of the review is that while SRN, SRA and CLLD perform different functions, they increasingly operate as part of a wider rural support ecosystem. The review argues that their future effectiveness will depend upon greater clarity of purpose, improved collaboration and stronger strategic alignment.

Funding complexity and short-termism. Funding emerged as a recurring issue throughout the review. Stakeholders highlighted challenges associated with annual funding cycles, uncertainties over future allocations and the administrative burden associated with existing arrangements. The review therefore explores opportunities for longer-term funding approaches, greater alignment between funding priorities and policy objectives, and closer integration between different funding streams.

Governance transparency and accountability gaps. The review identifies a need for clearer governance arrangements and greater transparency around organisational roles, responsibilities and decision-making processes. It recommends the publication of clearer work programmes, improved communication of funding processes and a more explicit articulation of how the three elements complement one another.

Strengthening rural proofing. While recognising progress made through the Rural Assessment Toolkit, the review suggests that rural considerations could be embedded more consistently across government policy development. It therefore proposes a range of measures aimed at strengthening rural proofing processes and ensuring that rural perspectives are considered at an earlier stage of policy design.

Increased emphasis on participation and inclusion. The review recommends strengthening mechanisms through which rural communities can influence policy, including through increased use of participatory approaches, enhanced engagement with underrepresented groups and further development of youth participation structures such as the Rural and Islands Youth Parliament and the Young Islanders Network.

Data, evidence and evaluation weaknesses. The review also highlights the need for stronger evidence, monitoring and evaluation frameworks. Recommendations include improved data collection, greater use of outcome-based evaluation methods and more systematic approaches to measuring the impact of rural interventions.

4. Implications for Local Authorities

Many of the review's recommendations have implications for local authorities, particularly those operating in rural and island areas or acting as accountable bodies for Community Led Local Development (CLLD) funding.

The review reinforces the importance of place-based working and recognises the role local authorities place in connecting national policy objectives with local priorities. Proposed changes to governance arrangements, community participation mechanisms and rural proofing processes are likely to require ongoing engagement between councils, communities and national partners.

The recommendations relating to CLLD are of particular relevance. These include proposals aimed at improving funding certainty, strengthening Local Action Group governance, increasing transparency, and encouraging wider community participation. The review also highlights opportunities to strengthen links between CLLD and wider policy agendas including community wealth building, local governance reform and community empowerment.

The review's focus on monitoring, evaluation and data collection may also have practical implications for local authorities, particularly where councils are involved in administering funding programmes or supporting local partnership arrangements. Greater emphasis on outcome measurement and evidence gathering may require additional coordination between local and national partners and potentially additional resources.

More broadly, the review signals continued policy interest in community-led approaches, participatory governance and rural place-based development. Local authorities are likely to remain central partners in the delivery of these agendas.

5. Emerging Policy Direction

Although many recommendations focus on operational improvements, the review also points towards a broader strategic direction for rural policy in Scotland.

A key theme is the development of a more coherent and integrated approach to rural policy. Rather than viewing SRN, SRA and CLLD as separate initiatives, the review advocates treating them as interconnected elements of a wider support system for rural communities.

The review also places considerable emphasis on developing a shared vision for rural Scotland, supported by stronger cross-government collaboration and enhanced rural proofing arrangements. This reflects a wider ambition to ensure that rural issues are considered across policy areas rather than being confined to specific rural programmes.

Place-based policy is another significant theme. The review identifies opportunities to align rural policy more closely with community empowerment, public service reform, community wealth building and other place-focused agendas. In doing so, it highlights the importance of ensuring that rural perspectives are reflected within wider policy developments.

Finally, the report points towards a greater emphasis on participation, accountability and evidence based decision-making. Proposals for a Rural Communities Taskforce and a Rural Commissioner illustrate a desire to strengthen oversight, coordination and the visibility of rural issues within government.

6. APSE Comment

The review presents a comprehensive assessment of Scotland's current rural support arrangements and identifies a number of opportunities to strengthen coordination, transparency and long-term policy coherence.

Many of the themes identified will be familiar to local authorities, including the importance of place-based approaches, effective community engagement, sustainable funding arrangements and partnership working across sectors. The review also reflects wider discussions taking place across local government regarding community empowerment, public service reform and the role of local institutions in supporting resilient communities.

The emphasis on strengthening links between rural policy, community-led development and wider place-based agendas highlights the increasingly interconnected nature of policy development and service delivery. Local authorities will continue to play an important role in supporting these relationships and ensuring that local circumstances and priorities are reflected within broader strategic objectives.

As consideration is given to the review's recommendations, it will be important that any future arrangements provide clarity of roles and responsibilities, support effective partnership working, and recognise the diversity of Scotland's rural and island communities. Consideration

will also need to be given to the practical implications of any new governance, funding or reporting arrangements for delivery partners at local level.

APSE is currently undertaking a piece of research supported by the University of Staffordshire which is focused on Sustainable Island Futures. Professor Steve Griggs provided [an update](#) on the research at APSE Scotland's AGM 16 June in Glasgow including place sensitive policies. For more information on APSE's research programme or other services available please visit our [website](#).

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