



# **Informing Scotland's Rural Delivery Plan and Rural Lens: Evidence, Indicators and Evaluation**

Final Report from the SEFARI Specialist Advisory  
Group

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## Highlights

**What were we trying to find out?** This report summarises the information provided to, and discussed with, the Scottish Government by a SEFARI-funded Specialist Advisory Group (SAG). The SAG was originally set up in late 2022 to provide advice to the Scottish Government for developing their rural lens guidance. The role of the Group evolved over time to broaden its activities in response to Scottish Government's announcement that a Rural Delivery Plan would be published by 2026.

The aim of the SAG was to draw on the individual and collective expertise of a group of academics to provide information and advice to the Scottish Government on its introduction of a rural lens and on its Rural Delivery Plan. Members of the Group provided this information on the basis of previous research (done by themselves and others) on rural policy design and implementation in different countries, including in relation to rural proofing/rural lens tools, and their learning about what has worked well and less well in other contexts which might be relevant and applicable to Scotland.

**What did we do?** Members of the SAG met regularly and exchanged emails with one another and with Scottish Government policy officials to provide general advice and to answer specific questions posed by the officials as part of the design of the rural lens guidance and the Rural Delivery Plan.

**What did we learn?** There is an existing body of research on the availability and quality of data and indicators for rural areas and issues, and this has highlighted that data is often not available at small enough scale nor in joined up ways to adequately highlight inter-connected rural challenges and opportunities. It may be appropriate to have different indicators in different places to reflect different circumstances, with a theory of change designed to guide the process of designing appropriate interventions for the desired outcomes/outputs. Rural proofing activities have generally not been evaluated well in other national contexts and this offers an opportunity for the Scottish Government to co-design approaches to do this fully and robustly.

**What do we recommend?** There is a need for a clear and positive vision for rural Scotland to guide the implementation of the rural lens and the focus and content of the Rural Delivery Plan this should be guided by a theory of change co-constructed with stakeholders, including communities. Better data is required to enable more detailed understanding of local rural circumstances; this may require additional (quantitative and qualitative) data collection, or new, more in-depth analysis of existing data. The implementation of a rural lens and of the Rural Delivery Plan need to be appropriately evaluated in terms of the full breadth of desired outcomes and their impact on wellbeing. Opportunities to learn from overseas are important, and co-design with stakeholders is critical to ensure buy-in and partnership-working.

## Executive Summary

- A SEFARI Specialist Advisory Group (SAG) was established in late 2022 to provide advice and information to Scottish Government to inform the design and implementation of the rural lens guidance across selected projects funded as part of the National Strategy for Economic Transformation. The work of the SAG evolved over time to take account of the shift to apply a rural lens across policy domains and the announcement of the publication of a Rural Delivery Plan by 2026.
- The SAG is made up of a small group of experienced academics, all of whom have worked on various aspects of rural policy-making for some time, with a particular focus on the design, implementation and impact of rural proofing processes in different national contexts. The first role undertaken by the SAG was to comment on the draft rural lens guidance produced by Scottish Government policy officials in the Rural Economy Policy team.
- The SAG's work then focused on three aspects of the application of a rural lens, and of the design and delivery of the Rural Delivery Plan: data and indicators; intervention logics and theories of change; and measuring impact. This report summarises the key aspects of the Group's intelligence-sharing across these three aspects.
- The SAG identified a large amount of existing research on rural definitions, data sources and indicators over the last few decades in the UK and beyond. Much of this work has concluded that data is often not available at small enough geographies (i.e. disaggregated locally enough) to fully describe rural circumstances or the extent of rural contributions, and often it does not adequately enable the measurement of less tangible issues such as wellbeing. It is worth considering whether there is merit in having a different set of indicators for rural areas (but linked to any national indicator set) and whether and how communities have a role to play in deciding on the most appropriate indicators for their area (perhaps from a suite of options). This requires an acceptance that different places may have different sets of indicators tailored to their specific circumstances and needs. Whatever approach is taken to choosing data and indicators, this must be guided by a clear and positive vision and policy framework for rural areas.
- Intervention logics and theories of change are different but the terms are often used inter-changeably. Theories of change tend to be more flexible (thus allowing for more real-world complexity) and focus on why things happen, more than what changes are likely to occur (as is the focus of intervention logics or logic models). Having a clear theory of change may help to ensure measurable outcomes are identified which deliver to an overarching vision. This vision is crucial for both the rural lens application and the Rural Delivery Plan.

- Scotland has a history of rural interventions over the last few decades, from general policy statements to specific funding schemes. Some of these have been evaluated, but not all of these evaluations are still (or indeed were ever) publicly available, which means that learning from them when shaping new interventions can be difficult if not impossible and there is a real risk of repeating things that have not worked well and reinventing the wheel.
- Rural proofing and rural lens implementation in other countries has not been well evaluated, with the success of rural proofing often measured according to how easy the guidance is to follow or the tools are to implement across policy domains. The process is often viewed very negatively by policy-makers, rather than as being something that will enhance the ability of rural areas to contribute even more to national economies. There is an opportunity for the Scottish Government to develop robust mechanisms for evaluating the success of the rural lens in terms of the impact of a change in policy resulting from its use for rural residents, businesses, visitors, etc. Conversely, the potential impact could be measured if any changes suggested by applying a rural lens are not implemented (e.g. the number of rural businesses that might be disadvantaged/excluded from a change in service delivery, or the number of rural households disadvantaged by a policy change requiring a change of technology). There may be learning to explore from reviewing ICIAAs that have been undertaken.
- It may be worth exploring the value of tools such as social value and social return on investment in measuring a wide range of potential impacts that go beyond GDP or productivity to encompass wellbeing, for example.
- Across all of these three issues, the SAG emphasised the importance of policy-makers in Scotland learning from and exchanging information with other countries, where relevant and appropriate. This includes countries within the EU but also beyond where rural proofing/a rural lens has been applied (e.g. New Zealand, Canada). Working closely with rural (and indeed non-rural) stakeholders is also vital to ensure that there is co-production of rural lens tools and of the vision and desired outcomes of the process and the Rural Delivery Plan as a whole. Building on the existing cross-Government buy-in and collaboration through the Ministerial Working Group on the Rural Delivery Plan is important.

## Introduction

In April 2023, Scotland's new First Minister Humza Yousaf MSP published his policy prospectus '[Equality, opportunity, community](#)' and announced that the Scottish Government would publish a Rural Delivery Plan (RDP) by 2026. The Plan will show (p8):

*"...how all parts of the Scottish Government are delivering for rural Scotland. As well as policies on agriculture, land reform, marine, and our Islands Plan, this will cover areas such as transport, housing, social justice, repopulation, digital connectivity and economic development."*

A few months before this in December 2022, two Cabinet Secretaries (Mairi Gougeon MSP, [then] Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands and Kate Forbes MSP [then] Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Economy), made a commitment to apply a rural lens to projects funded as part of the National Strategy for Economic Transformation (NSET) which launched in Spring 2022. More recently in August 2023, Cabinet Secretary Mairi Gougeon MSP, [commenting on the publication of SRUC's Rural and Islands Report: 2023](#), confirmed that:

*"The Scottish Government is committed to continuing to build vibrant, sustainable and inclusive rural and island communities, now and for future generations."*

*This report will help to inform the Rural Delivery Plan which is an opportunity to set out the actions government and public bodies are taking to improve policies that impact rural communities - such as agriculture, marine, land reform, transport, housing, repopulation, social justice and digital connectivity."*

*Fully understanding the challenges faced by rural and island communities is crucial to addressing their specific needs. The insight and recommendations from this research, combined with hearing directly from rural and island communities themselves, will be valuable as we develop the plan, which will ensure that a rural lens is applied to all ongoing policy."*

This explicit application of a rural lens represents an interesting development in rural policy in Scotland. While the Government's approach remains rural mainstreaming, as has been the case since the early 2010s when the National Performance Framework was introduced<sup>1</sup>, it argues that adopting the rural lens will ensure a 'sharper focus' is placed on rural areas and issues. This will happen in a way that is positive and focused on

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Scottish Government's Rural Scotland Key Facts 2021 publication (p3): *"The Scottish Government acknowledges that key areas of policy such as the economy, transport, education and health can have a particular impact on rural communities, and seeks to reflect this in mainstream policy development."*

releasing the potential of rural areas, rather than negatively implying that rural areas are lacking something and are lagging behind (an assumption which is sometimes associated with the term rural proofing<sup>2</sup>). The RDP provides the opportunity for a rural lens to be applied across the Scottish Government's policy domains to assess how well they are delivering for the 17% of Scotland's population that live in rural communities across the country.

This paper explores three building blocks which could help to ensure that the rural lens assessment is full, accurate and meaningful:

- an accurate, up-to-date evidence base to inform the creation and use of associated indicators,
- a clear intervention logic to be able to identify the steps needed to get from the baseline situation to an improved situation, and
- SMART outputs and outcomes to measure the extent to which a clearly stated vision is achieved.

Drawing on the individual and collective expertise, experience and knowledge of the members of the SEFARI Specialist Advisory Group (SAG)<sup>3</sup>, and with reference to wider academic and other literature and research where appropriate, this paper discusses these key elements in turn (recognising that they are all interrelated). The aim of the paper is to inform the RDP as it develops, including through discussions at the Ministerial Working Group during 2024.

### **Rural evidence and indicators**

This first section of the report focuses on rural evidence and indicators, drawing on research work over the last few decades from Scotland, the wider UK and beyond. The section concludes with a set of key messages that the SAG believes are worth considering when designing indicators for the RDP.

A necessary first step in defining appropriate indicators for rural areas is agreeing on a definition of rural on which data identification and analysis can be based (see Bryden 2002

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<sup>2</sup> For more discussion of rural proofing, see the work of the [European Network for Rural Development's Thematic Group on Rural Proofing](#) which ran in 2021-2, and in particular the Group's [background paper](#) and [final working paper](#). See also, Shortall, S. and Sherry, E. (2017) *Briefing Paper One: Preliminary recommendations to assist with the development of a guidance framework and monitoring framework for rural proofing related to the Rural Needs Act*, AFBI and CRE. Available online: [Preliminary recommendations to assist with the development of a guidance framework and monitoring framework for rural proofing related to the Rural Needs Act | Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute \(afbini.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> See footnotes 1-6.



for more discussion of this<sup>4</sup>). However, many researchers have argued that the ‘simplicity’ of a definition which is based on a limited number of factors (usually population density and accessibility to an urban centre) is problematic as it can create an artificial rural-urban dualism and can downplay both the diversity of rural areas and the inter-relationships between rural and urban areas. Moreover, if definitions vary fundamentally between countries, this can make international comparisons difficult (if not impossible). This has led some researchers to develop typologies of rural areas as a more effective way of recognising both their diversity and the complexity of functional (and other) relationships between different types of places (see Copus et al.’s [2008] paper on typologies in the EU for more discussion of this, and also Van Eupen et al. [2012]<sup>5</sup>).

In terms of the need for a definition of rural in order to implement rural proofing<sup>6</sup>, Parnell and Lynch (2023, p63) argue that rather than trying to define rural in strict territorial terms, it may be more practical and effective to think about rural proofing from the point of view of the shared characteristics of rural areas. Understanding these characteristics may be easier and more intuitive for policy-makers across government departments than the characteristics that define rural, making it easier for them to assess the potential impact of their proposal on rural communities.

Potentially adding to the complexity of defining rural areas, Bryden (2002) notes the usefulness of adopting different territorial units to address different issues, such as using functional labour markets to explore labour market issues. For other issues a water catchment or bioregion approach may be more appropriate.

Bryden (2002) notes that the OECD’s Territorial Data Service (TDS) was established in 1994 and had (at the time of his writing in 2002) developed a database for 2,500 sub-national units including demographic, economic, social and environmental indicators to classify those territories according to analytical requirements.

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<sup>4</sup> Bryden, J. (2002) *Rural Development Indicators and Diversity in the European Union*. Available online: [\(PDF\) Rural Development Indicators and Diversity in the European Union \(researchgate.net\)](#)

<sup>5</sup> Copus, A., Psaltopoulos, A., Skuras, D., Terluin, I. and Weingarten, P. (2008) *Approaches to Rural Typology in the European Union*, Joint Research Council (JRC) Scientific and Technical Reports, EUR23634 2008; van Eupen, M., Metzger, M., Perez-Soba, M., Verburg, P., van Doorn, A. and Bunce, R. (2012) A rural typology for strategic European policies, *Land Use Policy* 29 (3), pp. 473-482. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landusepol.2011.07.007>

<sup>6</sup> The terms rural lens and rural proofing are often used inter-changeably. The Scottish Government takes the view that rural lens is a more positive term and potentially makes the process itself more positive than rural proofing. ‘The Last Dance’ session at the end of the 2023 Scottish Rural and Islands Parliament where the RDP was discussed explores differences in meaning between the two terms in more detail.

The OECD has continued this data and indicator work (see their [Regional Statistics and Indicators](#) page) and although they have collected data on a wide range of indicators, including to address different aspects of wellbeing, most of this data is only available at regional level and therefore often does not enable local (i.e. sub-regional) rural-urban characteristics and differences to be explored.

*Figure 1: OECD Territorial Data Service (TDS) indicators according to key development concerns (1996) (Source: Bryden, 2002)*

Population and Migration	Social well-being and equity
Density	Income
Change	Housing
Structure	Education
Households	Health
Communities	Safety
Economic Structure and Performance	Environment and Sustainability
Labour force	Topography and Climate
Employment	Land Use Changes
Sectoral Shares	Habitats and Species
Productivity	Soils and Water
Investment	Air quality

Source: OECD (1996)

*Figure 2: Three indicator themes designed by Bryden and colleagues in the PAIS project (Source: Bryden 2002)*

<b>1. Quality of life and social well-being</b>	
	Environmental features, service availability (health, education, local government), housing, safety, income and deprivation
<b>2. Economic structure and performance</b>	
<i>General</i>	Sectoral shares, enterprise, investment, labour force attributes, performance and competitiveness, business infrastructure, single industry dependence.
<i>Primary sector activity</i>	Multifunctionality of agriculture, diversification and productivity, financial resources.
<i>Tourism sector activity</i>	Physical features of consumption, physical features of supply, employment features and other monetary features
<b>3. Demographics</b>	
	Population density, change and structures, commuting patterns, migration patterns, cultural issues.

Bryden (2002) also noted that the EU's time series data on many important economic and social indicators was "woefully inadequate" below regional level (NUTS 2 level). Bryden (2002) noted that in 1996, the TDS proposed a set of indicators organised according to four main development concerns relevant to rural areas (Figure 1). Building on this, Bryden's subsequent PAIS project for Eurostat identified three categories or themes of indicators: quality of life and social wellbeing, economic

structure and performance and demographics (Figure 2). His work assessed some 500 indicators using the standard criteria of sensitivity, analytical soundness, comprehensibility, reference value, and policy relevance. From these, 55 indicators were selected that were considered to represent "best practice" in addressing the needs of rural development policy makers and practitioners. He argued that it can be useful to make the distinction between (a) indicators that measure 'performance' along a number of

dimensions, and (b) indicators that may help local, regional, and national policy makers to account for relatively good, or poor, performance<sup>7</sup>. [Philip and Shucksmith's paper on social exclusion from 2003](#) also contained a four-fold domains framework for grouping indicators of social exclusion, according to the means by which resources and status are allocated in society. This framework has been revisited more recently in the [Rural Lives](#) study of financial hardship in rural Britain<sup>8</sup>.

Before reviewing some more recent/current work on rural indicators, it is worth noting a study undertaken for Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) in 1995 by Conway and Shucksmith<sup>9</sup>. The authors explored social indicators for the Highlands and Islands for measuring progress against HIE's strategic objectives. While this work was undertaken almost 30 years ago, it still has resonance today and may be useful in thinking about appropriate data and indicators for the RDP. Conway and Shucksmith's work built strongly on earlier research on rural disadvantage<sup>10</sup> in particular to demonstrate the issues that were of importance to people living in the Highlands and Islands, and to highlight the challenges of identifying quantitative indicators of deprivation, not least because existing indicators tended to suffer from an urban bias in their construction and to obscure the processes underlying disadvantage in rural contexts.

As well as 'growing businesses', HIE's objectives included 'developing people' and 'strengthening communities', with Conway and Shucksmith (p1) arguing that the latter two strategic objectives were "*less easy to measure and conceptualise and the sources of information may be lacking*". The report noted a trend beginning in the 1960s of increasing dissatisfaction with the use of conventional economic indicators as proxies for welfare indicators. It noted work which had already started in the 1960s to develop alternative indicators to GDP and GNP as measures of national wellbeing, with the Canadian Government for example producing a set of indicators based on four key areas: population and migration; economic structure and performance; social wellbeing and equity; and environment and sustainability.

As discussed earlier, the report also noted that it is often difficult to apply indicators to rural areas due to the lowest scale at which indicator data is commonly available which usually

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<sup>7</sup> For more information, see: Bryden, J.M., Copus, A., and MacLeod, M. (2002) *Rural Development Indicators, in the Report of the PAIS project, Phase 1*. Report for Eurostat with LANDSIS, Luxembourg, February

<sup>8</sup> See also the recently published book from this project: Shucksmith, M., Glass, J., Chapman, P. and Atterton, J. (2023) *Rural Poverty Today*, Policy Press.

<sup>9</sup> Conway, E. and Shucksmith, M. with Chapman, P. (1995) *Social indicators for the Highlands and Islands*, Draft Report to Highlands and Islands Enterprise (December). Available on request from Jane Atterton or Mark Shucksmith.

<sup>10</sup> See Shucksmith, M., Chapman, P. and Clark, G. (1996) *Rural Scotland Today: The Best of Both Worlds?* Aldershot: Avebury.

does not allow for monitoring at rural settlement level. The collection of specific, local-level data would be expensive and time-consuming. The authors also questioned the appropriateness of some indicators (such as community spirit), whether they can and/or need to be appropriately quantified and measured, and whether they truly represent peoples' everyday life experiences and priorities.

Nevertheless, Conway and Shucksmith (1995) were successful in devising a set of issues, indicators and sources of data for HIE's strategic objectives on developing people and strengthening communities, many of which were not readily available (at least not in terms of publicly available quantitative data) for HIE to measure progress against them. For the strengthening communities strategic objective, they noted particular data gaps in relation to community groups and organisations, and rural services. The authors identified a list of factors that rural people tend to value (making them actually feel advantaged in their location), including lower levels of crime, good communities, better quality of life and good support networks and neighbourliness. While some of these issues linked to social wellbeing can be 'measured' through quantifiable indicators (e.g. lower levels of crime), for others this is much more difficult. The latter may therefore require more qualitative information to measure changes in economic and social development.

The report also noted work, in particular linked with 'Agenda 21', on involving local people in developing indicators for 'local sustainability'. As an example, the authors described the community of Jacksonville in Florida which took a bottom-up, community-led approach to devising 74 indicators to measure the quality of life of their citizens, based around nine areas (Education, the Economy, Public Safety, the Natural Environment, Health, the Social Environment, Government/Politics, Culture/Recreation and Mobility). Informed by Jacksonville's approach, Conway and Shucksmith (1995) suggested that a long-term approach should be taken to the process of developing indicators so that over time, trends can be identified, and that HIE should consult with communities in jointly identifying suitable indicators. They stated that:

*"It might be possible to establish two tiers of indicators – those identified and owned by the local community which it can use to monitor progress against the issues it identifies; and a Highlands and Islands-wide level, incorporating indicators which measure HIE priorities as well as those indicators which are consistently identified across local communities.*

*There are a number of reasons for adopting a community approach in the identification of indicators:*

- *Complies with the principles underlying Local Agenda 21*

- *Allowing communities to identify their own indicators will in itself act to strengthen local communities, one of the key HIE priorities*
- *Allows genuine community involvement*
- *Presents opportunities for joint working with other organisations and agencies,*
- *Will encourage networking - both of agencies and communities, as experience from other areas can readily be transferred, thus pursuing a further HIE priority*
- *Experience from other attempts at identifying local indicators is available, thus allowing a 'head start' in any programme adopted."*

A paper by Midgley et al. (2005<sup>11</sup>) explored the implications of the observed shift in objectives of Scottish rural development policy towards economic, social and environmental sustainability, promoted through local community empowerment. The authors considered the new challenges raised and accompanying future data needs using three scenarios, also discussing possible ways in which data availability and provision could be reoriented in future. During workshop discussions, participants (those working across rural development activities) highlighted the need for accessible and appropriate forms of data to lift current constraints on rural community empowerment and participation in local development, and to support rural communities' decision-making and strategic planning. Issues of ownership, confidentiality, access, quality, consistency and funding were raised, alongside communities' training and education needs in information handling and interpretation.

Returning to focus on more recent work at European level, a range of indicators have been developed at transnational and national level across Member States, for a variety of purposes. For example, the Commission's Common Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (CMEF) provided a framework of indicators for monitoring the efficiency of Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) spend at national and EU level. In the 2014-20 programming period, the CMEF contained over 200 indicators and the information was presented interactively via a data dashboard. Monitoring of the CAP was undertaken by the Commission using a number of indicator types to assess the CAP's performance against its objectives, while evaluation was undertaken by independent external contractors appointed through a public tendering process. For the rural development programmes, the evaluations were undertaken at national level with the Commission producing over-arching synthesis reports.

In the 2023-2027 period, a new regulation has established the Performance Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (PMEF). This change supports the overall shift in policy focus at European level from compliance with rules to performance and results (as part of the

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<sup>11</sup> For more information, see: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0264837704000341>

[EU's Better Regulation agenda](#)). The new performance-based delivery model uses a set of common performance indicators including:

- output indicators, which will be used for monitoring the implementation of the CAP
- result indicators, which will be used to monitor EU countries' progress towards pre-set targets, and
- context and impact indicators, which will be used to assess the overall policy performance against CAP objectives.

There is more information and associated reports available online on [the CMEF](#) and [the PMEF](#).

In its [Long Term Vision for Rural Areas](#) (LTVRA), the Commission made a series of commitments for rural areas, including the creation of an [EU Rural Action Plan](#) and a [Rural Pact](#) and associated community. The Rural Action Plan contains 30 actions organised by the four pillars of the rural vision (stronger, connected, resilient, prosperous) and to be implemented by 14 European Commission departments working together in close cooperation. As part of the vision, the Commission committed to put in place a rural proofing mechanism through a rural lens (again as part of the [Better Regulation agenda](#)) to assess the impact of major EU legislative initiatives on rural areas. The EU regards rural proofing as reviewing policies through a rural lens, to make them fit for purpose for those who live and work in rural areas. In practice, it considers, for policies in the making, the actual and potential, positive or negative, direct and indirect impacts and implications on rural jobs, development prospects, social wellbeing, equal opportunities for all and the environmental quality of life of rural areas and communities. At EU level there are [guidelines and tools to support the rural proofing process](#).

Also as part of the LTVRA, the Commission has set up a [Rural Observatory](#) to support knowledge production and improve data collection and dissemination related to EU rural areas. The Observatory represents an important source of information for rural proofing. The site contains information on the rural classifications used in different Member States, a tool which enables the user to find out information about specific places, trends data to compare changes over time, and thematic analyses. It is worth noting, however, that the Observatory notes that the widest range of indicators is available at the regional level (NUTS 2) which is not fine-grained enough to explore local rural-urban differences. It is also worth noting that the [European Network for Rural Development](#) has now become part of the [EU CAP Network](#) which may lead to some loss of visibility of rural issues. The European Commission-funded [ESPON programme of work](#) over a number of years has delivered a large amount of data, evidence and spatial analysis on the characteristics of different areas across the EU.



In terms of current research, researchers working in the Horizon Europe-funded [RUSTIK project](#) have recently published a report exploring the use of evidence and indicators in practical strategy and policy implementation<sup>12</sup>. They reaffirm some of the challenges of identifying data at sub-regional or local level, including misalignment in the years for which data is available when trying to make comparisons over time and a lack of information which can be disaggregated for different genders, age groups, etc. It is also the case that many policies have long-term targets so measuring impacts in short term – assuming the data is available - may not reveal significant impacts. The RUSTIK researchers note that capturing progress and impacts requires a wide range of indicators and qualitative evidence (p.5) for their own project, which involves 14 living lab locations across Europe<sup>13</sup>. As a result, the team recommends undertaking an exercise to create an inventory of significant sources of information for each living lab locality by bringing together a number of different and disparate sources of information and creating a common information grid to ensure the same data is collected for all of their living lab locations.

Specifically in relation to Cohesion Policy, the RUSTIK team note the use of a range of indicators to determine funding allocations (including GDP per capita, unemployment rates, population density, education levels, greenhouse gas emissions and migration); these indicators reflect regional prosperity, socio-economic factors and environmental challenges. GDP per capita tends to be used to measure economic cohesion; while poverty, access to services, etc. is used to measure social cohesion. The team note that the use of indicators has evolved over time in terms of Cohesion Policy, with a shift in the strategic logic from top-down and redistributive approaches to a more place-based approach, which emphasises the specific needs and strengths of different territories (this links with the more bottom-up approach outlined by Conway and Shucksmith (1995), drawing on the example of Jacksonville in the US). They note that this shift has resulted in an increased focus on obtaining data at different territorial levels and using alternative data sources, such as open data, big data and environmental data, to supplement national statistical data. They also note that public perceptions of Cohesion Policy and indicators of citizens' confidence and trust in the policy have also gained importance.

Given the centrality of wellbeing to the Scottish Government's policy priorities, national outcomes, etc. it is also perhaps worth noting that the Wellbeing Roundtable approach

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<sup>12</sup> The EU-funded GRANULAR project is a related project which is focusing on generating novel datasets and methods to better understand the characteristics and dynamics of rural areas. For more information, see: [Home - GRANULAR \(ruralgranular.eu\)](#)

<sup>13</sup> The RUSTIK project living labs are located in 10 European countries. More information on the living labs is available online here: [Living Labs - RUSTIK \(rustik-he.eu\)](#)

(originally suggested by Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi<sup>14</sup>, promoted by Carnegie UK and applied at national level in Ireland, Scotland, Canada and New Zealand, for example, and at sub-national level in North East England and in London) has now emerged as a method through which people's local priorities can be agreed and can form the basis of measuring progress towards them. This wellbeing approach also connects with the OECD's most recent rural policy statement, and they also conducted [follow up work to the Commission in 2013](#). The approach embraces economic, social, environmental and democratic domains, and the Centre for Thriving Places has compiled a [database of indicators connected with this approach](#) at local authority level for England and Wales (though not currently for Scotland).

**Key issues to consider:**

- **A clear vision for rural Scotland:** Scotland does not have a clear vision statement for its rural areas; this is needed as the starting point to inform decisions on the actions needed to deliver that vision, the outcomes required, the data, indicators and approaches to measuring the impacts of those actions (e.g. economic multipliers, Social Return on Investment, Social Value Engine, etc.), etc.. It is also needed as a way of encouraging a positive narrative for rural areas, based on what they can contribute to Scotland as a whole, and a way of counteracting the somewhat urban-centric nature of policy-making in Scotland. It is important that the vision and issues are identified first, with the data/indicators following on from that (i.e. this process should not be data-led); the vision can also form the 'anchor' for any intervention logic that is developed. Given the Scottish Government's emphasis on wellbeing and Scotland's future as a wellbeing economy with the principles of community wealth building and just transition at its core, it would seem appropriate for the vision to recognise these broader goals.
- **The need for complementary visions, purposes etc. for rural and island communities:** The Scottish Government's Islands (Scotland) Act and National Islands Plan set out the over-arching purpose for island policy and a set of 13 Strategic Objectives to reach that purpose. The vision for rural Scotland needs to be complementary to, and acknowledge this. The existence of the island legislation and plan, however, raises the question of whether it is a vision statement for mainland rural areas that is what is required? If so, how can such a vision statement take into account the huge diversity of challenges, opportunities, needs, etc. between remote mainland areas and accessible rural areas? The [new NISRIE](#)

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<sup>14</sup> For more information see the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress led by Stiglitz, Sen and Fitoussi in 2008. The report of the Commission is available online: [Report of the commission on the measurement of economic performance et social progress \(europa.eu\)](#)



[analytical framework](#) provides a means of differentiating and comparing islands and remote and very remote mainland areas. [Earlier work by James Hutton Institute colleagues on Scotland's Sparsely Populated Areas](#) also provides evidence on the different demographic and related challenges experienced by different types of rural area across Scotland. Allied to this, the work by Scottish Government, Scottish Rural Action and others<sup>15</sup> to create and strengthen a rural movement in Scotland will help to ensure that rural voices are 'heard more loudly' in policy-making.

- **To deliver the vision there will need to be clear targets:** It is important for the Scottish Government to consider and be clear about what its targets are for rural Scotland, for example, X affordable homes to be built by 2035. This allows progress to be easily tracked and makes the aims for rural Scotland concrete rather than aspirational.
- **Data disaggregation:** There is a need to ensure that data (as far as possible given confidentiality, anonymity and cost considerations) is disaggregated to the lowest spatial levels possible to enable economic, social and environmental circumstances in rural areas (and islands) to be understood and assessed accurately. This means that when data is being collected, care needs to be taken to ensure sample sizes are large enough to enable this disaggregation at the analysis stage (i.e. a rural lens needs to be applied to the research approach). The sample size should also be adequate to permit analysis by demographic variables such as age and sex, and socio-economic variables such as employment status, when the data is split for urban and rural areas. Developing typologies may help to 'get around' the issues of small sample sizes and anonymity (and indeed differences in rural-urban definitions and classifications between countries) and combining different methods may be useful in order to collect different kinds of data from different groups of people as a means of triangulating findings.

The recently launched [Rural Scotland Data Dashboard](#) will provide an easy to access hub for data on rural Scotland, which will help with target tracking. It would be useful to learn lessons from Defra's Rural Observatory which existed to provide up-to-date data, break it down by rural-urban geographies, etc. However, monitoring revealed that much of the data was rarely used (if at all), suggesting that what evidence is needed and for what purpose needs to be clearly defined and articulated.

It should be recognised that there are multiple ways to generate new and improve existing data for rural communities, including reviewing existing secondary data as well as identifying areas for additional primary data collection (e.g. through SRUC's Rural

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<sup>15</sup> See for example [SRUC's report on rural movements in Europe](#) to inform the Scottish approach.

Exchange and the wider Scottish Environment, Food and Agriculture Research Institutes (SEFARI) Strategic Research Programme projects). This may be done through modifications to existing surveys to increase rural sample sizes, modifications to survey questions to ensure they are fit for purpose for rural areas and the ways that issues are experienced in rural places, modifications to data after its collected again to ensure it is more fit-for-purpose (e.g. relating to household income estimates after housing costs to take into account the unaffordability of housing in many rural communities), and analysing data to always include rural-urban comparisons. For many indicators, qualitative information is vital as well or instead of quantitative data in order to understand ‘on-the-ground’ situations and experiences.

RESAS analysts in Scottish Government and researchers in SEFARI and in other HEIs across Scotland and beyond<sup>16</sup> all have an important role to play in generating data to inform policy and practice. There are particular data gaps for rural areas in relation to economic and business issues, and household financial circumstances, including benefit take-up levels and household spending, and how this differs spatially between rural and urban locations. For example, ad hoc case study work was done by Citizens Advice Service (CAS) in Dumfries and Galloway several years ago<sup>17</sup> focusing on the cost of a basket of goods in different locations across this region, but this work has not been repeated more recently, nor in other locations to enable comparisons to be made. Further work by CAS in 2015 suggested different kinds of data that might be useful in future work to track a rural cost of living penalty<sup>18</sup>. This work would be interested to repeat again now given recent (and ongoing) challenges with the high costs of energy, food and other aspects of daily life.

- **Indicators:** The choice of indicators to capture the challenges and opportunities of rural Scotland needs to be informed by existing knowledge of those key issues to ensure that indicators measure ‘the right things’.

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<sup>16</sup> For example, Emeritus Professor Mark Shucksmith has published widely on experiences of poverty in rural areas across the UK, including [a recent paper from August 2023](#) on the rural-urban poverty gap in England which contains a useful discussion on poverty data and indicators.

<sup>17</sup> Dumfries and Galloway Citizen’s Advice Service (2015) *Cost of Living: D&G Shop Check*. It has not been possible to find this work online but it is cited in Citizen’s Advice Scotland (2015) *Remotely Excluded. Barriers facing Scotland’s rural consumers* available at [https://www.cas.org.uk/system/files/publications/remotely\\_excluded\\_0.pdf](https://www.cas.org.uk/system/files/publications/remotely_excluded_0.pdf), and Revoredo-Giha, C., & Russo, C. (2021). Food prices in Scottish remote rural areas: Measuring and explaining the ‘remoteness premium’. Paper presented at 16th Congress of the European Association of Agricultural Economists “Raising the Impact of Agricultural Economics: Multidisciplinarity, Stakeholder Engagement and Novel Approaches”, Prague, Czech Republic, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/ruso.12468>

<sup>18</sup> Citizen’s Advice Scotland (2015) *Remotely Excluded. Barriers facing Scotland’s rural consumers* available at [https://www.cas.org.uk/system/files/publications/remotely\\_excluded\\_0.pdf](https://www.cas.org.uk/system/files/publications/remotely_excluded_0.pdf) (<https://doi.org/10.1111/ruso.12468>)

- It is worth considering if the indicators need to be the same everywhere or whether they (or at least some of them) can be different in different locations depending on the particular circumstances in different places. Given the huge diversity across rural Scotland, this is worth considering. Conway and Shucksmith suggested that indicators could be different in different locations as they should be devised, at least in part, in a place-based, bottom-up way to respond to different local circumstances. SRUC's recent NISRIE classification may be a useful way to analyse data as it enables different types of rural areas, small towns and islands to be analysed separately<sup>19</sup>. The choice of indicators in different places should also be revisited at appropriate intervals (e.g. every few years) to assess the need for new indicators to be added or some removed depending on the evolution of opportunities, challenges, needs, etc.
- If the role of the RDP is to assess how all parts of the Scottish Government are delivering for rural communities, the set of indicators needs to be holistic to ensure that all issues are taken into account, as well as the inter-relationships between them. It should also be recognised that policy goals may sometimes conflict and choices may need to be made over which is the priority (and this may be different in rural and urban areas). If data is not currently available to measure the indicators chosen, then changes need to be made to facilitate that data becoming available.
- There needs to be an ongoing process of revisiting the indicators to ensure that they remain fit-for-purpose. A formal review process relating to the indicators, and accompanying data, could take place through the Ministerial Working Group on the Rural Delivery Plan.
- **Learning from elsewhere:** It is worth considering whether there may be merit in regular sharing of 'best practice' between different countries in relation to rural data collection and analysis, and indeed broader issues regarding rural policies and policy-making, including rural proofing. Statistics Canada, for example, has a [well developed section of its website devoted to rural and small town Canada](#) covering a range of data, including relating to labour markets and employment, population, etc. The Canadian Government is also in the process of re-introducing a rural lens having previously done so from the mid-1990s. Engaging with OECD discussions

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<sup>19</sup> PhD work being undertaken by Kirsten Gow (at Aberdeen University and the James Hutton Institute) may also be useful here. Kirsten is developing an islands typology and more information on this is available here: Gow, K., with Currie, M., Duffy, P.M., Philip, L.J., and Wilson, R. (2023) *Gow's Typology of Scotland's Islands* Technical Note. University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen. 17p. Available at <https://abdn.elsevierpure.com/en/publications/gows-typology-of-scotlands-islands-technical-notes>. Kirsten is also currently undertaking an internship with the Scottish Government's islands team to further develop the typology and more information on this work should be available in February 2024.

on data and territorial indicators would also be valuable, as it would be with EUROSTAT. While all countries are different in terms of their set-ups and funding for national data collection, the importance attached to rural issues politically and in policy terms, etc. there may be useful learning that can be shared. Sharing best practice with regard to rural data collection and analysis within Scotland would also be useful, for example between local authorities, with the Improvement Service playing a role here, for example.

### **Intervention logics and theories of change for rural Scotland**

Put simply, an intervention logic is the explanation that lies behind taking an action or a set of actions to move from one situation (with a 'problem', A) to another situation (without that problem, B). This has also been described more formally as a logic model, outlining how an intervention produces its outcomes. The decision to adopt a particular action may be reached through an appraisal of different options. Making the link through the intervention logic between the problem and the delivery actions needed is part of the justification for taking that action. It also explains the way/s in which the solution is expected to work and can provide information on how to monitor that process, including the evidence required to undertake that monitoring. A logic model may therefore encompass a consideration of the initial context and conditions (both local and global) and capacities of the programme participants (and the relationships between them) which may shape the type/extent of outcomes that will be achieved, the inputs to the intervention, the quantity and quality of outputs or programme activities achieved, capacity outcomes (i.e. the direct short-term outcomes that enhance the capacities of those involved) and realised outcomes (i.e. the broader long-term impacts of a programme).

However, such models are sometimes criticised for being too simplistic, as this linear logic does not necessarily accurately reflect the complexity of real life where the reality is that a number of intervening factors are likely to influence the journey from A to B and the influence of one action (e.g. a policy change) will be hard to disentangle from other explanatory factors and may vary over time and space. This would be a concern for the application of a theory of change or intervention logic for an overarching RDP. While it may be possible to develop this for an individual policy area, it would likely be hard to develop and use such an approach for the RDP as an over-arching framework.

[According to the Centre for Theory of Change](#), theory of change is a comprehensive description and illustration of how and why a desired change is expected to happen in a particular context. It is focused in particular on mapping out or 'filling in' what has been described as the missing middle between what a programme or change initiative does (its activities or interventions) and how these lead to desired goals being achieved. It does this by first identifying the desired long-term goals and then works back from these to

identify all the conditions (outcomes) that must be in place (and how these related to one another causally) for the goals to occur.

Logic models and theories of change are different things but the terms are often used interchangeably. The most important difference between the two is that an intervention logic or logic model describes what changes are likely to occur, while a theory of change focuses on the why (i.e. why each intervention is expected to lead to certain outcomes), taking into account contextual factors and assumptions. Logic models are linear and based on a logical sequence of steps, while a theory of change is theory-driven and as result is most useful when considered before programme development as a way to determine the best intervention for the desired outcome. A theory of change is more able to take account of real-world complexity and the potential role of a range of intervening variables than a logic model.

It is worth just reflecting on how either/both of these may be used in a rural policy or rural lens context. As mentioned earlier, Scotland currently does not have a clear vision and associated outcomes for its rural communities. Nor does it therefore have a clear logic model or theory of change. While the purpose of applying a rural lens in Scotland is to put a sharper focus on rural areas and rural issues, there is also no clear statement of what the outcomes of the exercise are hoped to be. Indeed this is a criticism of rural proofing where it has been adopted in other countries – in terms of evaluating it, too much focus is placed on the process of rural proofing (which is often taken in a very limited way to assess whether the checklist easy to use) and not enough on the wider process or on the desired outcomes of rural proofing and their feasibility in different settings (e.g. X more rural businesses supported, Y rural people back into the labour market, etc.).

Adopting a logic model and/or a theory of change, however, may facilitate the elucidation of clear and measurable outcomes which will deliver to an overarching vision, a development which is important for both the rural lens adoption and RDP in Scotland.

In a current piece of work for WHO<sup>20</sup> on the importance of rural proofing for addressing the social determinants of health and improving rural wellbeing some of the discussion has focused on the logic models and theories of change relating to interventions in rural areas to improve health and wellbeing. An intervention logic in rural areas, for example, may be market failure (i.e. the private sector does not invest due to the high cost of delivery). The discussion has also explored a theory relating to the impacts of non-investment or de-investing in rural places, which might include service decline and depopulation, as well as implications for land use and the environment. Deterioration of

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<sup>20</sup> This work is being undertaken by Dr Jane Atterton and Dr Ian Merrell from SRUC's Rural Policy Centre and Dr Karen Scott from the University of Exeter. A policy brief from the work will be published in 2024. More information on this work can be obtained from [jane.atterton@sruc.ac.uk](mailto:jane.atterton@sruc.ac.uk)

these places and their communities may lead to the creation of insular systems that prevent and discourage intervention programmes, further prompting the appearance of lagging and stagnated localities. However, such an approach represents a somewhat negative rationale for rural investment. A more positive framing could be based on a rationale for rural investment which is to unlock the considerable (currently untapped) rural potential through supporting more rural businesses, creating more sustainable communities, etc.

It is also important to acknowledge and build on the work undertaken at the Scottish Rural and Islands Parliament (SRIP) in November 2023 to inform the RDP. This work proposes a draft framework which is different from a logic model or theory of change but could inform discrete logic models/theories of change. It encompasses a rural lens as a discrete structural lever coupled to a rural movement and lends itself to different levels of indicators.

***Key issues to consider:***

- ***Applying a logic model and/or theory of change in a Scottish context:*** It is important to consider which approach, a logic model and/or theory change or an alternative, would be most useful in a Scottish context given developments with the rural lens and the RDP, and how can it/they be designed (in particular through appropriate stakeholder engagement), communicated, subject to appropriate ongoing evaluation, etc. An important part of the process will be thinking through how this logic or theory of change differs in a rural context (and indeed in different rural and island contexts) compared to a non-rural context, and which data and indicators will be required. The important work undertaken at the recent SRIP should inform thinking and can form the basis for ongoing consultation with stakeholders. The synthesis report from ‘The Last Dance’ workshop in Fort William will be available shortly.
- ***Clear vision and outcomes for RDP and rural lens application:*** As suggested earlier in this paper, having a clear vision statement for rural communities in Scotland is important, as is a clear set of associated outcomes to be achieved through applying a rural lens and through the RDP. This will mean that the effectiveness of both can be more closely and accurately monitored and measured, and changes made if/when required. That is not to say that all impacts will be easy to monitor/measure. One example of the latter may be the rollout of the National Entitlement Card to all young people in Scotland and in particular its use for free bus travel. While this policy may be hugely beneficial to the young people living in urban centres to get to education and work, for those young people in rural locations who do not have access to regular, reliable public transport, the positive



impact will be minimal, and it may even exacerbate challenges of exclusion and isolation. This in turn has potential knock-on impacts for their wider communities, including subsequent out-migration of young people and local service decline. Measuring the impacts for these young people in terms of the training/employment they are not able to access or the impact of the decision they then take to move away is hard but potentially impactful.

### **Evaluating rural interventions: outputs, outcomes and impacts**

Evaluations of previous Scottish Government and other stakeholder interventions in various aspects of rural Scotland have been undertaken over the last few decades, but often not in a systematic way. Work being undertaken by SRUC researchers for the Strategic Research Programme 2022-2027 (Project SRUC-E2-2 'Reimagined Policy Futures: Shaping sustainable, inclusive and just rural and island communities in Scotland (ReRIC)' has reviewed the evolution of rural and island policy in Scotland since the Second World War. This review included reference to a number of evaluations that have been undertaken on various interventions in rural Scotland and beyond over the last few decades. There have been formal national and local level evaluations of EU LEADER funding, often as a requirement of the EU funding, as well as formal evaluations at EU level too, but other evaluations have been more ad hoc. It is also worth noting that the [SRUC review of the evolution of rural \(and island\) policy in Scotland](#) has concluded that not all of these evaluations are still (or indeed were ever made) publicly available. This is disappointing as they contain useful learning even though the socio-economic context, policy priorities, etc. have changed.

One issue that it is interesting to reflect on is the use of formative evaluation instead of or in addition to summative evaluation. A formative evaluation takes place as a programme or intervention is developed and implemented rather than solely at the end, which means that learning can happen on an ongoing basis leading to the ability to improve a programme or intervention during its life course. One example of this is an evaluation of Scottish Homes' rural policy and interventions (including Rural Housing Grants) where learning took place with stakeholders (i.e. through a process of co-production) as the interventions were implemented, which increased the chance of the interventions being successful<sup>21</sup>. There are other ad hoc evaluations which may also be useful, including for example work in 2013-14 to [evaluate the activities of Rural Housing Enablers in Wales](#) and [also slightly later rural housing evaluation work in England](#) in 2018. An evaluation of Scottish Homes' rural policy is summarised in Chapter 11 in a book published in 2003

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<sup>21</sup> A copy of the Scottish Homes Evaluation Report can be obtained from Mark Shucksmith or Jane Atterton (this is no longer available online).

edited by Gallent, Shucksmith and Tewdwr-Jones entitled '*Housing in the European Countryside*'. Summaries of all book chapters are [available online](#).

To support the shift to a wellbeing economy, it is worth considering methods of evaluating the impacts of rural policies or applying a rural lens which go beyond traditional measures of GDP or economic activity/productivity to be more all-encompassing for a wider range of different impacts, including those that are harder to measure. The Wellbeing Roundtable approach has already been noted in this report. Looking more recently and beyond Scotland, in 2015, an evaluation was undertaken of a community agents programme by the Centre for Health and Social Evaluation at Teesside University, using a social return on investment (SROI) approach<sup>22</sup>. The community agents programme was a pilot study to explore the feasibility of bringing together the health and social care sectors to work with voluntary sector services to better meet the non-health needs of the elderly and vulnerable adults in the Redcar & Cleveland area. The evaluation focused on whether the programme had made a difference to the people engaged in it, and whether the project had created any social value.

The approach adopted was the SROI Framework as developed by the SROI Network<sup>23</sup> and followed a set of key principles:

- Involving stakeholders
- Focusing on what changes
- Valuing the things that matter
- Emphasising 'materiality' – including only things that are material
- Avoiding over-claiming
- Being transparent
- Verifying results.

The report provides information on the monitoring data collected in the programme and its overall objectives and then describes the SROI process adopted including information about the scope and stakeholders, programme inputs, outcomes and evidence, programme impact, social return on investment and verification. The evidence collected was both quantitative and qualitative, with the latter undertaken in part to check that any estimates used in the former were realistic, and in part to be able to include any non-

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<sup>22</sup> Centre for Health and Social Evaluation (2015) *Community agents: making a difference, Social return on investment Evaluation*, Report for Tees Valley Rural Community Council (July). Available online: [community\\_agents\\_final\\_report\\_sept.pdf \(socialvalueuk.org\)](#)

<sup>23</sup> <http://socialvalueuk.org/>



material benefits not included in the SROI methodology. The report also outlines how evidence generated was used to inform decisions about the future of the programme.

Researchers at CCRI at the University of Gloucestershire have undertaken a number of evaluations of different rural policy interventions using SROI and it may be worth exploring their work further<sup>24</sup>.

The [Social Value Engine](#) tool has been adopted by the current (2023-24) Scottish Government CLLD programme and there will be useful learning from this about appropriate indicators to measure, ways to measure them and data requirements which may have wider lessons for rural development policies and interventions.

One of the criticisms of rural proofing or applying a rural lens is that policy-makers in government departments are often not fully aware of the outcomes that rural proofing is aiming to achieve. As such any evaluation of it that have been undertaken have tended to focus on evaluating the process not its outcomes, and even then to focus on evaluating the checklist that is used as part of the process, not the process as a whole. As Parnell and Lynch (2023, p.61) argue:

Rural proofing should always be considered in terms of the outcomes it is designed to achieve for rural areas and not in terms of compliance with a series of abstract process steps. This does not mean that rural proofing does not require a process, but the process itself needs to be undertaken reflectively and with a mind to the outcomes it is intended to achieve.

Rural proofing is also often seen as a somewhat negative process, based on addressing the needs and disadvantages of rural areas. If rural proofing was framed more positively as a process which unlocks the untapped potential of rural areas, communities and businesses (i.e. a potentials model)<sup>25</sup>, and this unlocked potential could be measured (either through economic multipliers or in other more holistic ways such as through SROI or social value), it may be easier to demonstrate its value and encourage policy-makers to complete it in a meaningful way. A narrative which explains and quantifies (where possible) the counterfactual may also be useful. For example, applying a rural lens may result in recommendations for changes to a policy which in its non-rural proofed format

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<sup>24</sup> See for example, the recent Horizon Europe funded [Farmwell project](#) which explored the wellbeing of farmers using a range of social innovations, including an SROI approach. Courtney and Powell (2020) reports the use of SROI to assess social innovation outcomes from the Rural Development Programme for England from 2007-2013 (Courtney, P. and Powell, J. (2020) Evaluating Innovation in European Rural Development Programmes: Application of the Social Return on Investment (SROI) Method. *Sustainability* 12(7), 2657. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12072657>

<sup>25</sup> For more discussion of this, please see Parnell W. and Lynch, C. (2023) Proposals for an effective rural proofing model for Ireland, Paper for the Department of Rural and Community Development. Available online: [gov.ie - Rural Proofing: Proposals for a Rural Proofing model for Ireland \(www.gov.ie\)](http://gov.ie - Rural Proofing: Proposals for a Rural Proofing model for Ireland (www.gov.ie))

may disadvantage rural businesses. It may be possible to articulate how many businesses would be directly disadvantaged if those recommendations are not implemented, in what ways and to what extent, and also the indirect impacts of them not being supported (or worse still, disadvantaged). Policies should be evaluated on an ongoing basis after they are implemented and it is important that this ongoing evaluation includes an exploration of the impacts for rural areas; this may mean that rural communities should be involved in the evaluation process, and if this is the case, they need to be resourced to do so, they need to understand what they are evaluating against and using which tools, and their input needs to be appropriately recognised and valued. If this impact on rural people is not measured, then the effectiveness and impacts of a mainstreamed policy cannot be ascertained.

It is also important to note a broader point, which is that applying a rural lens to general policies does not replace the need for dedicated rural policies and interventions. The decision on which is the most appropriate option needs to be taken early, at the very start of the policy process at the inception stage. At this stage, those involved in the discussion are likely to be at ministerial and/or senior civil servant level and they need to be taking rural circumstances into account from the outset in order to be able to make a decision about whether the best outcome for rural areas is for a new transport or economic development policy, for example, to be subject to a rural lens assessment or whether it would be more appropriate to have a separate rural transport or rural housing policy.

As Parnell and Lynch (2023, p61) argue:

*“In its policy framework ‘Rural Well-being: Geography of Opportunities’, the OECD notes that rural development, particularly in more remote regions should incorporate “overarching policies targeting rural attractiveness that nurture existing and new economic activities”. While some of these policies will require specific, targeted interventions, it is our view that much can be delivered by ensuring, through rural proofing, that general and sectoral policies and programmes are developed with the potential of rural areas in mind.”*

It is worth noting the example of Finland here which is usually described as having both a narrow and a broad rural policy. Finland regards those policies that impact on rural areas but which were not designed to ‘produce rural development’ – and may sometimes actually damage rural development, unless a rural lens is applied or appropriate rural proofing takes place - as broad rural policies, and they typically include policies for agriculture, forestry, fishing, social welfare, transport and infrastructure, public lands, environment and national parks, health and education, housing, trade, local government, energy, and so on. Policies that explicitly aim at rural development on the other hand are described as ‘narrow rural policies’.

Looking to what is done elsewhere, Parnell and Lynch (2023, p61) describe three proposed outcomes/objectives of rural proofing in Ireland as:

- An improvement in the quality of life of rural communities
- The harnessing of the assets of rural areas and communities in an appropriate way to contribute to national and regional policy objectives
- Ensuring that the maximum benefit for rural communities can be obtained from national policies and programmes.

**Key issues to consider:**

- **Recognising that the application of a rural lens to policies across Government does not mean that rural-specific policies and interventions are redundant.** Both policy approaches are required to ensure that rural areas and their opportunities and challenges are most effectively addressed. It may be worth exploring how both are used effectively in other national settings; Finland for example is often described as having both a broad and a narrow rural policy. The 'broad' rural policy refers to the way in which rural areas and their residents are taken into account in all policy areas (i.e. rural proofing), while 'narrow' rural policy refers to the practical instruments employed by government and society to specifically support rural communities, including rural development funding programmes.
- **Articulating the purpose of the RDP:** As it has been described so far, the RDP seeks to demonstrate how the Scottish Government is already delivering for rural Scotland and serves as a means to set out actions to improve policies that impact upon rural communities. These purposes need to be set out clearly at the start of the Plan which will help to demonstrate to policy-makers how their activities in relation to specific policies will benefit rural communities and (therefore) the whole of Scotland. This argument resonates with the conclusions of the National Council of Rural Advisers in 2018 who, in their final report, argued that:

*"We need **radical** change that redefines the rural contribution and makes clear its significance in achieving Scotland's national ambitions... The leading recommendation is that a vibrant, sustainable and inclusive rural economy can only be achieved by recognising its strategic importance – **and effectively mainstreaming it within all policy and decision-making processes.** When this is achieved, ultimately, there should be no need for a separate rural economic strategy – it will simply be part of 'the way things are done'.*

*But we know that requires a change in mindset, culture and structure, and that takes time... We have the opportunity to remove the complexity and lack of understanding surrounding rural support by clearly linking it to the achievement of*

*national outcomes: ensuring it is well understood, accepted and celebrated for improving national economic prosperity and wellbeing.”*

- **Articulating the outcomes of the RDP:** One outcome of the RDP is to articulate what the Scottish Government is doing for rural areas and another is to identify gaps in this provision. A discussion will then be needed about how best to fill those gaps (noting that the RDP does not have funding attached to it), which could be gaps in terms of knowledge and data collection to better understand a topic, gaps in the delivery of a service, or a gap in terms of learning about and measuring the impact of an intervention. The latter could be filled by reprioritising activities or by working differently and/or more collaboratively across policy portfolios and/or levels of governance. The discussion will need to involve policy-makers across portfolios and (as far as possible) all stakeholders involved at different governance levels, all of whom need to be bought into the overarching vision and outcomes.
- **Addressing the relationship between the National Performance Framework and its outcomes and the RDP:** It is not always possible to articulate the extent to which the NPF outcomes are being achieved in rural areas as well as urban areas as the data is not available at fine-grained enough level. Nevertheless, it will be important to clearly set out how the RDP will help to demonstrate how rural areas deliver to the outcomes, and/or if the RDP has different outcomes, indicators, etc. how these inter-relate with those in the NPF. This may be a real opportunity to ensure that there can be clear demonstration of the ways and extent to which rural areas positively contribute to national outcomes.
- **Potential impacts to be considered when applying a rural lens:** It may be worth further considering Parnell and Lynch’s (2023) two-step approach to rural proofing as the way to frame the rural lens activity in Scotland. The first stage is to consider the negative impacts (direct, indirect or unintended) of the policy on the rural population and to identify steps to mitigate these impacts. The second step in the process is to assess the extent to which rural communities or rural assets can contribute to the achievement of the objectives of the policy and whether any amendments to the proposal are required to facilitate that outcome. A question still remains, however, about the timing of these considerations. In order to achieve the best outcome for rural areas, they need to be considerations at policy inception stage which usually involves Ministers and senior civil servants, not only later during the policy design phase when other civil servants become involved.
- **Considering different ways of measuring outputs and outcomes:** ‘Traditional’ economic-focused approaches to measuring impacts alongside quantifying the amount of money spent on an intervention often underplay the extent and depth of impacts of rural interventions, because the numbers of individuals, households or

businesses benefiting is comparatively small (when compared to urban areas). There are a range of other measurement approaches which are broader and help to identify less tangible impacts on peoples' lives, including for example social cohesion and quality of life. It should be recognised still though that identifying and measuring these impacts is not straightforward, not least because the impacts may not be seen immediately an intervention is implemented, and it may require different actors and governance levels to work together to take a holistic approach to identifying impacts. Data to measure these impacts will need to be both quantitative and qualitative.

- **Learning from previous interventions:** The [work by SRUC to review policies since the Second World War](#) has revealed a good deal of learning already exists from what has been tried before. Although the policy, political, socio-economic etc. context has changed, there are still useful lessons to be drawn from this earlier work, in particular from evaluations already conducted (in terms of their content and also how the evaluation was conducted). There is a risk that some of this learning will be lost as many evaluation reports etc. are no longer (or never were) available online and are only in the personal files of the individuals who undertook the work. SRUC is exploring the potential for setting up a physical and/or online archive of these documents to ensure that they remain available.
- **International learning to inform Scotland's approach:** The EU's commitment to rural proofing in the LTVRA, and other work going on internationally on rural proofing (including by the WHO, FAO and the OECD), mean that there is a growing body of evidence on the application of rural proofing or a rural lens from different national contexts. In addition to learning from rural proofing activities elsewhere, other countries have rural development plans (Ireland is one example) and there may be useful international learning for Scotland too, in terms of how the plans were written, the involvement of stakeholders, how their impacts and outcomes are measured, etc. Learning from closer to home is important too, in terms of how the National Islands Plan was developed, consulted on, evaluated, etc.
- **Learning from ICIA's:** ICIA's were introduced as a legislative requirement in the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018. To date there has not been a systematic review of how these have been implemented, the outcomes and successes, challenges encountered etc<sup>26</sup>. The impact of the initial screening process has also not been evaluated, in terms of why, how and by whom the decision is made not to go ahead with a full ICIA. Undertaking and learning from such a review will be important to inform the Scottish Government's application of a rural lens (recognising that the latter is not set out in legislation). As discussed earlier in this report, the links

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<sup>26</sup> Jane Atterton undertook a [review of the learning from some early ICIA's](#), which was published in 2019.

between islands policy, including the National Islands Plan and ICIA's, and the rural lens and RDP are important to explore and articulate clearly across government departments and to all relevant stakeholders. For example, is it anticipated that the rural lens and RDP are for mainland rural areas only, given islands issues (including rural island issues) are dealt with through the National Islands Plan and ICIA? This is important, particularly given SRUC's work [to develop](#) and use (e.g. in the [Rural and Islands Insight report 2023](#)) a new analytical framework which has demonstrated the challenges being experienced by many remote mainland rural locations<sup>27</sup>.

- ***The importance of stakeholder engagement:*** The Scottish Government's guidance for ICIA's emphasises the importance of stakeholder engagement. This engagement needs to be more meaningful and ongoing than a simple one-off consultation. Work is ongoing to establish a rural movement in Scotland and this rural movement, together with supporting organisations including Scottish Rural Action, potentially has a key role to play in supporting ongoing engagement. As the basis for meaningful engagement, however, all those involved need to fully understand what the rural lens process is, how it works, anticipated outcomes, etc. They also need to be resourced to be able to engage meaningfully. Academic and research institutions across Scotland and beyond also have an important role to play in undertaking research, data collection and evaluation work.
- ***The role of the Ministerial Working Group:*** Having cross-Government buy-in to the RDP at its design stage through the Ministerial Working Group (involving Cabinet Secretaries and Ministers and senior civil servants) is very important. It is significant that this Group is co-chaired by the Deputy First Minister. Having this Group continue once the Plan is published will also be important to ensure ongoing buy-in and commitment to rural areas and issues, and that the impacts of the Plan are monitored on an ongoing basis. More practically, the Group can continue to feedback on the use of the rural lens guidance across Scotland's diverse rural areas, how they are engaging with rural stakeholders in different policy areas, evaluation methods, etc.

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<sup>27</sup> It is interesting to note that in an article in The Scotsman in November 2023, Deputy First Minister Shona Robison describing the discussions at the SRIP said *"they will help inform policy development and shape the development of the Rural Delivery Plan, which will set out how all parts of the Scottish Government will deliver [for] our vision for Scotland's rural and island communities."*