

# Scottish residents' preferences for places to live

## What services and place characteristics matter most?

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### Introduction

The sustainability of rural economies requires a healthy population structure and local availability of necessary skills. This can be achieved by retaining the current population and attracting new dwellers. Accordingly, the Scottish Government's **National Population Strategy** aims to promote “*a population [that] is more balanced and distributed across Scotland.*” While often desirable from the naturalistic point of view, **rural, island and remote locations** are generally characterised by lower accessibility to keystone services, forcing people to make difficult **trade-offs**. Therefore, we investigate Scottish residents' willingness to move (or not) to places that differ in terms of their natural environment, and service accessibility. Our results allow us to draw conclusions on what is needed to attract different demographics to such places.

### Methods

We conducted **two choice experiment surveys**, one in **2023**, targeting rural and town dwellers, and one in **2025**, targeting a sample representative of the entire Scottish population, and covering the full urban-rural continuum. Choice experiments are a method to quantitatively assess preferences between goods or services characterised by sets of “attributes” that can assume different “levels.” They allow us to account for trade-offs, and to calculate people's monetary valuation of each attribute.

In our choice experiments, each respondent was asked to make eight choices between **pairs of localities** characterised in terms of quality of the natural environment, quality of digital connectivity, commuting time, distance to family, driving time to schools, A&E hospitals, and grocery shops, urban-rural type (Scottish Government, 2018), and change in household income net of housing costs. Respondents could “opt-out” (i.e., decide to stay in their current locality). An example of “choice card” is provided as **Fig. 1**.

### Results

250 people answered the 2023 survey (“rural sample”), 1,007 the 2025 survey, of whom 63% were from urban areas. **28%** of the choices in the rural sample and 29% in the whole-Scotland one were to **stay in the current locality**, with about 6% always choosing not to relocate. The respondents' preferences for each attribute are illustrated in **Fig. 2**.

The quality of the **natural environment** and **digital connectivity** were key determinants of respondents' choices. For instance, in 2025, a “*very good*” natural environment was equated to a gain of £491 per month on average, compared to a “*poor*” environment, and a “*very good*” connectivity to £1,091, compared to “*no connectivity*.”

**Commuting time** and the **distance to schools, hospitals, and grocery shops** had no significant impact in the rural sample, while being significant drivers of choices in 2025, with respondents requiring “compensation” for longer distances. **Distance to family** mattered in both samples, with a greater penalty in 2025. Among the rural sample, all locality types were preferred over cities, but in 2025, the **locality type** (rural vs. urban, accessible vs. remote) was not a significant determinant of relocation decisions.

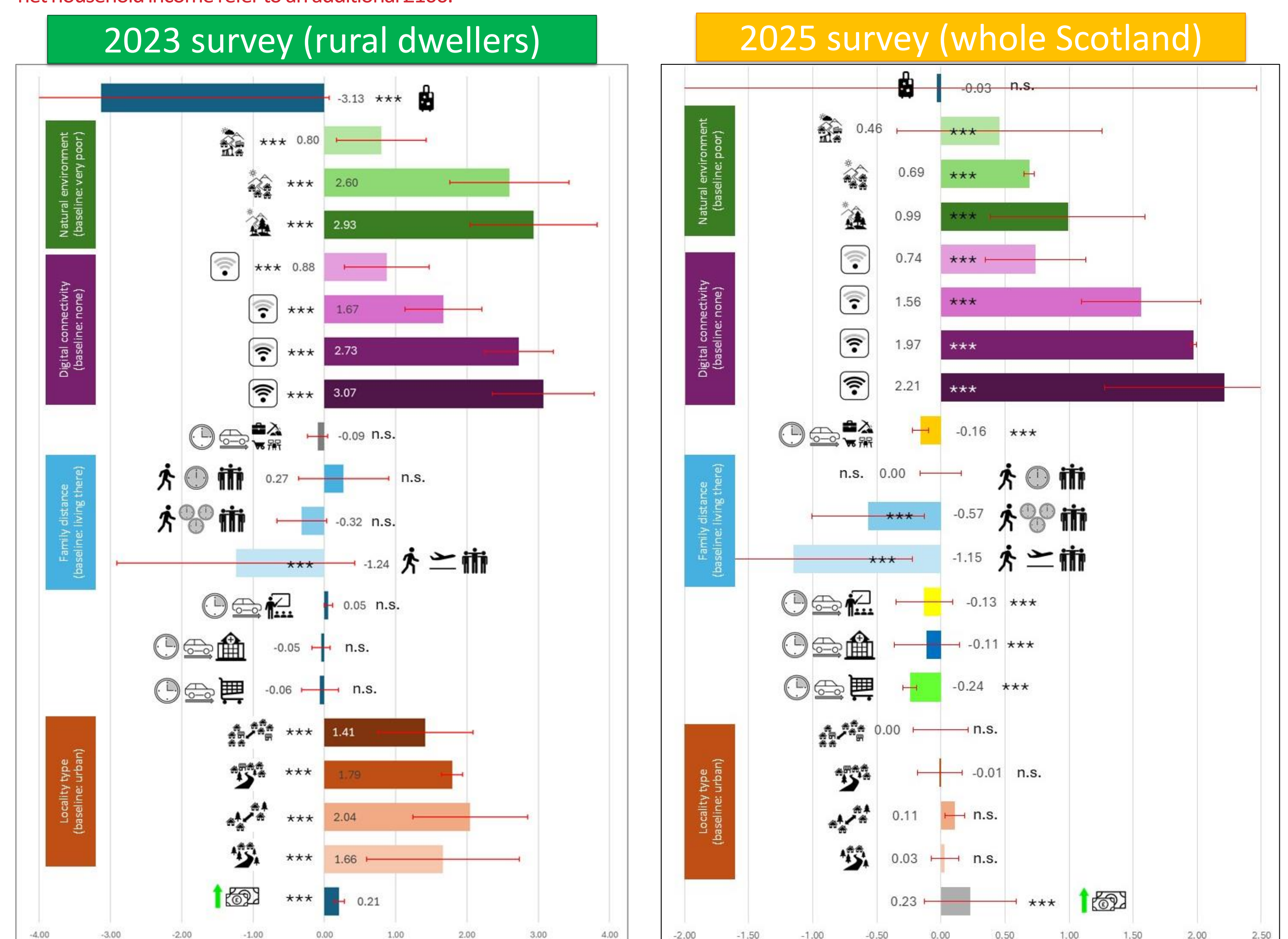
**Women** were more sensitive to distance to family and groceries; the **elderly** prioritised distance to hospitals, and tranquillity; **young people** valued good digital connectivity; respondents with **children** placed greater importance on the quality of the natural environment, with complementary questions pointing to pre-school childcare.

Figure 1: Example of card used in the 2025 choice experiment survey  
If these were your only options, which locality would you move to with your household?

|                              | Locality 1             | Locality 2        | Neither                                  |
|------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|--|
| Natural environment          | Good                   | Very good         |  |
| Digital connectivity         | Poor                   | Good              |  |
| Commuting time               | Roughly 30 mins        | Roughly 30 mins   |  |
| Family                       | Living in the locality | Less than 1 hour  | As in your current locality of residence |
| Primary and secondary school | Roughly 15 mins        | Roughly 5 mins    |  |
| A&E hospital                 | Roughly 45 mins        | Roughly 45 mins   |  |
| Grocery shop                 | Roughly 10 mins        | Roughly 10 mins   |  |
| Location typology            | Accessible rural area  | Remote rural area |  |
| Household income             | +£150                  | -£50              | £0                                       |

Figure 2: Preferences for different characteristics of localities

The bars represent the average values, and the red lines the standard deviations of the preferences based on mixed multinomial logistic models. The preferences for distance to the workplace and services refer to an additional 15 minutes of driving time, while the preferences for change in net household income refer to an additional £100.



### Conclusions

By assessing trade-offs between locality attributes, we identified both barriers and drivers to relocation. Our results show potential to achieve a more balanced distribution of Scotland's population through migration. Yet this goal cannot be met without considering the preferences of its mainly urban residents.

- Rural dwellers are used to long travel times, and therefore less affected by them. By contrast, attracting urban residents requires shorter distances to essential services.
- When service access, natural environment quality, and digital connectivity are factored in, place identity matters less for urban populations.
- Focus groups with a subset of respondents highlighted key priorities to unlock the population potential of rural areas: improved transport connections to local hubs for accessing services; greater availability, affordability, and quality of housing; expanded opportunities to work remotely; and job opportunities for all household members.

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