



What are Living Labs and how can they enable change in rural communities?

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Introduction to our Living Labs

A vital part of our research on rural communities is hearing from people living in rural and island communities about:

- The challenges they face in their everyday lives
- How things are changing
- What they would like to see happen in the future

We are working with eight communities across rural and island Scotland during the project (2022-2027) to understand the lived experiences of residents and businesses. We are looking at a range of factors that affect the liveability of rural and island communities and identifying ways of addressing challenges that have applicability elsewhere.

We call the communities *living labs* because we aim to *facilitate* as well as observe change. We also want the research to influence decision-makers. The living labs are settings for data collection, experimental methods, and exchanging knowledge.

As well as listening to the experiences of residents and businesses, we want to activate our role as researchers – where there is a call to do so – by putting our research skills to use for the benefit of the communities and by linking them to policy-makers and other stakeholders to help address challenges.

Each living lab explores a different topic (in the key to the right). By gathering data about these themes, we are aiming to gain a depth of insight into how different challenges manifest for people in diverse places, and inform policy about what solutions work best in different situations.

- Orange: Hoy (young people)
- Green: North West Highlands (repopulation)
- Purple: Lewis (climate change)
- Red: North East Scotland (young people)
- Blue: Coll and Tiree (transport and repopulation)
- Yellow: Perth and Kinross (micro-businesses and digitalisation and housing)
- Dark Red: South West Scotland (social innovation and community-led development)



Key findings from our work so far

In 2023, we interviewed around 100 people across 6 of our living labs, and we will re-interview many of them in 2026 to explore their experiences of continuity and change. Analysis of the first round of interviews highlighted:

- **Rural, remote and island communities feel they are in the midst of a poly-permacrisis.** While many of the challenges they face are not new, they are *persistent* and have been *exacerbated* by COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis. Some communities are getting closer to the margins of viability than they have ever been before. Many communities do not have the capacity to address the combined scale of these challenges alone.
- **External funding is not sufficiently supporting communities in the ways they need.** If the way forward is communities generating their own income, they need to be supported through that. The way in which communities generate income is spatially unjust and some have more capacity to do this than others.
- **Representation is also an issue.** Specifically:
 1. Local authorities are felt to be increasingly focusing on main centres of population to the detriment of more remote locations;
 2. Young people want their voices to be heard in a way that isn't tokenistic; and
 3. Community groups also want greater representation when decisions are being made that affect them e.g. in housing.
- **Communities want to learn from each other, share success stories and replicate such successes in a local-to-them, place-based way.** The researchers working in living labs are beginning to share stories on common themes between the living labs (as well as within them) specifically on topics such as community energy, housing and inclusion of youth voices.

Impact of our work in Tiree

We are working with Urras Thiriodh (Tiree Community Development Trust) to understand **which skills and roles are needed to ensure a sustainable and thriving Tiree**. Over the course of two workshops and a 'homework' activity, we have facilitated tasks to ascertain:

- What roles exist in Tiree and in what quantities?
- How are roles combined in individuals and in households?
- Which roles are most critical and most vulnerable?
- Who may leave the island if particular roles are lost?

These data are being combined with other information to create an agent-based model (computer simulation), which will enable us to understand the knock-on effects of losing or gaining roles and how this could affect the island's fortunes.

Impact: Urras Thiriodh will be able to use the model to inform its use of resources and to justify the case for more resources by better envisioning the potential long-term consequences of interventions and investments. In the longer term, the same approach could be replicated in other communities so that the benefits can be experienced beyond Tiree.



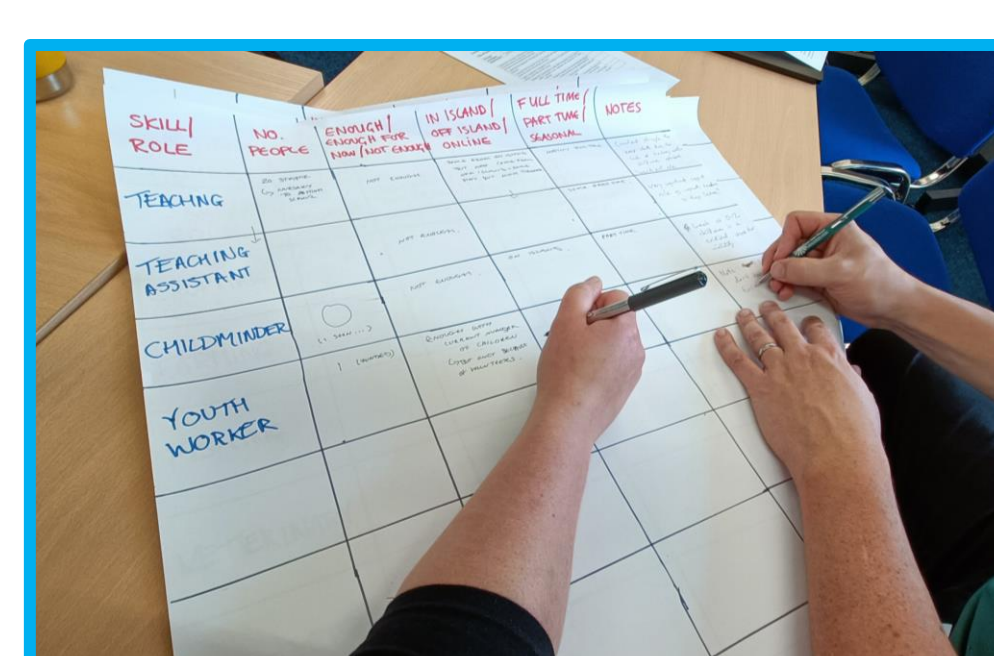
Housing, Tiree



Workshop in Hoy



Scapa Flow Museum, Hoy



Workshop with Urras Thiriodh

Impact of our work in Hoy

In addition to the longitudinal interviews, a workshop was held with different community voices to capture opportunities and challenges to tackle depopulation and reduce youth-outmigration in different future timeframes, short-term (i.e. 2-5 years) and long-term (i.e. 10-20 years). Whilst not representative of the whole Island, the interviews and workshop have helped demonstrate key issues relating to lack of affordable housing, a lack of awareness amongst both new(er) and older existing residents to available community resources and ways to become involved and fostering community spirit amongst different demographic groups.

Impact: Through our engagement activities, we've facilitated necessary dialogue between Hoy community actors and Orkney Islands Council to strengthen community capacity building in order to address some of these known challenges i.e. through future funding applications targeting provision of affordable housing.

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