

SEFARI Fellowship to understand changes in demand for largescale community land acquisitions and identify barriers and solutions to new acquisitions

REPORT

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1. Executive summary

The number of new largescale community land acquisitions has slowed over the past ten years. Largely, respondents in this research suggested this was less to do with a decrease in demand, but rather an increase in barriers to acquisition. Barriers identified by respondents were:

- Stretched community capacity and insufficient support from external organisations;
- Lack of ongoing support for the acquisition from local residents;
- Insufficient available funding, and constraining conditions on its use;
- Overcomplicated and ineffectual legislative mechanisms for acquisition;
- Reliance on a willing and cooperative seller;
- Lack of appetite for risk both within the local community and from funders.

Suggested solutions include:

- Increasing institutional support and community capacity;
- Improving promotion and communication of previous successes;
- Strengthening and simplifying legislative mechanisms;
- Improving and promoting routes to community empowerment short of ownership;
- Enhancing availability of funding and support for the acquisition process.

The vast majority of the thirty-four largescale community land acquisitions are located in two Local Authority areas – Western Isles and Highland – accounting for over 75% of acquisitions and over 94% of hectareage between them. The majority of these assets are crofting estates, followed by woodlands. While these assets and locations continue to dominate the largescale community land sector, in recent years there have been very few such acquisitions. Instead, different types of asset, including nature reserves, have emerged in different Local Authority areas. This may indicate a diversification of the types of largescale community land asset being acquired, but overall there has been a reduction in both the number of and hectareage of largescale community land acquisitions over the past ten years.

The concept of ‘demand’ itself was considered elusive and very difficult to accurately gauge, due to it being significantly affected by the combination of favourable conditions required for a largescale acquisition. Thus, while it is not possible to accurately measure levels of demand over time, it can be stated confidently that there remains a level of demand for largescale community land acquisitions which has not resulted in acquisitions.

The following suggestions and considerations emerged from this work:

Policy

- Strengthen support for, and understanding of, alternatives to outright ownership;
- Introduce a Land Value Tax to deter 'land-banking' and offer tax incentives for sales to communities;
- Strengthen and streamline mechanisms (such as Community Right to Buy) in order to encourage communities to utilise them;
- Increase the budget of the Scottish Land Fund in order to keep pace with the rising cost of land. Consider ringfencing money for largescale land acquisitions.



Practice

- Facilitate better peer support and communications in order to address any 'inspiration deficit';
- Representative and support organisations to better coordinate assistance for community organisations.



Research

- Further study the reasons for groups not achieving ownership;
- Consider the impact of the behaviour of largescale private/public landowners on demand for community acquisitions;
- Continue to seek answers regarding the factors affecting demand for largescale community land acquisitions between the major Scottish island groupings.



In addition, we present some more fundamental questions regarding the future role and purpose of largescale community landownership and how success should be judged, which are directly relevant to the interpretation of these findings.



2. Introduction and background

Community ownership of land is an important means of achieving sustainable development and delivering positive social, environmental and economic outcomes. Land ownership gives communities the opportunity to control what happens in their area. It enables communities to deliver local housing, support business development, provide community and recreation facilities, maintain and enhance greenspace, and meet other needs identified by the people who live there (SEFARI, 2025).

Support for community ownership in Scotland has developed significantly over the last 25 years. Successive legislation has developed mechanisms, funding and support for communities looking to acquire land and assets, from whole islands and estates, forests and woodlands, to buildings and small sites for development.

The Scottish Land Fund (SLF) plays a central role in such acquisitions, funding the vast majority of purchases. In recent years, there has been a reduction in the number of hectares purchased with support from SLF grants, with many communities applying to purchase buildings and smaller sites instead (SEFARI, 2025). In addition, successful largescale community land purchases are unevenly distributed around the country, with concentrations in the Western Isles and Highlands, while the vast majority of local authorities do not contain any.

The purpose of this research is to understand the reasons behind these chronological and geographical trends, identify any barriers to largescale community land acquisitions and illustrate the potential solutions to overcoming them.

Definitions

This research considers community ownership of largescale assets.

The definition of community ownership has largely been streamlined and formalised under legislation as the private ownership of an asset by a constituted membership organisation open to all residents of a 'community of place'. It may adopt one of a few legal forms, including: Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO); Company Limited by Guarantee; or Community Benefit Society (Bencom), with most also being registered charities. Prior to this legislation being passed, a number of crofting communities took ownership of their land through an organisational structure which limited membership to croft tenants. As this is not open membership it does not meet the official definition of 'community landownership'. However, we are including this limited number of cases in our analysis as we feel it is important to recognise the role they played in the developing community land movement.

We define largescale assets as any acquisitions of over 500 contiguous hectares. This size was chosen in order to capture most of the crofting estates which form the backbone of this form of ownership, while also taking a pragmatic methodological approach to considering a sufficiently large dataset for analysis.

Structure of report

The report will first outline the main themes and findings of literature and media reports on the topic of largescale community landownership in Scotland. It then outlines the methods utilised in the empirical research.

The Findings section illustrates the results of our research, including: the extent of largescale community landownership today, and how and why it developed over time; considering the nature of 'demand' for largescale community assets, and what drives (or triggers) it; how and why largescale community landownership differs geographically; interest in largescale community land acquisition which has failed, and the barriers which prevented it; and proposed solutions to these barriers in the expansion of largescale community land acquisition across Scotland.

This was a short-term, rapid project. While we are confident of our findings, we consider this to be a foundational understanding of the issues focused on, with significantly more research required to comprehensively cover the topic. We state the limitations of this research in the Methods section, while remaining knowledge gaps and required future research are noted in the concluding section, alongside considerations for policy and practice.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the individuals and institutions that contributed to this research. This includes those that agreed to be interviewed, circulated and submitted surveys, and offered their views and expertise in the workshop.

We would also like to thank all of those that helped in the sourcing and interpretation of data, especially Highlands and Islands Enterprise, The National Lottery Community Fund, Community Land Scotland, Community Woodlands Association, and Development Trusts Association Scotland.

Thanks to the Scottish Land Commission and SEFARI Gateway for their funding and management of this research, and to the Steering Group for their guidance and oversight of its quality.

Without the help and support of the above, this research would not have been possible.

Literature and media review

There is limited literature specifically focusing on largescale community land. Sources which do, consider it a solution to issues of monopolised private ownership and its constraints on sustainable development (Danson and Burnett, 2021; Glenn et al., 2019). In the case of one acquisition, media reports boasted that:

“Ownership will empower the community to lead and control the management and future development of the Estate and enable them to create new, sustainable economic and social opportunities for the benefit of local people” (Stornoway Gazette, 2015)

Many largescale acquisitions were catalysed by a desire to reverse declining populations through investments in employment and local services (Cameron, 2014; Carrell, 2017; Fletcher, 2016). Further, community trusts can be locally “trusted” to act in the common interest, whereas if private landowners advocate for land use change (for example, peatland restoration) local people may question their motives (Helmcke et al., 2025).

“Inspiration” plays a significant role in expanding the number of largescale community land acquisitions, with successful purchases greatly enhancing subsequent demand (Watson, 2002). Despite this, the number of largescale community land acquisitions has been claimed to be “plateauing” due to growing barriers (The Scotsman, 2023). The nature of these barriers can broadly be categorised as: cost; process; and community.

Cost

Largescale assets are expensive and finding the funding for acquisition can be a barrier to achieving community landownership. While different options exist for sourcing funding, none are without their constraints and even sourcing information on all current funding models is not easily achieved (MacPherson et al., 2019).

While the presence of the Scottish Land Fund (SLF) is considered vital and much appreciated, the limited budget of the fund can be constraining, with communities less able to afford the increasing price of land (Carrell, 2020; MacPherson et al., 2021). Indeed, even if one group is successful in receiving funding, it may exhaust the entire year’s budget, thus denying other groups the chance to receive financial support (Elliot et al., 2014).

Alternatively, community groups can seek to secure mortgages against the asset. However, the price of large estates reflects not just the ‘use value’ or operational profitability of the land, but the additional intangible ‘status symbol’ value, which would not be covered by a lender (Braunholtz-Speight, 2015). In such instances, community groups may go into partnership with commercial or charitable bodies which could ultimately lead to a successful acquisition, but at the cost of influence and authority held by local people

over the land going forward (Braunholtz-Speight, 2015; Carrell, 2020). Other community organisations have sought largescale philanthropic donations (Campsie, 2020), but it is unclear what conditions these may have attached to them.

Increasing land prices have exacerbated these challenges and increasingly put largescale land acquisition out of reach of communities (Helmcke et al., 2025; McMorran et al., 2022; Ross, 2022). A surge in land prices between 2020-2022, partly driven by speculation surrounding natural capital opportunities, has since subsided (Merrell et al., 2025). However, this period of heightened speculation remains important context for understanding the contemporary trajectory of community land acquisition in Scotland, particularly given its impact on communities' ability to engage with the land market during this time.

Process

While there have been a number of processes and mechanisms implemented to facilitate community land acquisition, there remain barriers to doing so in practice. A negotiated sale can take a long time and lead to high costs for both parties (McMorran et al., 2018). Amid all these potential delays, the timescale for community bodies to raise funds to conclude a purchase is considered too short for large purchases (Black and Leeman, 2012). Some have claimed that there is more help available for communities in the Highlands and Islands to navigate these processes, with other regions not receiving the same level of institutional support (Mair, 2020).

In almost all cases, largescale community land acquisition in Scotland relies on the owner's willingness to sell (BBC News, 2009; Braunholtz-Speight, 2015; McMorran et al., 2018). Larger landed estates were considered more likely to oppose a community buyout (Elliot et al., 2014) and may be wary of entering negotiations where they perceived community bodies lacking in capacity or insufficient business planning (McMorran et al., 2018). Even where negotiations do take place, there can be accusations of secrecy and underhand tactics of both the seller and buyer's representatives (Gilchrist, 2023; Press and Journal, 2004a). In one circumstance, the seller withdrew from the process even after the community had been awarded the funds for the purchase and was celebrating the imminent acquisition, indicating the extent of the seller's power in this situation (Stornoway Gazette, 2015). However, there are also instances of willing and facilitative actions by landowners in supporting communities with their often long and difficult journey to landownership (Carrell, 2020; Wilson, 2024).

The Community Right to Buy (CRtB) mechanism was not considered helpful in this regard, with the 2023 Rural Land Market Insights Report observing 'that some estate owners prefer to sell privately to minimise perceived interference from any Community Right to Buy option' (Merrell et al., 2023,

p. 13). This was especially notable where community organisations were perceived to not have a realistic chance of buying such a large piece of land, with landowners wishing to avoid this process ‘ruining’ their chances at selling at market value (McMorran et al., 2018). With regard to the Crofting Community Right to Buy, its use has been so limited as to question whether this ‘compulsory right’ is fit for purpose (Wilson, 2025, 2022) .

Community

The nature of the community itself plays a significant role in successful largescale land acquisition, with larger buyouts more likely to happen where there is sufficient community capacity and high levels of social capital (Elliot et al., 2014; Press and Journal, 2004b). These conditions are often found in the Highlands and Islands where much of the land is under crofting tenure, further enabling buyouts in this region through its relative low cost and usage restrictions. Relatedly, such acquisitions are less likely in the south and east of Scotland, predominantly owing to higher land values, fewer large estates and a greater number of owner-occupied farms (McMorran et al., 2018). However, two largescale purchases have been completed in Dumfries and Galloway in the form of two parcels of land forming the Tarras Valley Nature Reserve (Amos, 2022; Carrell, 2020), where it is pointed out that the community faces many of the same challenges as those experienced in the Highlands and Islands (Mair, 2020). There has been other interest expressed in the South of Scotland but no further largescale acquisitions have taken place (Clements, 2020).

However, where local divisions or conflict are present, this can not only jeopardise largescale land acquisitions and the ongoing management of community-owned estates but also deter others from pursuing acquisition (Baynes and Campbell, 2024, 2020; Macaulay, 2019). Such conflict has long affected the South Uist Estate, with the disparate nature of multiple townships across this very large estate considered to exacerbate conflict due to the difficulties in unifying the dispersed population (Braunholtz-Speight, 2015; McKee et al., 2025; McMorran et al., 2018, 2014).

These themes provide a basis upon which we conducted our research, seeking to examine, expand and critically consider their specific influence on ongoing demand for largescale community land acquisition.

¹ At the time of writing, a Review of Community Rights to Buy has recently been published. It was not possible to fully digest and integrate its findings and recommendations into this work.

3. Methods

The research sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the nature of, and explanation for, the differences in demand for largescale community land acquisition, relating to:
 - a. Time: how has the level of interest in, motivations for, and execution of, largescale community land acquisition changed over the past 10-20 years?
 - b. Geography: why are there such distinct variations in demand for community land acquisitions in different areas of Scotland?
2. What barriers exist for largescale community land acquisitions, and what solutions (policy or otherwise) could help to overcome them?

To answer these, we adopted a mixed-methods research design, utilising qualitative interviews and a survey to interpret and explicate secondary data. Ethical approval for this research was given by the Research Ethics Committee at the University of the Highlands and Islands in January 2026 (ETH 2526-0613).

Secondary data

We sourced secondary data on largescale community land acquisitions to date, as well as instances where communities had attempted to take ownership, but ultimately did not proceed to acquisition. Secondary data on largescale community landownership was compiled following input from: Highlands and Islands Enterprise, The National Lottery Community Fund, Community Land Scotland, Community Woodlands Association, Development Trusts Association Scotland and relevant academic literature. The list was checked and verified by the project Steering Group and others working in the field. We extracted data on the organisation name, asset name, year of acquisition, size of asset, local authority and type of land cover. We then sought to understand instances of 'unmet demand', whereby groups had expressed an interest in a largescale land asset but ultimately did not proceed to acquisition. The main sources of data for this approach were Scottish Land Fund records, jointly held by Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the National Lottery Community Fund, of groups in the following categories:

- Referrals or enquiries which did not result in an SLF Stage 1 application;
- Groups that received SLF Stage 1 funding, but did not apply for SLF Stage 2 funding;
- Groups that applied for SLF Stage 2 funding, but were unsuccessful.

The SLF only initiated the two-stage funding model at the start of SLF 3 in 2016 (See Table 1), at which point these records began. Prior to that, data was harder to source and accurately consider, with only a few records existing of groups that had unsuccessfully applied for capital funding for a largescale community land acquisition. In addition, we considered the Records of Community Interest in Land (RCIL) and instances of Community Asset Transfer requests for largescale community land asset.

Table 1- Scottish Land Fund Programmes

Land Fund	Dates
Scottish Land Fund 1	2001 - 2006
Growing Community Assets (1 & 2)	2006 - 2015
Scottish Land Fund 2	2012 - 2016
Scottish Land Fund 3	2016 - 2021
Scottish Land Fund 4	2021 - 2026

While this represented a significant search with multiple avenues investigated, we are unsure of the completeness and robustness of our dataset of ‘unsuccessful’ groups. Further, a range of reasons underpinned why interest did not result in an acquisition, which is important context for understanding demand and barriers. In this report, all these instances are combined under the heading of ‘intent’, but it is important to consider the limitations of this data when drawing conclusions from this work.

Interviews

We sought to gather the views of both those working within the community landownership sector and those who have an interest in, or experience of, largescale acquisition from the perspective of either the ‘buyer’, i.e. the community organisation or the seller. Across these groups, we tried to ensure a range of experiences and perspectives would be reflected. This included people who could speak to long-term trends having worked in the sector for several decades, those supporting communities through the process currently, community organisations that have either successfully acquired a largescale asset or expressed an interest in doing so but did not see this materialise, and those in geographical ‘cold spots’ to identify reasons for this.

We conducted 13 interviews (Feb - Mar 2026) with six professionals from the community land sector and seven representatives from specific communities with experience of, or interest in, largescale acquisition.

Respondents were recruited through direct contact from the research team, with a small number identified through ‘snowball sampling’. Interviewees were asked about their perception of changes in demand for largescale acquisitions over the last 25 years, current community appetite for largescale buy outs, the barriers communities face, and solutions to overcoming these. All interviews were conducted online, transcribed and thematically analysed using inductive coding.

Survey

To gather the views of a wider cross-section of community organisations, we designed and circulated a survey to groups which either own or are actively seeking to own a largescale land asset. The survey was split into two sections: the first sought information on their own journey towards ownership (whether or not that had been achieved), specifically considering barriers and facilitators along the way; the second asked about the more general picture across Scotland in terms of the demand for largescale community landownership and what changes could be observed over time and geography. Questions were qualitative in nature, with open text boxes for responses. The survey was designed using JISC Online Surveys software and was live from February–March 2026.

The survey was circulated by the three main representative organisations for asset-owning community groups – Community Land Scotland, Community Woodlands Association and Development Trusts Association Scotland – directly to their membership. In addition, all organisations that currently own largescale assets were contacted directly with details of the survey.

Nine responses to the survey were received. One response was from an organisation which did not either own or seek to own a largescale asset so was removed from the analysis, leaving eight remaining. Data was thematically analysed alongside interview data.

Sense-checking workshop

Finally, we presented our provisional findings to a meeting of the Community Land Leadership Group in March 2026. The purpose of this workshop was to seek feedback and assess the relevance of these findings to a range of different stakeholders in policy and practice around community land. This session was not a data gathering exercise, but a useful sounding-board for the provisional findings with suggestions made for presentational considerations and wider discussions about largescale community landownership.

Declaration of interest

One of the researchers, BM, was a member of the Scottish Land Fund Committee from May 2021 to March 2026, including during the period of this research. Many of the topics discussed were therefore familiar to him and related to the work of the Committee.

In order to mitigate the potential for this to unduly influence the results of this study (or a perception that it could), a number of precautionary steps were taken:

- Prior to the research commencing, permission was granted from the three main entities responsible for the work of the SLF for BM to undertake it: The Chair and remainder of the Committee of the Scottish Land Fund; SLF Fund Manager, The National Lottery Community Fund; Head of Community Assets, Highlands and Islands Enterprise.
- BM had attended his final SLF Committee meeting prior to the commencement of this research, thereby negating any possibility that the process or findings could influence SLF decision-making.
- BM played no part in the collection or analysis of qualitative interview data during this study. This was entirely conducted by CM and ADC with written findings subsequently synthesised with secondary data.
- While BM's knowledge of the processes of the SLF supported the collection, analysis and presentation of secondary data, it did not influence the conclusions or recommendations emerging from this research.



4. Findings

Largescale community landownership today

At present, 34 largescale land assets (over 500ha) are owned by 29 community organisations . These assets were acquired between 1908 and 2024, with all but two coming into community hands over the past thirty-five years, from 1992 onwards (Table 2).

Table 2- Largescale community-owned estates

Year	Organisation	Asset	Total area (ha)	Local Authority	Asset type
1908	Glendale Trust *	Glendale Estate	9307	Highland	Crofting
1923	The Stornoway Trust	Stornoway Estate	28000	Western Isles	Crofting
1992	Assynt Crofters Trust *	Assynt Crofters Trust	8620	Highland	Crofting
1993	Borve and Annishadder Township	Borve and Annishadder Township	1860	Highland	Crofting
1994	Melness Crofters Estate *	Melness Crofters Estate	4360	Highland	Crofting
1997	Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust	Isle of Eigg	2995	Highland	Mixed
1998	Abriachan Forest Trust	Abriachan Forest	540	Highland	Woodland
1999	Knoydart Foundation	Knoydart Estate	7082	Highland	Mixed
1999	Bhaltos Community Trust	Bhaltos Estate	690	Western Isles	Crofting
2000	Culag Community Woodland Trust	Little Assynt Estate	1174	Highland	Woodland
2002	Isle of Gigha Heritage Trust	Isle of Gigha	1385	Argyll & Bute	Mixed
2003	North Harris Trust	North Harris Estate	21361	Western Isles	Crofting
2005	Assynt Foundation	Glencanisp & Drumrunie Estates	18257	Highland	Mixed
2005	Aline Community Woodland	Aline Woodland	630	Western Isles	Woodland
2006	North West Mull Community Woodland Company Limited	Langamull and West Ardhru Woodlands	700	Argyll & Bute	Woodland

2006	Stòras Uibhist	South Uist Estate	37636	Western Isles	Crofting
2006	North Harris Trust	Loch Seaforth Estate	2911	Western Isles	Crofting
2007	Urras Oighreachd Ghabhsainn	Galson Estate	23234	Western Isles	Crofting
2010	Bute Community Land Company	Rhubodach Forest	694	Argyll & Bute	Woodland
2010	West Harris Trust	West Harris Crofting Estate	7347	Western Isles	Crofting
2013	Colintraive and Glendaruel Community Development Trust	Stronafian Forest	615	Argyll & Bute	Woodland
2013	North Harris Trust	Scalpay Estate	708	Western Isles	Crofting
2015	South West Mull and Iona Development	Tiroran Community Forest	803	Argyll & Bute	Woodland
2015	Pairc Trust	Pairc Estate	10840	Western Isles	Crofting
2015	Urras Oighreachd Chàrlabhaigh	Carloway Estate	4756	Western Isles	Crofting
2016	Keose Glebe Estate	Keose Glebe Estate	605	Western Isles	Crofting
2016	Urras Sgìre Oighreachd Bharabhais	Barvas Estate	13676	Western Isles	Crofting
2018	North West Mull Community Woodland Company Limited	Isle of Ulva	2000	Argyll & Bute	Mixed
2018	Garbh Allt Community Initiative	Garbh Allt Estate	1252	Highland	Crofting
2019	Rousay, Egilsay & Wyre Development Trust	Trumland Estate	690	Orkney Islands	Other
2019	Stòras Uibhist	Loch Druidibeg	1027	Western Isles	Nature reserve
2021	Langholm Initiative	Tarras Valley (1)	2104	Dumfries & Galloway	Nature reserve
2022	Langholm Initiative	Tarras Valley (2)	2119	Dumfries & Galloway	Nature reserve
2024	Coigach Community Development Company	Badentarbat Estate	3156	Highland	Crofting

² Organisations marked with a * may not be considered 'community landownership' by contemporary definitions due to not having an open membership. It was considered important to include such organisations in this list in order to illustrate the broader movement towards local control over landholdings.

Largescale community land acquisition over time

Figure 1 illustrates the number and hectareage of largescale community acquisitions per year over the past 35 years, while Figure 2 shows the cumulative trend.

Figure 1 - Number and hectareage of largescale community land acquisitions by year

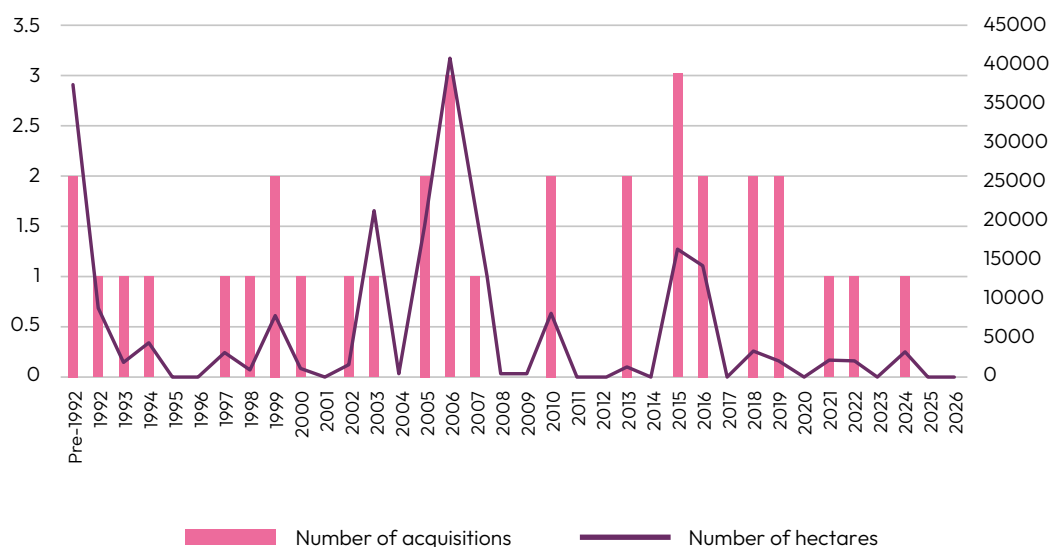
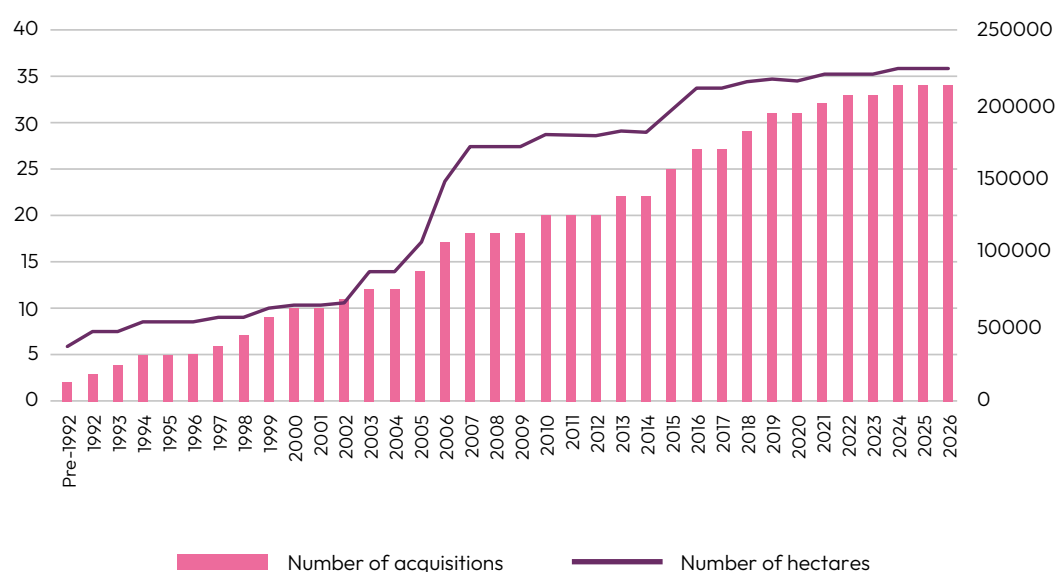


Figure 2- Cumulative total of successful largescale community land acquisitions and hectareage



What these graphs display is a relatively stable upward trend in both acquisitions and hectareage, punctuated by two periods of significant increases. Table 3 divides these periods into five segments, based on significant trends in acquisition over these periods. Period A (1992-2004) was prior to any legislative support for community land ownership but still resulted in an average of almost one acquisition per year of relatively large areas. While it may be expected that the increased provision of dedicated funding, support and legislative mechanisms for community ownership across Scotland would have increased the trajectory of largescale community asset acquisition, the rate of change remains largely similar in periods C (2008-2014) and E (2017-2026), with a similar average number of annual acquisitions but for, on average, smaller assets being acquired.

Table 3 - Trends in largescale community land acquisitions, segmented into specific time periods

Period	Years	Average year-on-year acquisitions	Average year-on-year increase (ha)	Average size of acquisition (ha)
A	1992-2004	0.8	3851	5007
B	2005-2007	2.0	27789	13895
C	2008-2014	0.6	1338	2341
D	2015-2016	2.5	15340	6136
E	2017-2026	0.7	1235	1764

Two spikes can be seen in Figure 1, with rapid growth in hectareage visible in Figure 2. These relate to the periods labelled B (2005-2007) and D (2015-2016) in Table 3. Period B included six acquisitions and resulted in an average annual increase in hectareage over this period of more than ten times that of the 'gradual growth' trends of periods A, C and E, respectively. As can be seen in Table 2, this period saw the purchases of the very large assets of Glencanisp & Drumrunie Estates (Assynt Foundation), South Uist Estate (Stòras Uibhist) and Galson Estate (Urras Oighreachd Ghabhsainn), with the average size of acquisitions over this period significantly higher than any other time.

Period D was also notable for bucking the trend in the number of acquisitions. From 2015-2016, five acquisitions were completed, although none on the scale of those in Period B. Thus, while the numbers of acquisitions were significant, there was not such a sharp spike in hectareage. Assets acquired during this period included smaller crofting estates, such as the Carloway Estate (Urras Oighreachd Chàrlabhaigh) and Barvas Estate (Urras Sgìre Oighreachd Bharabhais), as well as smaller woodlands such as Tiroran Community Forest (South West Mull and Iona Development).

Characterising the change in ‘demand’ over time

Our qualitative data suggests there has not been a ‘drop in demand’ from communities to acquire largescale landholdings over the last 25 years; rather, the picture is more nuanced with no simple interpretation of any clear trend.

Across respondents, we heard various interpretations of what has happened over the last 25 years or so, including contentions that latent demand was met when funding first became available, barriers to acquisition have become increasingly insurmountable, and interest in other, smaller assets has grown, potentially eclipsing appetite for largescale landholdings. While each of these factors may have contributed to a downturn in the number of new largescale acquisitions, community interest in them was claimed to have remained relatively stable, or indeed increased, across this period.

Latent demand has been met

Respondents emphasised the need to interpret trends in community interest in largescale land acquisition within the context of a shifting funding environment. The establishment of the SLF prompted what one respondent called an “initial surge” (CR 4) in acquisitions. This funding mechanism created new opportunities for both landowners seeking to sell and communities with long-standing aspirations to own land but with no means to fund this previously. One community representative explained how the SLF released such demand, while another described how, once the selection of early cases had taken this new opportunity, much of the latent demand was satisfied:

“When you introduce something you open the floodgates, so there’s a latent demand. It’s not just a latent demand to buy, or to own, or take control of, but there was a latent demand to sell” (CR 4).

“It seems fairly clear that the early sales, the whole islands and the large estates, were the result of local frustration with the owners, with the ownership at that time, and once you’ve cleared those out of the way, then that particular demand is met. Not to say that there might not be others in the future, but that kind of log-jam has been cleared” (CR 2).

This burst of initial activity may give the impression that demand has subsequently declined. However, an alternative interpretation is that this early period reflected the release of previously unmet demand, resulting in a temporary concentration of activity.

Barriers to largescale land acquisition have increased

Demand must also be seen in the wider socio-political and economic context, which constrains what is perceived to be possible at any one time. Interviewees conveyed that current conditions are less conducive to largescale community land acquisition than in previous years, questioning the assumptions of linking demand with interest:

“My experience wasn’t really that the demand dropped at all, like the number of calls I got about communities wanting to do large buyouts doesn’t really change, it just became much more difficult over that time. So I think depending on where you are in the system, your perception might be different” (SR 3).

Further, there was a complaint that if community demand is being measured by number of hectares successfully acquired by communities, this overlooks key constraints. Interviewees cautioned that this can lead to a misinterpretation of there being falling demand:

“I could make the argument for there being a drop in demand, so long as I avoided the conditions that led to it... The drop in demand is caused by failure of the system to support communities to have an aspiration and an expectation... How many barriers do you have to put in place to knock down that motivation to succeed? It’s not that we haven’t got the demand for it, it’s just that the barriers that are put in our way are just insurmountable for a small community. There is no fall in demand. Demand is there. Absolutely.” (CR 4)

As a result, this sense of challenge can fuel a potential wavering in community demand, as communities start to perceive largescale acquisition as an impossibility: “we know we haven’t got a chance of buying it... futility is a good killer of demand” (CR 4). This means that a community interested in acquisition may not pursue this, as they come to understand how many barriers lie between them and a successful acquisition.

Interest in smaller assets has increased

Interviewees described a shift in attention from larger land assets to smaller amenity assets in recent years, such as buildings and strategically useful, small areas of land. One sector representative explained:

“Over time, communities became interested in smaller areas, buildings, other community assets that they felt were just as important to the future of these communities and the resilience of these communities as buying, you know, twenty-thousand acres. And the trend moved away from the very big, large acquisitions to a huge range of small community asset acquisitions” (SR 5).

While some interpreted this as a drop in demand from communities for largescale landholdings in order to channel community capacity into smaller asset acquisition, some respondents felt it is more accurate to describe this as “huge growth” (SR 4) in interest in acquiring smaller assets which eclipses the perhaps more steady appetite for larger acquisitions. One sector representative reflected,

“I would say the sense is now that the larger landholdings are kind of the exception rather than the rule, but to be fair, they always were; but they just seem, there was less volume of other projects [before]” (SR 1).

Additionally, some noted there is a “limited number” (SR 2) of possible areas of land that fit the largescale landholding category. This means change over time may be dictated by issues of supply of largescale purchase opportunities rather than, or as well as, demand from communities.

Is it a question of demand?

Many interviewees felt a ‘drop in demand’ was the wrong framing to explain the recorded decrease in land area going into community ownership. Local residents may still be very interested in having a say in land use decisions and the development of their community, even if this is not translating into as many large plots transferring into community hands:

This is why I have the problem with the word demand; it’s demand for what? Demand for taking back the land, demand for having it run properly, demand for who gets to make decisions about it, demand for having respect for the cultural heritage and the loss, demand to take back the culture of this place, which has been systematically destroyed over hundreds and hundreds of years (CR 4).

It is because of this consideration of the nature and definition of ‘demand’ that we looked in depth at what ultimately leads to community interest in a largescale land acquisition, and whether indeed it is due to an expressed demand from the resident population, or another possible driver.

Drivers for largescale community landownership

This section outlines the factors which motivate communities to pursue largescale land acquisition. The common term for this is ‘drivers’, but in reference to the previous section on how demand can either build over a long period or be catalysed by a specific occurrence, some of the below justifications could better be described as ‘triggers’ in the latter circumstance. A discussion of the relative benefits of these two terms is beyond the scope of this research, but it is worth noting that the below cover both aspects of a long-held groundswell of local opinion, and a reflex reaction to a change in circumstances.

From interviewee accounts, we identified four key drivers of largescale community land acquisition: two ‘pull’ factors that encourage communities to view ownership as a realistic possibility (opportunism and inspiration) and two ‘push’ factors that mobilise communities to act (a need for intervention or a perceived threat).

Seizing the opportunity (“We can do something”)

Largescale community land acquisition is largely opportunistic. When the possibility to acquire a nearby landholding arises, a community may decide to attempt a purchase, even if ownership had not previously been a strong aspiration:

“The estate came on the market for the first time in quite a long time, since the 60s or 70s, and started this whole conversation” (CR 3).

In many cases, the emergence of such an opportunity is what prompts communities to begin seriously considering acquisition, and in that sense is the first time ‘demand’ is expressed. In some instances, the opportunity presents itself as a gift – land that the landowner is willing to give the community for no, or very little, money. For many others though, a delicate mix of conditions is needed for communities to be able to successfully mobilise and capitalise on the opportunity.

For an opportunity to become a completed acquisition, a particular combination of conditions is required, or in other words, “you need to be in the right place at the right time for if something comes up” (CR 5). For example, having a seller who is willing to consider the community as a possible buyer, a landholding of lower-value land (often found in the crofting counties) so the price is not insurmountable, sufficient levels of institutional support and funding to help the process move from initiation to completion, possibilities for generating income from the land post-purchase to make it a sustainable and viable decision, and ample capacity within the community to take on and manage such an asset. One community representative explained how this came together for them:

“The Trust existed, we had money, we had staff, and we were able to access funding support relatively easily; so it happened” (CR 2).

Demographic conditions were also seen to affect this opportunity, with population dynamics influencing whether communities are interested in largescale acquisitions and whether they are able to proceed with them. One interviewee starkly warned that “there’s no community left to do a community buyout in some places” (SR 2).

Inspiration (“Things look good next door”)

Communities get inspiration from already-existing largescale community landowners, whether located nearby or elsewhere, with similar aspirations or conditions. Successful acquisitions illustrate what is possible to achieve and provide the basis for peer support networks, encouraging further communities to pursue largescale acquisition.

Demonstrating what is possible

Previous community acquisitions set a precedent for what a community can achieve. Interviewees discussed how historic buyouts “showed everyone else what could be done” (SR 3) while current acquisitions are followed closely by nearby communities to understand what their own process might look like. One community representative recounted:

“If I turn my head to the side, I’m looking at [neighbouring community]. They were over here, we were over there, we were having a cup of tea or a beer talking about all of this. And yeah, it’s possible, but it’s hard. One thing [that] really struck me was one of the people involved in the original buyout at [neighbouring community] said to me, sometimes you have to lose it to realise you’ve got to get it back. Like first time round, there isn’t the impetus and the motivation to do it. The second time there is”. (CR 4)

Respondents noted that “things do come in waves, like one community will do something and it will get a high profile, and then [another] community is like, ‘well, that’s a really good idea’” (SR 3), creating a “domino effect” (survey respondent). One community representative said, “of course, that’s one of the first things we did, was look at other different communities and see what was possible” (CR 5). In this way, other community buyouts offer “an easy jumping off point for that conversation” (CR 3).

Peer support networks

Communities learn from one another through peer-to-peer networks, support organisations, and media outlets. This can provide inspiration, knowledge, skills, and confidence for prospective community landowners to start and navigate the process. One sector representative described how their organisation financially facilitates peer support activities, providing an example of how they supported one community landowning group to visit another prospective group:

“We covered all their transport, all their costs and everything else, and even a speaker fee. And they spent, well, actually four days... sharing their knowledge and expertise around how they went through that process”. (SR 6)

A need for intervention (“Things are bad”)

While opportunities and inspiration offer some communities a pull towards landownership, others may experience more push factors. Interviewees conveyed that communities often take on assets, including largescale landholdings, when they experience undesirable or unviable conditions. This is often due to either structural failures to provide key services or inadequate land management practices of current landowners, motivating communities to enact change.

Market failure

Within the wider context of community acquisition of assets, interviewees explained how “we’re seeing a huge volume of communities stepping in because the public sector is stepping back” (SR 1). Although such comments primarily related to communities acquiring smaller assets to deliver local services, market failure was still seen as a key driver of larger land acquisitions:

“Community buyouts, whether we like it or not, tend to happen where there’s what you might consider market failures; nobody ever lets communities play with the valuable bits” (SR 2).

This highlights how gaps in service provision can shape motivations for ownership. In some cases, rather than being drawn to ownership by its potential for empowerment, communities may feel compelled to pursue acquisition out of necessity to sustain the viability of their area as a place to live. Some interviewees reflected on how this may be more of a driving factor in some remote rural and island contexts where public sector retreat may be felt more keenly.

Inadequate land management

Structural failure is not the only condition that stimulates a perceived need for intervention. Respondents also pointed to the role of problematic landowner-community relations, with one survey respondent commenting that “some of the initial purchases were provoked by insensitive and possibly oppressive landlords”. In such contexts, everyday experiences of undesirable land management practices could drive community interest in acquiring largescale landholdings. While historic cases were often seen to be “driven out of desperation, like they had no choice” (SR 3), several interviewees expressed that this dynamic may be less prominent in contemporary cases. As such, “if people are seeing land managed well, they’re not against it” (CR 5) and “if the status quo is fine, people have got enough on in their lives to just get on without having to own it” (SR 4). One sector representative wondered:

“The perceived maladministration of large areas of land to the detriment of the communities that live on [the land], or near, has been one of the triggers for interest. Is that still the case? Perhaps less than it was; maybe some of the worst cases have been mopped up, as it were” (SR 5).

Now, there are greater expectations on landowners to consider community interests and engage them in decisions regarding the land, which was considered to have encouraged landowners to be:

“willing to work a little bit with communities and not allow a degree of community fracture to build up that the communities are willing to take on [the land themselves]” (SR 2).

As a result, some interviewees speculated that fewer contemporary largescale buyouts are driven by the “dire” (SR 3) conditions associated with earlier cases.

Perceived threat (“Things could get worse”)

Despite potential improvements to contemporary land management practices broadly, experiences of detrimental practices have not necessarily been eradicated and, perhaps most importantly in the drive for community acquisition, this is still perceived to be a very real threat. When land enters the market, communities may fear what a change in landowner might bring. This could include changes to tenancy agreements and land management practices or a shift in the type of developments likely to be pursued on the land. When speaking about their community’s experience of land nearby going up for sale, respondents expressed such concerns:

“Everyone was wary of what an incoming new owner would do... There will only be one owner of that estate, and it could be a fabulously well-integrated and careful and caring person, or it could be an offshore money laundering enterprise...the impact that it has will depend entirely on who that person is”. (CR 2)

There was a lot of chat about how bad it could be if someone else came in that was the archetypal evil laird...a lot of community conversation was like ‘Trump golf courses’ and like, that’s as bad as it can get. Someone far away, really wealthy, doesn’t care about any of the local designations or the community. (CR 3)

The basis of these concerns was the feeling that “we didn’t really want things to change and everything is okay the way it is” (CR 1). These sentiments illustrate the general push communities may feel towards pursuing an acquisition based on a fear of the unknown and a desire for more autonomy over the future of the land.

Push or pull?

While one factor may dominate the drive for ownership in any given case, interviewees conveyed that decisions to pursue an acquisition often emerge from differing combinations and extents of ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors experienced within a community:

“I don’t think there was really [community interest in buying land before], for us at least it was a reaction to opportunity but also a perceived threat to a status quo that was quite stable” (CR 3)

“An unexpected availability linked with unacceptable social conditions” (SR 5).

What motivates a community to attempt to acquire largescale land establishes the foundations of their experience, from the barriers they may face to the solutions that may help in their context. As the next section outlines, these contexts may differ markedly across the geography of Scotland.

Geography of largescale community land acquisition

There is significant disparity in the numbers of largescale community assets across local authorities in Scotland. Table 4 outlines the numbers and percentages of both acquisitions and hectarage across the six local authorities that contain completed largescale community land acquisitions. It is worth noting that there are therefore another twenty-seven local authorities that do not contain largescale community assets, including one crofting county- Shetland.

Table 4 - Attributes of largescale community land acquisitions by Local Authority

Local authority	Number of largescale community land acquisitions	Percentage of largescale community land acquisitions (%)	Total hectarage of largescale community land acquisitions (ha)	Percentage hectarage of largescale community land acquisitions (%)	Average hectarage of largescale community land acquisitions (ha)
Western Isles	14	41.2	153421	68.2	10959
Highland	12	35.3	58603	26.0	4884
Argyll & Bute	5	14.7	6197	2.8	1239
Dumfries and Galloway	2	5.9	4223	1.9	2112
Orkney	1	2.9	690	0.3	690

As can be seen in Table 4, and graphically illustrated in Figures 3 and 4, the Western Isles and Highland council areas are responsible for the vast majority of both acquisitions and hectarage, with 94.2% of the area of largescale community land being located between the two regions.

Figure 3 - Number of largescale community land acquisitions by local authority area

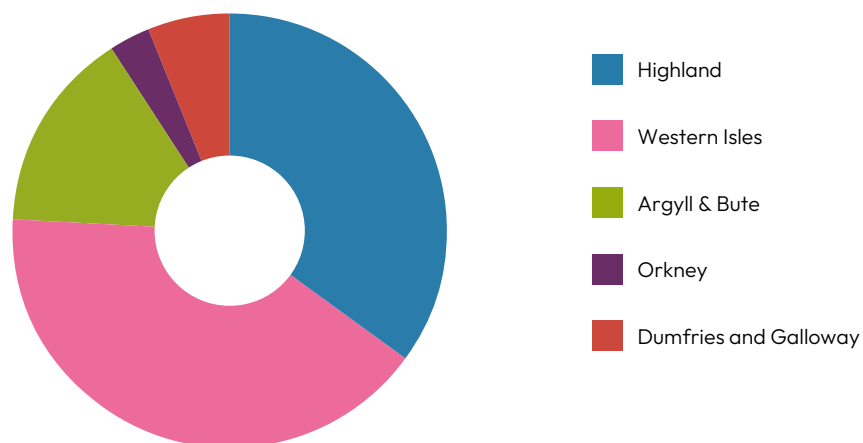
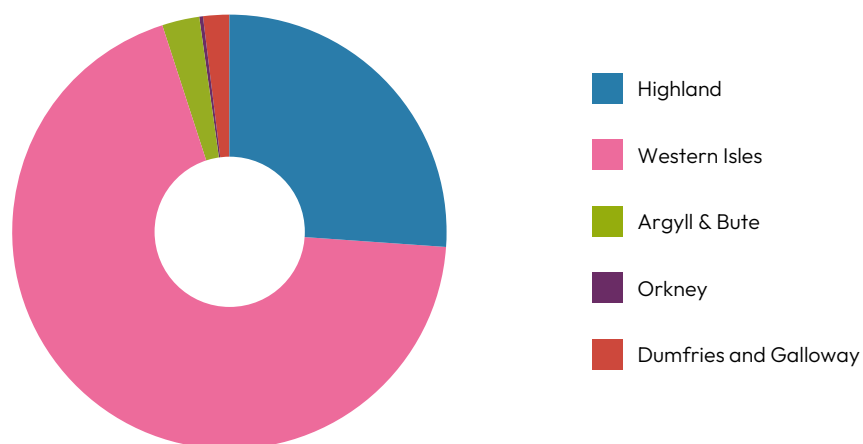


Figure 4 - Hectarage of largescale community land acquisitions by local authority area



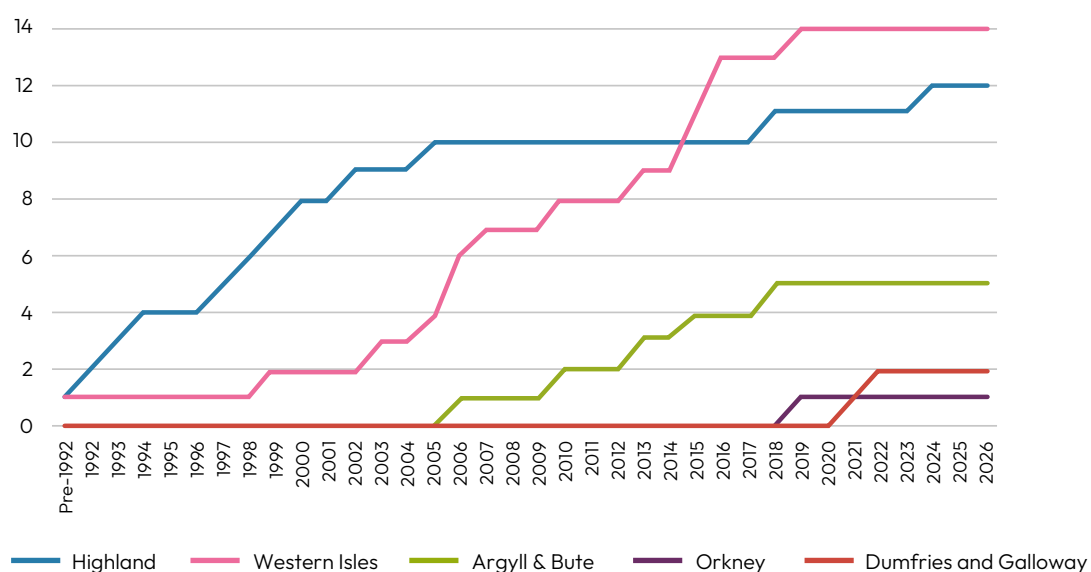
As illustrated in the final column of Table 4, the average size of largescale community assets is also significantly higher in these two areas. This is strongly associated with the types of assets being acquired. Table 5 illustrates the main land uses of largescale community assets. Those in the Highlands and Western Isles tend to be crofting estates, while only one such asset type is owned outside of these two areas. Other asset types, such as woodlands and nature reserves are more common in other regions and tend to cover a smaller area.

Table 5 - Types of largescale community land assets by Local Authority

	Crofting	Woodland	Mixed	Nature reserve	Other	Total
Western Isles	12	1	0	1	0	14
Highland	6	2	3	0	0	11
Argyll & Bute	0	4	2	0	0	6
Orkney	0	0	0	0	1	1
Dumfries and Galloway	0	0	0	2	0	2
Total	18	7	5	3	1	34

Considering the changes in the number of largescale community land acquisitions over time by local authority, Figure 5 displays the number of acquisitions while Figure 6 shows the number of hectares.

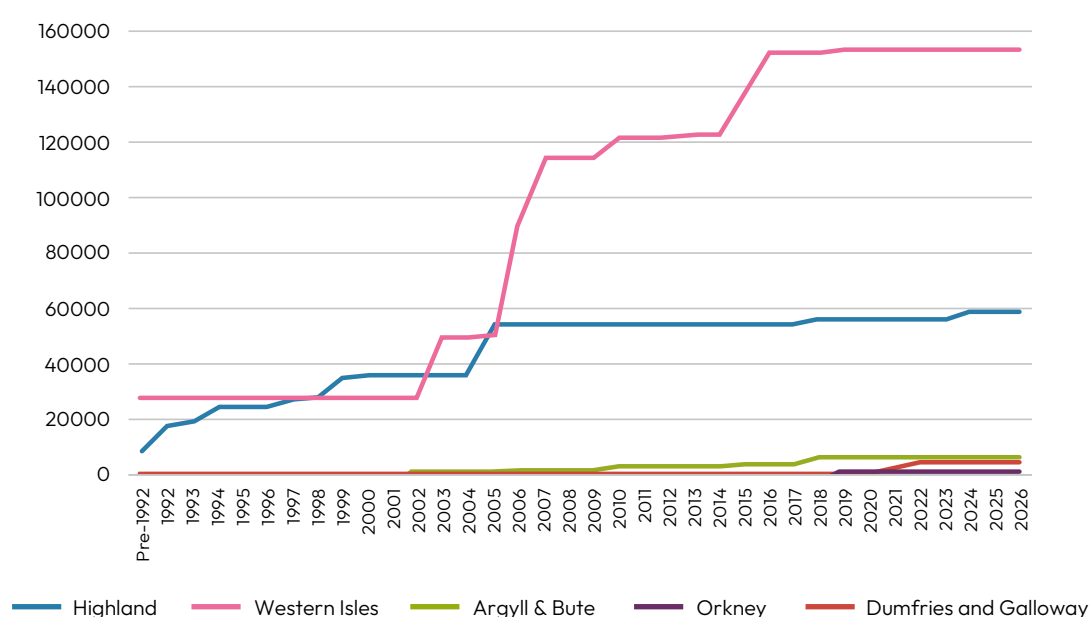
Figure 5 - Number of largescale community land acquisitions over time by local authority



As can be seen in Figure 5, Highland Council area was the first to experience growth in largescale community asset ownership. This trend all but stopped in the Highlands in 2005, just at the time when both the Western Isles and Argyll and Bute began to experience significant growth, and continued to do so for the following ten years. However, since 2018, all three of the 'leading' local authority areas in largescale community asset ownership have largely flatlined. Over the same period, there have been successful acquisitions outside of these areas; in Orkney and Dumfries and Galloway. As shown in Table 5, the successful groups in these areas have not acquired the same type of crofting estates which have marked the rapid expansion of largescale community landownership in the Highlands, Western Isles and, to a lesser extent, Argyll and Bute.

Figure 6 indicates that while new asset types and locations for largescale community landownership are emerging, they are contributing little to the overall area of community-owned land and may be considered a different type of acquisition to those preceding them.

Figure 6 - Number of hectares acquired in largescale community land acquisitions over time by local authority



There are multiple reasons why some areas of Scotland have seen more largescale community acquisitions than others. There was no clear consensus among respondents as to why this is; as with changes in demand across time, it is a nuanced picture.

History, culture and value of land

The history and culture of places across Scotland can dictate current land ownership patterns and land use. Significant areas of Scotland under community ownership are under crofting tenure. One respondent noted:

“There’s a strong cultural element to this. I think when you look at where buyouts have happened, they’ve predominantly been crofting estates, quite a few woodlands as well, but most of the land of scale is under crofting [tenure]” (SR 1).

While this is a complex story, interviewees connected this culture and land use with the legacy of displacement from the Highland Clearances, with a suggestion that some communities in Scotland have a greater sense of bringing land into their own hands again. One interviewee described people as:

“feistier in the Highlands and Islands... they’re very good at making their case and saying what they need” (SR 3).

Another noted the varying degrees of “social capital” (SR 5), affecting capacity and interest in driving forward local community development.

Land uses can also contribute to differences in land values. For example, we heard from interviewees that agricultural land tends to be valued much higher than land under crofting tenure. Interviewees felt that this was one factor explaining why agricultural areas see fewer largescale community ownership initiatives: it is often simply too expensive, and agricultural subsidies complicate the picture even further. While this is not always the case, the lower the valuation of land, the easier it may be for some communities to acquire largescale landholdings:

“That’s why the Western Isles have got such a lot of community ownership, because the estates were at the time peanuts compared to some other estates” (SR 3).

“My recollection is that actually the amounts paid for those really big estates were relatively low, mostly because they’re all in crofting tenure” (SR 2).

It was also felt that where there is more market failure, there tends to be more community ownership. One interviewee noted: “Where the agriculture is poor or the services are poor or the connectivity is poor, it’s different. And a lot of the Western Isles, I guess, are like that” (CR 2). These factors of history, culture, land values and neglect appear to converge to facilitate largescale community land acquisitions.

Institutional support

There is a perception that the support available also varies from region to region, with longer-established support in the Highlands and Islands (largely through the presence of Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) and its predecessor, Highlands and Islands Development Board (HIDB)) claimed to be one of several explanation for there being more largescale buyouts there than elsewhere in Scotland. Communities in this region were claimed to be receiving additional support due to the greater “base level of knowledge” (SR 3):

“The Highlands and Islands has got a head start in supporting community-led stuff and that started off with community co-ops and then just supporting community businesses... the rest of Scotland is catching up quickly...but they’re years behind”. (SR 1)

This, combined with the strong peer support offered by previously successful community landowners in the region, can result in these areas receiving both formal and informal support which was perceived to be lacking elsewhere. However, respondents did note that this appeared to be changing with the spreading of largescale community ownership to other areas. This includes support from South of Scotland Enterprise for places such as Dumfries and Galloway, as well as increased interest and focus on the northern isles of Orkney and Shetland.

Interest in largescale community land acquisition which did not result in ownership

Beyond considering acquisitions, in assessing demand for largescale community landownership it is important to consider those groups who have signalled an interest or intention in acquiring land, but have not achieved ownership. Our approach to gauging this, and its limitations, are outlined in the Methods section above. We have brought together a number of different data sources to identify community organisations which have reached various stages of the acquisition process and have a range of different reasons for not ultimately taking ownership. For ease, the shorthand terminology we will use for such cases is ‘intent’, although even the aggregation of these different data sources without adequate context on each specific case may be considered problematic. In addition, much of this data is not publicly available and it is not possible to provide as detailed a breakdown as we have for the successful applications.

There is limited data available on the reasons why these cases did not progress to acquisition. While this data does not provide the full picture of the context or decision-making, it can paint a wider picture of some of the factors at play. One major barrier to progressing these applications was a lack of support within the local community, often due to the perception of

unacceptable risk involved. This either meant the project was abandoned at some point during the process, or that funders noted this as a concern during decision-making. Beyond the community itself, 'external' factors also derailed these applications, including being outbid for the asset and not being successful in being awarded funding from the Scottish Land Fund or other funders.

Figure 7 illustrates the instances of 'intent' by local authority, while Figure 8 includes the related hectareage. As can be seen, the Highland region contained the most such cases. The Western Isles only had two records of intent, but for significantly larger assets.

Figure 7 - Instances of 'intent' by local authority

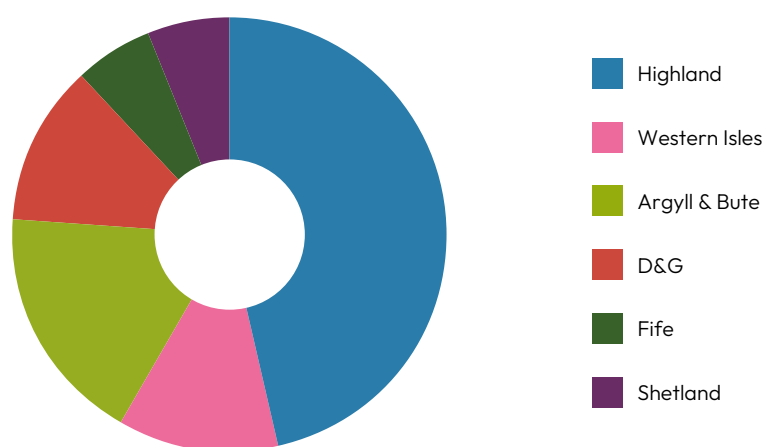
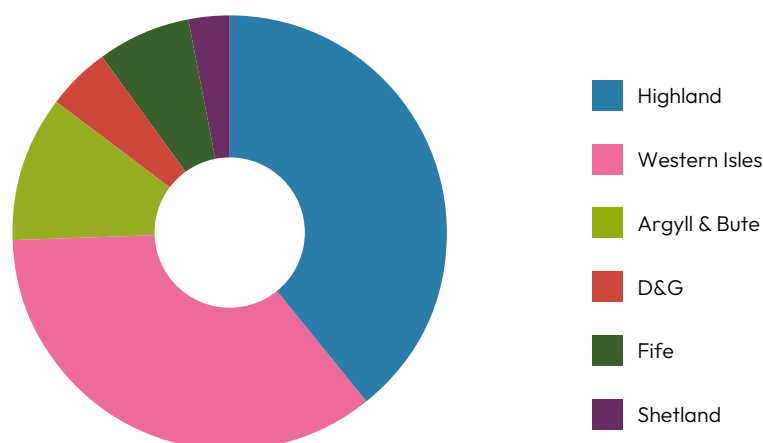
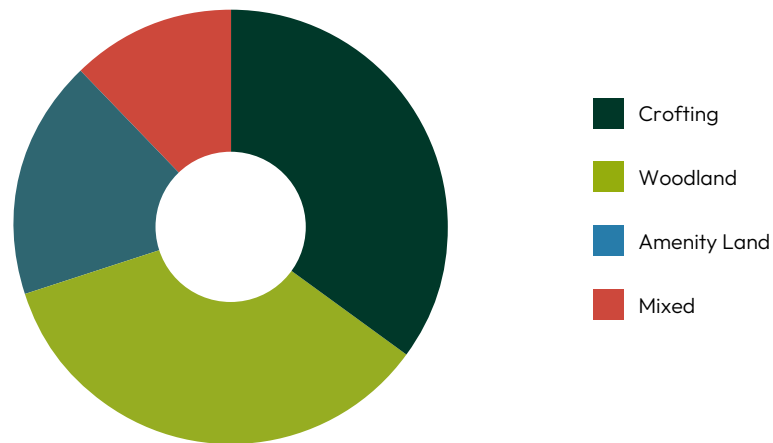


Figure 8 - Proportionate hectareage of 'intent' by local authority



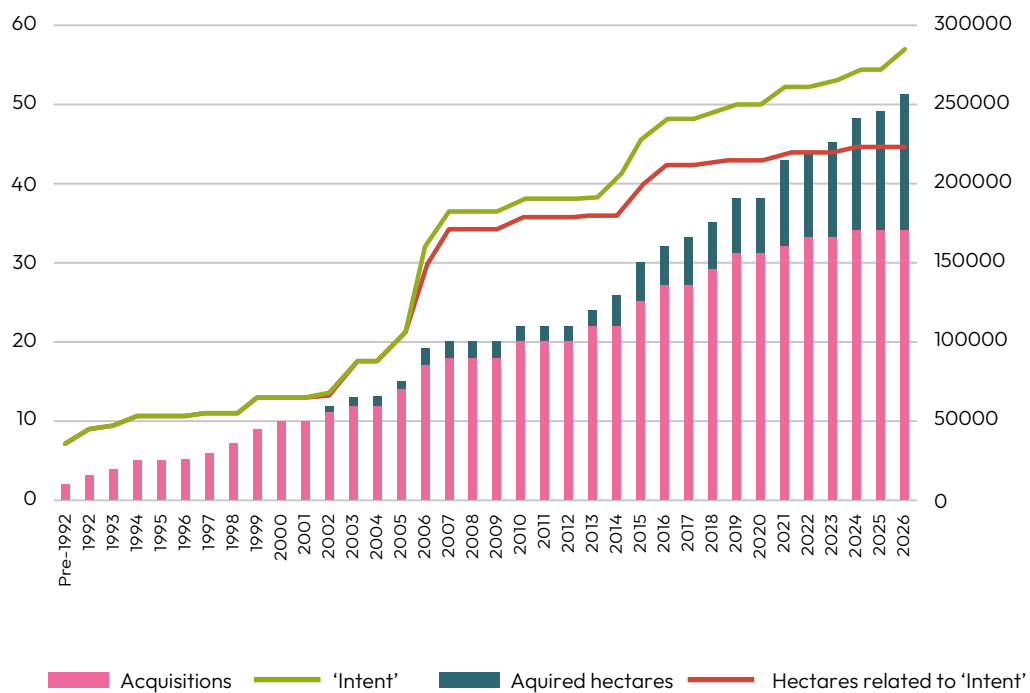
Reflecting the recent trends in acquisitions, we can see other local authorities represented, with intent expressed in Fife and Shetland for the first time. There was also a broad range of asset types represented (Figure 9), with crofting estates and woodlands remaining the most common.

Figure 9 - Types of largescale assets subject to expressions of 'intent'



Finally, in order to offer an illustration of the levels of demand, whether resulting in acquisition or otherwise, Figure 10 combines these two datasets.

Figure 10 - Combined acquisitions and 'intent', and related hectareage (cumulative)



The stacked bars indicate the numbers of largescale land assets which have either been acquired (red) or have fallen short of this point (grey). The outcome of stacking them in this way indicates a steady increase in the number of largescale community land acquisitions, as well as the cumulative ‘unmet demand’.

The orange line indicates the hectareage of largescale community land acquisitions, while the yellow line indicates the additional hectareage had all ‘intent’ led to acquisition. Similarly, the yellow line indicates a steadier upward trend in contrast to the flattening of the orange line.

Due to the methodological caveats stated, we cannot base definitive conclusions on the trends in Figure 10. However, it does indicate that there is a level of unmet demand and ‘intent’ to acquire largescale land assets which experienced barriers to its progression. The next section outlines respondents’ views on the nature of these barriers.

Barriers to largescale community landownership

Interviewees were asked about the barriers to largescale community land acquisitions. We heard that while there are many barriers to acquiring and sustaining community landownership of any size, these can often be exacerbated by the scale of a landholding.

Stretched capacity and institutional support

Managing multiple assets with limited resources

Communities often manage multiple assets and priorities with limited resources, a lack of secure income generation, little-to-no staff, and a reliance on volunteers. There was a perception amongst interviewees that communities are increasingly having to manage more assets, many of which are key services to the community and most of which the public sector may have previously been managing:

“we’re seeing a huge volume of communities stepping in because the public sector is stepping back to some extent” (SR 1).

With communities already feeling stretched, many do not have the resources, capacity, staffing nor income generation to consider, let alone manage, more complicated assets such as largescale tracts of land:

There is capacity in communities, but there’s a limit on how far it can go. A lot of that capacity is getting sunk into doing things that are maintaining services rather than taking on new stuff to add value... There isn’t much headroom and much capacity to look at, oh, let’s go and buy a huge woodland because they’ve got very immediate and often multiple responsibilities that are very, you know, communities delivering broadband, petrol pumps. These are essential day-to-day critical

services that have to work for the community to function... I'm not saying they haven't got the ambition that they used to have, but I think they perhaps haven't got the headspace or the capacity and can't stretch themselves to take on something that's maybe more aspirational, which could be transformational in time. They can't keep all the plates spinning. (SR 1)

If individual groups are being set up to look after individual assets, then you're going to just eventually run out of volunteers... There are only so many people who have the time and capacity to be on these boards. And if there is such a large, I mean, if there's so many things in community ownership, will we actually run out of the capacity for communities to take on assets? And the answer is yes. (SR 4)

Divided opinion among some communities on whether, and how, to pursue acquisition places further strains this capacity. One survey respondent discussed the requirements of balloting with community members and how to navigate competing interests in where to focus efforts.

Navigating the land market

Land values

Land values are a key barrier to largescale community land acquisition, prohibiting acquisitions most acutely in areas where land is more expensive. The challenge of sourcing financing for such purchases has become more difficult in recent years. One respondent stated, in response to a perceived reduction in demand:

"It definitely has a lot to do with land values [which] have made life increasingly difficult... It is increasingly difficult to buy substantial amounts of land... The proportion of Scotland that is kind of not accessible through the Scottish Land Fund has increased very significantly, I would suggest, in [the past] 25 years" (SR 2).

This sentiment was echoed by others in that the financial support available to purchase land has not matched this increase in land values. This is further complicated by the number of off-market sales:

"Land is still being sold in terms of off-market sales. It's going for, in some cases, you know, some people are paying ridiculous amounts of money to buy very unproductive, commercially unproductive land. And communities can't compete with that because the Scottish Land Fund can only support communities as a percentage of what the valuation suggests." (SR 1)

There was a perception that because land values are so high, some communities are not incentivised to consider acquisition, with it feeling out of reach or overly ambitious. The following quote indicates how the issues of cost and community capacity converge on this point:

“The logic of why not pursuing the buyout for the estate is we would have had to raise, with legal costs, well over [redacted number] in a space [redacted time]. How are you going to do that when we have a trust board which is run by volunteers? We have no development officer because there’s no funding for a development officer. So, we have no one employed who could have done that. And even if we did, the chances of them having, you know, it would be witchcraft. It wouldn’t be anything else. The only way you can get that amount of money is alchemy. You’re not going to get it. And the [Scottish] Land Fund was closing. And in terms of community buyout, we started the process, but it never proceeded. So, we hadn’t lodged our interest to buy and putting in a late application fails. It would have been a waste of time. And can you imagine the effort that would have had to go in?” (CR 4)

Limited funding options

There is a perception that acquiring largescale landholdings requires ever greater justification from communities as to why they should receive a significant proportion of the shrinking budget of the Scottish Land Fund. Communities may have significant aspirations for largescale land, but facing multiple barriers means they often proceed with smaller acquisitions:

“It always shook down to potentially buying a smaller piece of land... it was dependent upon what you could raise, and also dependent upon what money was available. We didn’t get very far in finding that money. So, then the discussion didn’t go much further. And we’ve kind of settled on a smaller piece, I suppose that was available that we could get funding for.” (CR 5)

Respondents felt that the limited size of the annual SLF budget negatively impacted community willingness to consider a largescale purchase with a price tag associated:

“A lot of it is to do with community perception. If it costs this much and we can only get that much, what’s the point?” (CR 5).

“Another challenge is within the [Scottish] Land Fund; it’s a fixed budget. So, this current year with the capital budget of five million [pounds] and it’s likely that that will be the budget for next year... And five million pounds, realistically, if you’re buying a big asset, five million pounds doesn’t go far. And that five million pounds is for community asset ownership for the whole of Scotland for a year... the committee have got an impossible position if a large one comes because how do you compare, you know, three churches, two libraries, public toilets, etc, etc, with a land buyout project?” (SR 1)

Those involved in supporting communities through acquisitions are often faced with having to make difficult choices in which groups may have a

reasonable chance of acquisition based on their justification for funding:

“Anything more than sort of four or five hectares tends to throw up a couple of alarm bells. Not bad alarm bells but purely to understand the rationale and that that piece of land is actually going to benefit the community” (SR 6).

Furthermore, community organisations struggled to receive the necessary support throughout the buyout process. This was through both the inability to attract sufficient revenue funding to employ a development officer, and a perception that the vital help received from support organisations, such as representative bodies and SLF case officers, was being stretched too thin.

Time

The time taken for communities to negotiate with sellers and raise the necessary funding was also highlighted as a barrier by respondents. Communities often must navigate complex processes in very short timeframes, whilst existing landowners must also navigate their own circumstances if wishing to sell to the local community (CR 7).

“We had no prior warning [about the sale of the land], so the clock was running. The situation really is an absolute impossibility for a community to respond in that timeframe to what’s happening. And the short answer to why aren’t there more community buyouts is partly that, but also partly that a lot of these negotiations are going on in a way that disadvantage communities; they’re excluded from them.” (CR 4)

“You’ve got lots of hoops to jump through and quite rightly as well to demonstrate what it’s all about. But all of that takes a lot to work and takes time, so there’s always caution about the amount of input that’s needed and the amount of time it might take. And that’s also dependent then on the seller waiting. So how can you facilitate that?” (CR 5)

Despite the Community Right to Buy mechanism seeking to support organisations in this situation, many respondents spoke about the difficulty of engaging in the process, with it not necessarily helping with regard to the short timeframes:

“There’s lots of barriers to using Community Right to Buy. And if you’re successful and it’s triggered by the landowner or asset owner offering it for sale, you’ve got a very short window to move. And then you’ve got to apply for the funding. And the funding takes as long as the window that’s open.” (SR 1)

This raises wider questions about legislation supporting or inhibiting largescale acquisition, focused on in depth in the next section.

Legislation as “symbolic” and an administrative burden

Interviewees noted the raft of legislative changes over the last 25 years:

“If we fast forward to now, so much has changed. We’ve now got all the legislation in community empowerment, various Land Reform Acts, community asset ownership” (SR 1).

Respondents felt that aspects of land reform legislation have been beneficial in signalling the direction of travel, and indeed that certain largescale acquisitions would not have happened were it not for them. However, it was considered limited in its ability to enable further largescale acquisition, with communities still having to navigate complex processes and face administrative burdens.

Community Right to Buy

Respondents perceived barriers within the Community Right to Buy process that limit its ability to facilitate largescale community land acquisition:

“The perceived problems with the legislation, the Community Right to Buy, which was used in the early days a bit more liberally, either the use of it or the threat of the use of it was useful, but Community Land Scotland research, amongst others, sort of shows that that’s much more difficult these days to get through, and there hasn’t been a successful Community Right to Buy acquisition for years, apparently. So, despite the fact we’ve got this very progressive legislation, it’s not really working. (SR 5)

Demand for the big buyouts is usually killed at the end of the first conversation because the communities who want to do the big buyouts are almost always inquiring about being able to do a late registration using Community Right to Buy. And like I would never say to community don’t try, but you have to be realistic. There hasn’t been a successful one for a very long time... Communities say is that it’s very complicated, so you don’t know who to go to. And so, communities can be quite kind of tired by the time they get to the right support. (SR 3)

Additionally, interviewees reported that the two-stage process of a Community Right to Buy is cumbersome, and communities often have to make a “gamble” (SR 2) on the one asset they wish to register for without knowledge of whether that particular asset will actually go on sale. This contributes to perceptions that navigating legislative processes is arduous and unlikely to result in success.

Whilst the mechanisms of Community Right to Buy are currently in review, there was a feeling that changes in legislation and the wider policy context might limit community appetite to consider largescale acquisitions:

“there’s also a hesitation because of legislative change or the anticipation of legislative change...communities have maybe held back and just to see what the legislation is going to bring them”. (SR 5)

In addition to a perception that existing legislative mechanisms are not as effective as they could be, there was a sense of a lack of substantive legislation to tackle the structural barriers to largescale community acquisition, such as inflated land prices and intransigent landowners.

Power dynamics and landowner influence

The relationships between landowners and communities influence the experience and success of a buyout. One respondent noted that “the vast majority of projects or acquisitions, be it land or buildings, occur through negotiations” (SR 1). Some interviewees felt the profile of landowners has possibly shifted over time in positive ways, with many landowners now more sensitive to community interests and pressure than several decades ago:

“The profile or their attitude has changed a bit, partly because maybe got rid of some of the worst ones, or the ones who are least kind of proactive. But actually, you possibly have a slightly more proactive cadre of large landowners who increasingly see actual opportunities in management and development of that land.” (SR 2)

In most instances, the success of a buyout hinges on there being a willing seller, one who is open to conversing with community members and, in some cases, can wait for the community to pull together resources to complete a sale. We heard positive experiences from interviewees about existing landowners and their open conversations with community members to consider a largescale acquisition. In the following example, the community had not considered community ownership as a possibility until the seller prompted a discussion with them:

I think the fact that they approached the community first was quite telling. I think they were certainly motivated to see it come under community landownership. It would have been very easy for them to say “I’m just going to stick this on the open market and what will be will be” type idea. But I think they’ve got a vested interest. (CR 1)

We also heard of another landowner who has been considering transferring an estate to the local community, moving through a “long process” of doing so (CR 7).

While these negotiations appear constructive, this may not be the case for all communities. Should there be a seller unwilling to work with an interested community, communities felt unable to progress with an acquisition, even if they had the funds, resources, and capacity to do so. Negotiating with the seller was considered one of the biggest barriers to largescale acquisition,

especially in the face of “a lack of communication and negativity in refusing to work with the community” (survey respondent). A representative from another community said that their relationship with the previous landowner was strained, and when the estate came up for sale, the community felt they had “no avenues. No power. We have no voice”, describing the landowner as “antagonistic” (CR 4).

Perception of the future viability of landholding

The responsibility of the landholding

The characteristics of a landholding itself can be a barrier to communities wishing to pursue largescale community land acquisition, with a “huge difference between purchasing 10,000 acres to purchasing a building” (survey respondent). Communities, and supporting organisations, are more wary if the landholding is more complex; for example, if it includes significant hectarage, contains buildings and tenancy agreements and encompasses designated sites such as SSSIs:

Taking on a large lump of land without any buildings on it is a very different risk profile from taking on land that has a lot of buildings or a large house that needs maintained... I think there are a band of community landowners that have significant responsibilities because they own land on which people live (SR 4).

Communities felt that some estates are so large and have been so poorly managed that they would require significant and possibly insurmountable investment, especially estates which are “cash poor, and have been for a long time” (CR 7). This was a barrier to the community wishing to pursue an acquisition in the first place, with one interviewee highlighted the difficulty of sustaining future income generation:

“Keeping ruins is expensive... it’s a very tricky one in terms of looking ahead at opportunities. If you think about this land for carbon sequestration, it’s not that good quality. You’re not going to stick a wind farm in the middle of it... [It is] losing money hand over fist because of lack of investment.” (CR 4)

They stated that if the community did acquire the landholding in its current form, it would be “a whole flock albatross hanging around the community’s neck for years” (CR 4).

Future income generation

When considering an acquisition, communities are often concerned by the perceived lack of income generation opportunities related to the landholding. Some landholdings may have more options for this readily available to them, such as potential for renewable energy, tourism, or housing, while others may not. The potential for renewable energy opportunities was a key theme among interviewees, considering it vital to

sustain the finances of the estate post-acquisition:

“There’s nothing really like renewables, unless you have like a gold mine or something... When you’ve got a community estate buyer that’s got good potential to do renewable energy, then that’s really a match made in heaven” (SR 3).

One interviewee clearly stated that the community’s interest and ability to pursue largescale community acquisitions “depends on the buoyancy of what is felt is achievable” (CR 5). If there is no clear viable way to financially sustain a largescale landholding, an acquisition is often seen to be too risky to attempt and so communities may seek to acquire smaller assets, or not at all.

This consideration illustrates the pragmatic and considered way in which many communities approach largescale land acquisitions, and emphasise the complex consideration of ‘demand’ discussed previously.

Barriers within the Scottish Land Fund (SLF)

The SLF has been an enabling force in largescale community landownership since its inception. There was little doubt among respondents about its positive impact. However, respondents outlined some of its limitations.

The main limitation is financial, with the Scottish Government unable to fulfil its pledge to increase its annual budget to £20m by the end of the parliament. Its reduced budget has been acutely felt due to increasing land values:

“[The budget has] reduced in cash terms, then it’s been massively reduced in relative terms because the value of the assets that it’s trying to buy has gone up... [While] it’s very difficult to [have a] bottomless pit of money for the [Scottish] Land Fund, if it doesn’t keep pace with land prices then more and more assets are just outwith scope” (SR 2).

One respondent noted that the limited size of the SLF, and how it pales in comparison to the value of land, can curb the sense of aspiration that the largescale acquisition may even be possible:

We could go back to the community and say, look, the Land Fund was ten million [pounds], now it’s twenty [million pounds], and there’s a chance. Instead, it was like, oh, now it’s down at seven and a half [million pounds], and will they commit to that? You don’t get that sense of optimism... any community now thinking about the Land Fund is going to think, well, there’s not much there anyway, so why bother? Whereas if it was twenty million or forty million [pounds], people might think, well, there’s a good fund there, then it’s worth pursuing that (CR 5).

In some instances, interviewees were unsure about whether the SLF had closed, and were conscious of the difficulty of meeting timeframes for

annualised budgets, resulting in some missed opportunities. In addition, respondents expressed that conditions limiting the ability of the community owner to dispose of portions of the landholding limited their long-term viability. This, in addition to limited post-acquisition revenue funding, were considered to unnecessarily disadvantage new largescale community landowners going forward.

Respondents also noted a perceived changing culture within the SLF, stating that in recent years there has been “a lot of risk aversion towards land buyouts from the committee” (SR 3). Interviewees also questioned a lack of transparency in the decision-making process, wondering why some buyouts are funded and others are not. There was a perception that the SLF may favour funding certain regions or past recipients over new applicants from under-represented areas.

Solutions

Interviewees suggested various solutions to address some of these barriers, some more short-term and practical, others more structural or radical. These included increasing institutional support and community capacity, highlighting the successes of previous buyouts, implementing legislative changes, strengthening alternatives to community landownership, and amending aspects of the SLF.

Increase institutional support and community capacity

Communities “need help and support to take the leap into landownership” (survey respondent). Increasing funding and resources for supporting organisations would increase their capacity to deliver support, for example by employing more development officers and offering training for community representatives:

“Training for communities to upskill members and give them the confidence to [acquire large landholdings], providing of expert support – legal, accountancy, business/rural consultants – free at key times to enable vital skill and capacity gaps to be filled.” (survey respondent)

Such institutional support would “prime the community” (SR 3) to be able to take advantage of an acquisition opportunity if one does arise. In some regions, community capacity to seize opportunities would also increase if the burden to manage other aspects of the community, such as the provisioning of key services in the area, was taken on more effectively by local authorities or existing landowners.

Highlight previous successes

Respondents articulated the importance of addressing the “inspiration deficit in what can be envisaged” (CR 3), felt in some regions specifically, to the continuation of largescale acquisitions by communities. One community

representative felt the sector should support efforts to:

“Build the really solid foundation and spend a lot of energy on the inspiring piece, like [talking about] the communities that are breaking through and achieving stuff” (CR 3).

Celebrating and promoting previous successes, and how these were achieved, can “show the benefits of community ownership” (survey respondent). This was thought to embolden other communities to attempt acquisition themselves, as knowing about other cases supports the development of collective knowledge and confidence as well as stronger peer support networks:

“If the community had a better understanding of community ownership and they felt it was something that was achievable, then it might have been possible for them to do a community buyout” (SR 3).

Implement wider legislation changes and land reform ambitions

Legislative measures could be amended or implemented to shape, or intervene in, the land market:

“Land reform more widely is really important because in an unregulated land market, prices are just going to keep going up and the land market is not going to be stable enough. So having a good land legislation that controls the market is really important.” (SR 3)

Some suggested tweaks to nudge the current land market in what they perceived to be the right direction, building on existing legislation. For example, increasing land market “transparency and knowing who owns [the landholding], and being told that it’s going to be up for sale and having a chance to examine the possibilities” (SR 5). To give communities enough time to consider the options, it would help

“if there was something to incentivise a landowner to work with a community and to give them time to do a negotiated sale over a timeframe that isn’t, you know, very short and sharp” (SR 1).

Further flexibility for communities to have greater say over exactly which parts of the land they want to take on could come in the form of lotting, which would enable a community to buy a desired section of a landholding for sale, rather than the whole plot:

“Maybe the option is to use a sort of interventionist approach where you try and, I mean, that’s what I was saying about effectively brokering, buying large estates, splitting them up, selling the bits off. There’s quite a lot of work in that and you’re not going to get it right every time, but it will liquify the market”. (CR 2)

Such solutions would alleviate some of the barriers communities face when trying to navigate the current nature and pace of the land market. This would be further helped by simplifying requirements for communities trying to navigate legislation. For instance, making it easier to complete a late registration of interest so communities are not blocked by administrative barriers.

Some suggested more structural solutions, such as various ways to reform taxation to support community acquisitions:

“Without something that’s more fiscal based, anything that we’re doing is kind of tinkering...a five million pound [Scottish] Land Fund can do a lot, but it will not change land ownership patterns in Scotland” (SR 1).

“[Implement a] land value tax, or something to ensure that we’re not getting these highly inflated prices that are way beyond the ability of that land to generate income to that extent”. (SR 5)

“If there was something where a sale to a community could have some financial benefit in terms of capital gains tax or something else like that, I think that could be a real enabler” (SR 1).

More radical suggestions included placing more restrictive limitations on private ownership or even forcing land sales in particular situations. Some felt it may be necessary to apply “very heavy direct pressure on landowners who fail to engage” (survey respondent). Incentives to depress land value, limit the ownership of land from those who are absentee, encouraging more transparency around off-market sales, and encouraging the public sector to step in at certain points during a community acquisition process were also listed as solutions to encourage more robust legislation and policy mechanisms to support largescale community acquisitions.

Overall, respondents suggested varying balances of ‘sticks’ and ‘carrots’ to encourage landowners, and land reform more generally, in a direction more conducive to largescale community land acquisition.

Strengthen alternatives to community ownership

Largescale landownership is not necessarily the answer for every community. Respondents discussed the importance of understanding what is driving the desire for community ownership in any specific context and which other mechanisms could be made available to that community to support empowerment and Community Wealth Building goals from multiple angles:

“The community doesn’t have to own things for good things to happen. We feel that that’s a huge benefit where it’s not about community ownership, but it’s about the community; seeing a commitment to people living there, wanting to live there”. (CR 5)

In instances where communities are being pushed into considering

ownership because of structural failures or problematic land management practices – or, in other words, they feel like they have no other option to achieve their desired autonomy – strengthening the support, capacity, and resources available to them could help resolve such issues without requiring acquisition. If such alternative support was available, this may be a preferable route to empowerment for some. Additionally, communities may be interested in developing their autonomy over land in ways other than ownership, such as through partnership or leasing agreements. If these mechanisms were developed, communities may have multiple pathways that provide them with more say and control over decision-making and land management practices to choose between. A strengthened suite of governance options that provide different routes to community empowerment enables community acquisition to be used in situations where this is genuinely desired by a community, not as a proposed solution to all land management issues.

Make changes to the Scottish Land Fund

The general sentiment among respondents was that “the [Scottish] Land Fund itself is a great thing to have and has been very beneficial for a lot of people” (CR 4), and is “absolutely pivotal to the continuation of community ownership” (SR 4). However, interviewees suggested various ways the SLF could be amended to increase its positive impact by supporting a greater number of largescale community land acquisitions and making it easier for communities to use the fund. Most commonly, respondents felt that increasing both the total budget of the fund and the maximum amount possible to grant any single acquisition would make a substantial difference:

“They could increase their funding massively and that would facilitate projects. I guess it hasn’t really kept pace with the price of land for many, many years. It’s just been the same pot but land has got more expensive, so you’re going to get less bang for your buck”. (CR 3)

Further, interviewees suggested that the funding pot could be managed differently to enable more acquisitions. For example, part of the fund could be ring-fenced for larger-land buyouts which “may be more of an incentive for communities to realise that it’s potentially achievable” (SR 5), there could be a flexible mechanism in place to provide uplift to the award in the case of the price for an asset being negotiated, or the current SLF could be “complemented by a different funding stream... specifically for the larger, more complex land-based assets” (SR 1). Considering how the SLF could further support post-acquisition development funding would also be welcomed:

“The thing that they did do for us, which did help a lot, was they gave money for a development officer for the first year. There is a bit of like startup period where [it’s helpful to have] more access to funds.” (CR 3)

Beyond this, it was suggested that the SLF could intentionally target areas that have previously been under-represented in receiving funding, with a perception that this would address some of the geographical variation in funding allocation. Increased transparency of SLF decision-making processes would also give communities a fairer chance at being successful:

“The guidance should be more detailed because especially when there’s a lot of pressure on the fund I think there’s more of a need for detailed guidance, because it’s a lot of work to put a Scottish Land Fund application together and if you get it wrong, you’ve put a lot of work in for nothing really.” (SR 3)

To expand what funding it can provide, the SLF itself would need to receive greater resourcing:

“It needs the same or additional members of staff...I think that that’s a given because we’re client facing, you can’t sit behind a telephone or a screen day in, day out and get to know a community, understand who are the movers and shakers, understand what the feeling is in the community about. You need to be out there with communities, working with them. It would benefit from additional staff and resource funds to go towards it (SR 6).

Respondents conveyed the importance of implementing a mixture of the solutions suggested here for largescale community land acquisition to be possible and viable going forward. The next section summarises both the main themes of this research and specific considerations for policy and practice.



5. Summary and conclusions

Largescale community land acquisitions have grown steadily over the past thirty-five years, punctuated by two short periods of rapid expansion. Over that time, the types and locations of assets being acquired has changed, from the initial surge in buyouts of crofting estates in the Highlands and Western Isles, to a growth in community woodland ownership in Argyll, and most recently to interest in nature restoration beyond the traditional Highlands and Islands region. This section will bring together the central themes emerging across literature and primary and secondary data analysed in this research, in order to address the research questions and summarise our conclusions. We will then make recommendations based on this data for future policy, practice and research regarding largescale community landownership.

The history of largescale community land is centred in the north-west of Scotland. Communities of the Highlands and Western Isles were the catalysts of the movement and have always been at the forefront of its expansion. A number of factors came together to create this situation, including: a history of land dispossession, negative experiences of current landowners, relatively low land values, crofting tenure and culture, and strong and cohesive local communities. Initial successes then led to institutional support and inspiration for ‘neighbours’, driving local movements. These aspects may not exist in the same combination elsewhere, leading to geographical disparities in largescale community land acquisitions. However, in recent years the types and locations of largescale land assets being acquired (or sought) by communities have changed, departing from the previous staple of crofting estates in the Highlands and Western Isles, to new types of land asset in other Local Authorities. It is unclear whether this trend will continue, but with ‘intent’ evidenced in ‘new’ areas, it is possible that largescale community landownership is starting to spread geographically while diversifying into new land uses and strategic aims.

The role of ‘inspiration’ was emphasised within this research. Drawing on reports of how difficult the acquisition process can be, as well as the multifaceted nature of ‘demand’, community organisations will think hard about the relative costs and benefits of embarking on this process, and indeed, owning the land asset in perpetuity. This decision will depend heavily on the capacity of the organisation and the wider community, likely requiring significant volunteer effort at a time when institutional support is felt to be declining. Ultimately, local people must make a pragmatic decision as to whether it is worth the effort, weighing up the potential future risks and benefits, opportunities and challenges. While it is impossible to know these in advance, understanding what other largescale community

landowners have experienced and achieved can provide inspiration and reassurance for prospective communities to be able to better anticipate their own pathway to ownership.

Should an organisation be willing to embark on this process, they will then encounter two of the main barriers to largescale community land acquisition: the current owner and the asset cost. The 'seller' - whether public or private, willing or unwilling - retains almost universal control of the process, with very little chance of a community acquisition succeeding if the seller does not wish to sell. There appears to be a perception that cases of particularly negative or detrimental landownership have decreased due to some historic cases having already resulted in a community buyout, and current owners improving their behaviour and practice to stem demand for one. In this sense, it is possible that as land management conditions in some communities have improved, and other priorities requiring community capacity have been prioritised, a 'drop in demand' for acquisition might be perceived.

The value/cost of land (the two are not necessarily comparable) is a significant factor in largescale community land acquisition. Although speculation around natural capital may have eased in recent years, land prices remain beyond the reach of many communities, and uncertainty persists regarding the future direction of land markets. The promised doubling of the Scottish Land Fund to £20m annually failed to materialise, with the budget being cut to below its previous £10m level. These factors combined make it increasingly difficult for communities to acquire largescale assets, with some reportedly abandoning plans at an early stage due to an acknowledgement of the slim chances of success. The stretching of support from case officers exacerbates these difficulties, with the SLF perceived to be playing less of a role in facilitating the process to ownership of largescale land assets. Alternative funding is difficult to source and the timescales required to raise capital are also constraining, especially as part of formal mechanisms such as Community Right to Buy.

The difficulty of navigating CRtB and other legislative mechanisms and support is a strong theme of this research. While such mechanisms, funding and support have been central to the facilitation and expansion of largescale community landownership, there continue to be challenges. Community Right to Buy is considered unwieldy and overly complicated, with little perceived chance of success. The Scottish Land Fund is the main funder of acquisitions but cannot support communities seeking to navigate the similarly difficult process of negotiating leases or other options short of ownership. While there appear to be numerous organisations providing support to groups, there are still reports of a lack of understanding of these processes by prospective largescale community landowners.

Finally, at the heart of this research was the concept of 'demand'. At

a practical level, this is not straightforward to gauge or even define. While there are examples of communities that have expressed explicit demand for their land, often over a long period of time, many others have responded to an opportunity presented, with just the right confluence of supporting factors: a willing seller of an economically viable asset, available funding and support, and the community capacity and cohesion required to be able to launch a bid and manage the land following its acquisition. Similarly, if it becomes clear that an acquisition is not possible, or indeed if the risk is not considered to justify the possible rewards, explicit 'demand' may well dwindle. In this sense, the nature and extent of demand changes considerably with circumstances and opportunity. Thus, demand is a particularly elusive concept and it is not possible to definitively conclude as to whether demand for largescale community land acquisition is falling across Scotland. However, conflating decreased hectarage with lowered community interest risks neglecting the wider conditions mediating and explicating such trends. What we can say is that there are numerous groups which have expressed a desire to acquire a largescale land asset and have been unable to do so due to persistent and growing challenges and barriers. In this sense, the appetite for largescale community land assets is still very much alive.

Recommendations and considerations

As stated previously, this was a small study which illustrates a snapshot of the extent, location, barriers and facilitators of largescale community landownership. While methodologically robust, it should not be considered a definitive or comprehensive uncovering of all related issues. We therefore call for significantly more research into this area to fully understand the factors present and how to address them. From our perspective, the following are particular priorities:

- 1** A targeted study of 'intent' to consider all 'unsuccessful' buyouts, understand the reasons for these and identify any trends. This could include an assessment of aforementioned distinction between 'drivers' and 'triggers' in motivating an acquisition;
- 2** Consider to what extent the behaviour of largescale private/public landowners may have improved in order to stem demand for further largescale community land acquisitions;
- 3** Further investigation of the factors affecting demand for largescale community land acquisitions within the Highlands and Islands region, especially the vast disparity between the major island groupings.

In addition, the following considerations are based on the data gathered from study participants, covering future policy and practice:

- **Policy**

- Strengthen support for, and understanding of, alternatives to outright ownership;
- Introduce Land Value Tax to deter 'land-banking' and offer tax incentives for sales to communities;
- Strengthen and streamline mechanisms (such as Community Right to Buy) in order to encourage communities to utilise these mechanisms;
- Increase the budget of the Scottish Land Fund in order to keep pace with the rising cost of land. Consider ringfencing money for largescale land acquisitions.

- **Practice**

- Facilitate better peer support and communications in order to address any 'inspiration deficit';
- Representative and support organisations to better coordinate assistance for community organisations to ensure clear routes and not allow anyone to slip through the cracks.

Finally, a recommendation for all parties involved in this area is to embark upon serious discussions regarding the future role and purpose of largescale community landownership. Questions raised by this research include:

- Where largescale community landownership has been considered a 'means to an end' and addressing 'market failures', should an increase in demand and acquisitions be considered a good thing?
- In order to prioritise need, is there an argument for limiting the Scottish Land Fund to those with no other option but ownership, while also facilitating and enabling other approaches short of ownership?
- In the context of retreating public service provision, is it appropriate (or desirable) to place such responsibilities on community landowners?
- Should we continue to give large quantities of public money to private landowners, especially where demand for community acquisition has been driven by their poor management of the asset?
- And if the Scottish Government and other agencies support an expansion of largescale community landownership, are they willing to directly address the barriers to doing so identified in this report?

Such questions are beyond the scope of this research, but in order to place its findings in context and consider what they may mean for the future, it is vital to discuss what kind of future we all want to work towards.

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Ma tha sibh ag iarraidh lethbhreac den sgrìobhainn seo sa Ghàidhlig, cuiribh post-d gu **commsteam@landcommission.gov.scot** no cuiribh fòn gu **01463 423 300**.

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