

SCOTLAND'S NATIONAL PLANNING FRAMEWORK 4 THINK PIECE – BLOG – A THRIVING RURAL SCOTLAND

Introduction

The Scottish Government is keen to bring together views and ideas from a wide range of sectors and to explore the priorities Scotland's fourth National Planning Framework (NPF4) should address.

In the seventeenth in a series of Think Pieces Calum Macleod sets out his thoughts on Scotland2050 and specifically a thriving rural Scotland. The opinions expressed are that of the author and we hope that they will stimulate debate and discussion.

A thriving rural Scotland

Much of rural Scotland faces a depopulation crisis. Scottish Government funded research by the James Hutton Institute estimates that the Sparsely Populated Area (SPA), covering almost half of Scotland's land area but containing less than 3% of the nation's people, will lose more than a quarter of its population by 2046 in the absence of urgent policy intervention. Zoom in to the regional level and the picture looks equally grim. Highland Council predicts population growth between 2016 and 2041 in Inverness, Skye and Lochalsh and Ross and Cromarty. However, many of the region's other places are set to experience continuing population decline over the same period: Sutherland (-11.9%); Caithness (-21.1%); East Ross (-13.8%); Badenoch and Strathspey (-5.3%); and Lochaber (-5.9%). Head to the Western Isles or the Southern Uplands and you'll be confronted by a similarly gloomy population prognosis.

Stemming the flow of people from our sparsely populated area must feature at the top of policymakers' 'to do' list if we are serious about creating a thriving rural Scotland by 2050. That means reframing our relationship as a society with land and landscapes so as to enable our most vulnerable rural communities to flourish as a matter of social justice whilst simultaneously safeguarding our natural heritage and combatting the existential threat of climate change. Land reform – defined in the Land Reform Review Group's 2014 report, 'The Land of Scotland and the Common Good', as "*measures that modify or change the arrangements governing the possession and use of land in Scotland in the public interest*" - has a vital role to play in reframing that relationship. A crucial part of that task involves tackling negative monopolies of power inherent in concentrated rural land ownership that can stymie genuinely sustainable development. That implies more imaginative deployment of legislative, regulatory and fiscal policy levers to achieve rural outcomes that contribute to the common good of Scotland as a whole.

The land-use planning system also has an important future role to play in the reframing process. Some of the groundwork for the system's future contribution to rural repopulation has been laid in provisions within the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 for which Community Land Scotland strongly advocated. Increasing the population of rural areas of Scotland is included as one of four outcomes for the National Planning Framework (NPF). Scottish Ministers must have regard to the desirability

of resettling rural areas that have become depopulated when preparing the content of the Framework. Allocating land for resettlement may now be a consideration for developing both the NPF and Local Development Plans. There is also scope for producing maps and other material relating to rural areas where there has been a substantial decline in population when preparing the NPF. The Framework must also have regard for any Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement or any strategy for land ownership or use prepared by Scottish Ministers.

These are all helpful provisions in terms of making the planning system fit for the purpose of helping repopulate areas of rural Scotland. However, their effective implementation depends on the commitment of Government and Planning Authorities to steer planning policy towards land use that is genuinely economically, environmentally and socially sustainable. In short, planning policy that helps deliver the affordable housing, 'hard' and 'soft' infrastructure and high-quality jobs that are vital to attracting more people to live and work in our currently most imperilled rural communities. That will require policy imagination and political will. But be in no doubt that the extent to which these communities' prospects are turned around will be the barometer of whether *all* of rural Scotland is thriving by 2050.

Biography

Dr Calum MacLeod is Policy Director for Community Land Scotland and a Sustainable Development Consultant. This Think-Piece is written in a personal capacity.