
‘Rural Thinks’ Consultation and Engagement Workshops

Report for the National Council of Rural Advisers
March 2018



Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba
gov.scot

Our thanks to everybody who gave their time to participate in the workshops.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Throughout February and March 2018, the National Council of Rural Advisors (NCRA) hosted nine 'Rural Thinks' workshops across rural Scotland. Each workshop comprised a 2-hour facilitated discussion around the following three themes:

- Infrastructure – enabling success
- People – investing in talent and creating opportunities
- Vision – the narrative of Rural Scotland – selling the story and the brand

1.2. The aim of the workshops was to gather feedback to help develop recommendations on the future of the rural economy, including how to create and maintain a vibrant rural economy, and what actions people might take to achieve this. The intention was for participants to leave their workshops feeling engaged with the NCRA and its work, enthusiastic about the opportunities of the future, and motivated to take ownership and action.

1.3. Participants were from a cross-section of the rural economy. They had stories to tell about the challenges and opportunities they face living and/or working in Scotland's rural economy. Small and medium enterprises, fisheries, farmers, forestry, renewable energy organisations, national parks, government organisations, local authorities, LEADER representatives, development trusts, education providers, unions, and crofters were all represented at the workshops.

1.4. In total, the nine workshops involved 107 attendees, the geographic distribution is illustrated in the map on page 6.

1.5. The Lines Between, an independent research agency, was commissioned to support the delivery of and report on the workshops. We recorded the discussions and captured notes using the creative engagement tool Ketso*, and on flip charts. Following the conclusion of each workshop, we wrote a detailed note highlighting the key themes and issues that emerged during the discussions, using illustrative quotes from participants.

About the report

1.6. This final report draws on this extensive material from each workshop, providing a complete report of the 'Rural Thinks' workshop series. It reports on the discussions and key messages under the three themes of Infrastructure, People and Vision.

1.7. We have provided illustrative quotes throughout the report. If quotes have not been provided under a certain heading for a specific location, this does not mean that this topic was not discussed at that particular workshop. However, due to the volume of quotes we have been unable to include them all in the main body of the report. We have therefore created an Appendix as a place for the surplus quotes which we felt should be included somewhere in the report.

1.8. The number of quotes provided from each workshop under each of the headings goes some way to demonstrate the amount of discussion devoted to that topic at each of the locations.

1.9. Where possible we have provided solutions and outlined ideas participants gave to overcome the issues they discussed.

* <http://www.ketso.com/>

1.10. The separate reports from each of the individual workshops are available from the NCRA on request; we suggest reading these reports should you require further detail on the topics covered.

Limitations

1.11. There are a small number of limitations that need to be taken into consideration when reading this report:

- Workshops varied considerably both in the way themes were discussed and the level of engagement of participants in certain topics. This is reflected to some extent in the number of quotes under each topic from each workshop, and where no quote is given under a heading it can be assumed that this was not something that was discussed by an area.
- For the purposes of reporting on participants' discussions, we have drawn out key themes from the data under each of the three main topics (Infrastructure, People, Vision). However, it is very important to note that the areas are all clearly interlinked, there may be some overlap, and sections should not be read in isolation.
- The report is long as we felt it necessary to ensure we captured and reported on the voices across all the workshops. Any omission of quotes we felt would run the risk of areas not being fairly represented, and while many discussions were similar in content, there were many nuances within the conversations that needed to be included in able to inform future work.



2. Infrastructure



2.1. Infrastructure was the first topic discussed during the workshops. Participants recognised the importance of good infrastructure to encourage people (including young people) to stay on and move to rural areas and for the rural economy to survive and flourish.

2.2. Analysis of the discussions shows that there were three main themes under this topic. 1) Infrastructure in relation to connectivity, both digital and transport. 2) Infrastructure to support rural communities – such as the availability of good public services (for example schools and hospitals), affordable housing, and utilities. And, 3) infrastructure in relation to business and industry support, in other words creating or having an environment within which businesses are able to start-up and/or grow and industry can thrive.

2.3. While there was acknowledgment that in some areas the infrastructure is good, participants believed that where it is inadequate, this harms the attractiveness of rural areas and limits development and the potential growth and productivity of Scotland's rural economy.

“If you want to keep people in the rural areas, [...] then you need the infrastructure to support that.” (Orkney)

Connectivity

“We want people to be able to live here without recognising it's a rural area, to be so well-connected that actually it's not a negative.” (St Boswells)

Digital connectivity

2.4. Participants across the workshops discussed the increasing need for reliable and fast communications such as the internet/broadband and mobile and telephone networks. Participants discussed the impact of poor connectivity, particularly the limitations it puts on those living rurally and running rural businesses and its negative impact on attracting and retaining young people.

“Broadband is woeful despite constant assurances from Government and from industry that it’s being dealt with.” (Orkney)

“If we can’t deliver [mobile communications] to young people, they just won’t stay.” (Oban)

“We offer some distance learning courses and we had a student withdraw because they simply couldn’t download the learning material because, going back to digital infrastructure, it took too long to get access to the material and there was no reliability of access.” (Oldmeldrum)

Suggested Solutions

Political Pressure

2.5. Participants discussed the need for political pressure on providers to support the improvement of digital connectivity, stressing that good digital connectivity is a necessity, not just a ‘nice to have’.

“We want increased political pressure around digital connectivity as a theme, we felt that’s not something you could achieve at a local level but that really needs national political pressure to be applied on the mobile phone and broadband providers to provide the service that they promise. [...]. It’s fundamental to the success of rural regions.” (Dumfries)

Place based approaches

2.6. Participants talked of ‘place based’ solutions, whereby the local community devises a solution to the issues they face, using local knowledge and expertise.

“We talked about place-based solutions, particularly with Broadband issues. We discussed groups in Skye that have managed to overcome their challenges with Broadband by using a local rural design solution rather than a one-size-fits-all rural solution. That could be a really, really useful thing for other rural areas that were looking to develop.” (St Boswells)

Transport

“We need affordable, reliable, regular transport.” (Orkney)

2.7. Participants described poor road, rail and air infrastructure as limiting opportunities in rural areas. They felt poor transport links can discourage people to live or set up businesses rurally and discourages investment.

“There’s the whole business of the road infrastructure, particularly with freight. That’s a serious limitation.” (Oban)

2.8. In addition, in Oban they discussed the single-track railway line as a significant limitation largely due to the impact this has on the line’s capacity, but also that wi-fi is not available on trains between Glasgow and Oban, which restricts activity.

Suggested solutions

Thinking innovatively and big

2.9. Participants highlighted the need to ‘think big’ to avoid missing out on available opportunities. For example, in Dumfries, they discussed the opportunity of being the new Space Port which in itself would lead to increased investment in transport infrastructure. In St Boswells, they discussed the need to think about different modes of transport to support the different types of road users.

“We’ve got to think big or we’ll miss out on these opportunities.” (Dumfries)

“Supporting a wider group of road users and modes of transport. If you’ve got a 16-year-old working in a rural area, they don’t have access to a car. Are there modes of transport? Having those develop might be really good for the rural economy.” (St Boswells)

Political pressure for Investment

2.10. Participants in Dumfries talked of the need for political pressure to encourage investment in their road network.

“We’ve been discussing issues with A75 Euroroute and the need for investment to maintain and improve. We need increased political pressure so that it delivers for the region rather than being detrimental to business of the region.” (Dumfries)

Using learning from elsewhere

2.11. Participants discussed initiatives that have been successful elsewhere as a possible solution, such as the 'Wheels to Work' programme.

"There are probably 20 or 30 Local Authorities across Britain that run a scheme that is often known under the title Wheels to Work, where they are particularly looking at the 16- to 19- or 18-year-olds and they can have a range of support schemes, everything from funding them to get their licence for driving a motor-bike, loaning them a motorbike for six months, funding bicycles, a whole range of appropriate modes of transport to enable them to overcome limitations of either the bus service or the fact that they're too young to have a car or have insurance cover. Paying the insurance cover is another." (St Boswells)

Infrastructure to support communities

2.12. Participants discussed the importance to a thriving rural economy of the availability of key public services such as education, housing, social care, childcare, as well as shops and post offices, and affordable utilities. They felt that good quality local services are crucial to the success of rural communities; stressing their ability to attract new residents to the area and help ensure current communities stay. They stressed the importance of ongoing investment to maintain and improve them, something which they felt was currently lacking.

2.13. Participants called on the Scottish Government and Local Authorities to think strategically about how rural communities can ensure there are opportunities and facilities available for entire families, as those who move into rural communities often bring their families with them. Participants discussed a concrete offer that includes childcare, continuity in healthcare provision, high-quality primary and secondary education, and local economies that understand the needs of young people.

"Attracting professionals into this area is a big one: they often come with partners or families, and they can't find jobs for the partner or good schooling for the children." (Dumfries)

"To attract people in rural areas you need the facilities, you need the links with education because people often bring their partners and families and children and by actually attracting entrepreneurial people to rural areas, you grow the momentum and by word of mouth more people are attracted." (Oban)

"there needs to be a package around the family. You have to make the whole thing attractive. Not just for people coming in, but to retain people here as well." (Oban)

“The need for big investment in infrastructure and utilities – water, sewerage, electricity. Some communities in Orkney suffer and other areas in rural Scotland are the same.” (Orkney)

Schools

2.14. Participants talked of the importance of good schools across rural Scotland and the current issues some are facing. For example, the perception that there is limited investment in rural schools, limited choice of schools, and the challenges around recruiting teachers in rural areas.

“[we need] Strong vibrant communities with local schools.” (Dingwall)

“There’s a big difficulty recruiting secondary school teachers around Bute.” (Oban)

Housing

2.15. Participants discussed the need for affordable, innovative, and flexible housing and felt that planning authorities need to reconsider their relatively strict procedures in relation to this. Participants felt that an increased availability of housing in rural communities would help encourage young people to stay and encourage businesses to settle in the area, increasing employment opportunities.

“We need affordable housing for young people who want to stay, to bring up young families, to stay for education.” (Dumfries)

“There’s no point in saying we want young people to come back if we don’t build housing for young people, which we don’t. If we keep building the rural housing like we’re a retirement home, we will become a retirement home. We’ve got to build mixed housing. The market isn’t doing it, I don’t see any other options other than much better public rental housing made available for the 18- to 30-year-old category of people in rural areas.” (Stirling)

“There’s a whole raft of things about housing, from planning, supporting community-led housing development, more affordable housing. And managing the housing that is starting to happen with deeds and trusts and things to ensure that houses, if they are built, end up then being maintained and being sold off for second homes and things like that.” (Oban)

2.16. They made suggestions on the need for different types of housing, such as seasonal accommodation for seasonal workers, and student housing, and the risks associated with not having appropriate accommodation available for the varied groups operating within the rural economy.

“Housing, housing, housing. High-level needs to push down innovative ways of dealing with housing. Local Authorities need to spend money on housing but it’s not just affordable housing, it’s possibly seasonal housing, seasonal staff accommodation.” (Oban)

Public transport

“We did a piece of work recently on access to training and education for young people. It was the cost of transport that was the real barrier. You can’t access further training in a lot of rural areas or if you can, it’s an extremely limited offering. Young people are prepared to travel for that but they just can’t in a rural area. You can’t get to college without spending a fortune on transport. If we want people to stay in our rural areas, live in our rural areas, but we also want the skilled employees, the gap is around vocational training.” (Oban)

Social Care

2.17. Participants acknowledged the widely growing concerns about the rural communities’ demographics (ageing population, health concerns, loss of young people etc.) and the potential strain it could place on rural communities and services. They discussed the need for serious vision and a strategic response to these challenges.

“D&G has one of the highest levels of individuals living with long-term chronic issues. We have and will continue to have the biggest percentages of population over the age of 65. It’s a massive issue.” (Dumfries)

“[We need] future-proofed social care for the elderly.” (Stirling)

Childcare

2.18. Participants expressed their frustration that government funded childcare vouchers are unable to be spent on unregistered childcare providers, yet registered providers are often difficult to find in rural areas.

“Rural childcare options – it should be a different strategy in rural areas as to what it is towns and cities and thresholds for accessing childcare funding. Registered child carers, which are easy to find in urban areas, don’t necessarily exist in rural areas and you can’t spend childcare vouchers on unregistered people.” (Oban)

2.19. Despite many calls for investment in public services and infrastructure, participants also acknowledged the ‘chicken and egg’ issues around investment, in other words, people are reluctant to set up a childminding business if there are insufficient people in the area to support the business, but people are reluctant to move to an area if there are insufficient childcare options.

2.20. Participants also discussed the impact poor local services has on tourism, often one of the biggest income generators within rural communities. Participants called on Local Authorities to provide fit for purpose services that can cope with both the local population and the tourists that many rural communities attract.

Infrastructure to support business/industry

2.21. There was a large amount of discussion across the workshops on the infrastructure available to support the businesses and industries operating within the rural economy. This was in relation to three key areas: business support, access to finance, and planning and regulation. They considered a strong Infrastructure to support business as key to a thriving economy which in turn helps to retain young people by creating job opportunities, attract new business, and grow established ones.

“[It’s about] concentrating on being able to get businesses to the size where they can start to offer opportunities that are sufficiently attractive to stop people leaving the rural areas.” (Oldmeldrum)

2.22. Many participants talked of the diverse range of industries people living in rural areas are engaged in and how diversifying is ‘the new normal’.

“I run a think tank, my partner runs a production company, we live in a rural area and this is normal now.” (Stirling)

2.23. Participants discussed how increasingly businesses in the rural economy have to diversify to survive due to the seasonal nature of many rural industries, such as agriculture and tourism. They felt that businesses should be rewarded for adding value to their local community as they diversify.

“I would add in a vision to challenge our thinking about separating all these different land uses off and only fitting into one defined area so you only work in agriculture or you only work in forestry or tourism or retail. Actually, a lot of our businesses incorporate and encompass all of those things and can benefit greatly from all of those things and all of those things should directly be connected to improving the environmental health of our land, our air, our water and so that people should be rewarded for not just integrating what they do but adding value to the land and to the people that live off of it.” (Dingwall)

2.24. Participants discussed how new and established businesses need to be encouraged to settle and grow in rural communities through business-friendly conditions, such as tax relief, and appropriate planning regulations; in turn, they argued, this should attract and encourage people to live and invest in rural communities.

“Businesses need to be encouraged to settle so you can create jobs.” (Dingwall)

Business Support

“If you want to say we’re ready and open for business we need to make this offer of support so businesses can grow and become more than micro-businesses.” (Oldmeldrum)

2.25. Participants highlighted the importance of role models, opportunities for knowledge exchange, mentoring, and peer support networks in the rural economy to help business and community development, and explained these opportunities are difficult to come by in small rural communities. Participants discussed the need to create opportunities for collaboration, noting the current perceived lack of collaboration in the rural economy and the need for national and/or regional coordination.

“We talked about the importance of peer support and actually learning from each other in the context of our successes, [...] it’s about businesses who are doing amazing things then putting it forward and supporting other businesses to learn from them. It’s more than just mentoring. We’ve got a lot of success at our fingertips already and I think we don’t necessarily promote the sharing of that and facilitate that. It’s a combination. Role models and knowledge exchange, mentoring, peer support networks, all of that.” (Oban)

“There aren’t enough organisations collaborating and it’s not broad enough. It’s not coordinated in any kind of national or regional way.” (Oban)

Suggested solutions

“Have infrastructure and support in place to nurture ideas, and encourage, rather than always finding hurdles and reasons for people not to do things.” (Dumfries)

Creating business hubs:

“Building new entrepreneur innovation hubs where people can get together and use the facilities, support, network and development opportunities. ‘We’ve got a great opportunity for that at the Crichton campus here in D&G.’ Hub model has big conference facilities used by businesses who have applied- for new starts- like a boot camp for businesses.” (Dumfries)

Flexible support

“Businesses need to be able to reach in and take what they need from any support.” (St Boswells)

2.26. There was an emphasis on the need to tailor the delivery of support to the needs of small businesses.

“A lot of the economy in this area is based on small family businesses. A lot of the people we’re having to deal with are totally bureaucratic, whether it’s trying to get planning permission or a new connection from Scottish power or some of the grants that are available in governmental forms, they seem to be thinking that they’re dealing with a big company with different staff to handle their processes, and if you’re a one man band, by the time you’ve spoken to five different divisions of Scottish power, you’ve probably given up. There’s a lot of help out there but it doesn’t seem to be directed at being user friendly for small businesses.” (Dumfries)

Being weary of big business

2.27. Participants at Dingwall, warned against relying on big business to solve problems in rural areas, but focussing more on supporting SMEs in the rural economy.

“The history of large business in the Highlands and Islands is not a happy one. They come and they go and they leave huge social problems behind when they leave. Big is not beautiful in the Highlands, I don’t think.” (Dingwall)

Access to Finance

“If we’re encouraged to invest, which then creates more employment, that keeps the rural economy [...] going.” (Orkney)

2.28. Participants talked about the limited amount of capital investment available from banks and other investors, who seem risk-averse and reluctant to fund innovation. However, they recognised what they could do with grant funding if given the opportunity to be creative and innovate.

“The number one thing would be the availability of capital.” (Orkney)

“We’re very good at investing in our businesses if there are grants there to do it.” (Orkney)

2.29. Participants indicated that they are concerned about loss of funding following Brexit.

“We need to make sure that we put these structural funds in place after Brexit.” (Stirling)

“After Brexit, the subsidies we get have got to be sustainable to keep our businesses going.” (Orkney)

2.30. Some participants criticised farming and agricultural subsidies for stifling innovation.

“One of the bad things that farming subsidies and agricultural subsidies have done is that they’ve stifled innovation in some areas and actually probably stopped younger people getting into agriculture.” (Stirling)

2.31. Others however, highlighted the importance of them for sustainability and keeping produce competitive.

“Support payments for farmers are fundamental. Agriculture is very important for the Orkney economy.” (Orkney)

2.32. They hoped that, following Brexit, revisiting the Common Agricultural Policy will help to ‘level the playing field’ for new industries to compete with agriculture, which receives subsidies.

“We talked about other obstacles specifically to do with Brexit and maybe there are opportunities in replacing or not replacing the Common Agricultural Policy in order to try and level the playing field so that new rural industries are able to compete on a level playing field with agriculture which, in some of its forms, is currently being subsidised.” (Perth)

Suggested solutions

Simplifying the grants system

2.33. Participants argued that often individuals don't know where to go to access funding and indicated there the number of funding programmes is bewildering.

“Planning, loans and grants need to be simplified.” (Stirling)

Attracting inward investment

2.34. In Perth, they suggested that each Local Authority should have a rural strategy for inward investment.

“Each Local Authority needs not just an urban strategy for inward investment but a rural strategy for inward investment. There are plenty of places where global companies are interested in investing in rural areas and there's an opportunity for them to be able to be put in contact with rural. Not enough areas have got devolved teams working on rural strategies and I think we need to perhaps think about organisation workforce and make sure that they are fully resourced with the right people to look at inward investment and all sorts of different things in rural areas, not just keep them focused on cities.” (Perth)

2.35. They also talked of the importance of effective marketing of rural Scotland to encourage big companies to set up there.

“Marketing in order to try and attract suitable investment into rural Scotland and if it was 2027, I would like to see more companies like Castle Water, who are based in London but they have a big presence in Blairgowrie. So, using that as a case study as a marketing tool, what is the benefit that they have seen to moving out of a big urban environment into a rural, fresh air, opportunistic, healthier, easy exercise, better long life living stimulation, to give Scotland the infrastructure that we'd all benefit from, from a tax point of view.” (Perth)

Planning

2.36. Participants across the workshops talked a lot about planning regulation, and land use legislation, and how over-regulation presents a constant barrier to developing businesses. Specific issues included its lack of flexibility, its bureaucracy and tendency to be more focused on urban rather than rural priorities (i.e. not fit for purpose), and its perceived 'lack of vision'. The impacts of these issues are largely that it leads to the stifling of diversification and innovation within the rural economy.

"The Orkney planning rules are, basically, if you're a farmer, unless your planning application is something to do with your business, you can't diversify. Farmers have got to keep farming." (Orkney)

"Town and country planning. They don't understand the country bit, so you try and apply a town policy to a country situation. It doesn't work. The policemen who police these rules and regulations don't get it, don't understand the problems that we have every day so therefore you have to comply, and the easiest way to comply is to do nothing." (Kilmarnock)

"In times of hardship, being able to take decisions very quickly in a small business is really important but the working environment needs to be regulatory-light and enabling. [...] If you're three or four people trying to run a rural community or rural charity or rural business, you're going to suddenly find that three days of this week are spent looking at one regulation instead of getting on and doing the job that you want to do." (Perth)

"Look at land use legislation and give more security to land owners and they may therefore produce more jobs and tenancies and smaller business get the opportunity to start up." (Stirling)

"Fundamental land use is a key thing because I don't think rural Scotland will express its full potential with the current mix." (Oldmeldrum)

2.37 Participants also highlighted their concerns regarding restrictive planning regulations in relation to housing. A key concern was the limited supply of housing for retired farmers.

“We have an aging population of farmers that can’t retire to anywhere. [...] Roughly half of Scottish Borders farmers are tenants therefore they don’t have the luxury of capital. Farmers need somewhere in their own location to retire to that allows young people to come back in. There’s a kind of rural-proofing of planning that perhaps has not been pushed hard enough.” (St Boswells)

2.38. This was a discussion in Dingwall where participants highlighted the issues in relation to the renovation of crofts, and how many are lying derelict due to the restrictiveness of current tax regulations.

“A lot of existing housing is becoming derelict and one of the blockages to renovating is that you have to pay VAT on renovating houses, but you can build a new house with no VAT. You look around almost every croft in the north and there’s a derelict house and a brand-new bungalow.” (Dingwall)

Suggested solutions

More flexible, fit for purpose planning

2.39. Participants discussed the importance of fit for purpose planning that is tailored and more in line with the needs of rural communities and businesses.

“People in authoritative positions need to be open and accommodating and pragmatic and less bureaucratic.” (Orkney)

“That’s going to involve the planning authorities to actually re-look at how they look at their procedures and policies. Some of them are very, very strict and that’s not going to encourage those sorts of innovate solutions.” (Oban)

“[it’s] about trying to reduce obstacles because we all recognise that there is lots of potential and there are great things going on in rural areas but there are frustrations and obstacles to people setting up businesses, to communities being able to build a heart.” (Perth)

“You need distinctive rural policies because anything you’re talking about, the challenges, the needs will be different, the resources, the capital assets, the human capital will be completely different but the policies are written often for urban.” (Oldmeldrum)

2.40. Participants proposed a reassessment of the priorities in planning towards how to best serve local needs through the planning system.

“We need to look at how we operate planning on all sides. Look at how to release land that we need for homes or whatever. Benefits to the local community should go far with planning, show how it’s going to add value.” (Dumfries)

Collaborative planning

2.41. Participants discussed the need for decision-makers to be rurally inclusive and for planning to be a collaborative process.

“Planning is a fairly confrontational process and it should be a much more collaborative process right the way through with the planners to encourage development.” (St Boswells)

Simplified Development Zones*

“The Planning Bill that’s going through at the moment has something called Simplified Development Zones which are simplified, they’re essentially micro-enterprise zones and they’re something which might allow local councils to reduce the regulation, to increase the opportunity for people to just get on with it and ask for forgiveness afterwards. And in some sense, we have to start moving a little bit more towards that, which may not be appropriate in urban places where there is much more going on but in the rural context, that’s what we’ve always done, for 1000 years, and we somehow need to be allowed to carry on doing that.” (Perth)

Local production facilities and supported supply chains

2.42. Participants discussed the difficulties in sourcing local produce in many local areas, and how the dismantling of many local supply chains has led to issues within the rural economy. For example, one participant in Orkney talked of the loss of the local abattoir meant they could no longer call their beef Orkney Beef, because it was slaughtered off-island. They talked of the missing link often being the processor, and how once you lose the local production facilities this impacts on viability and profitability of primary producers.

* [http://www.parliament.scot/Planning%20\(Scotland\)%20Bill/SPBill23S052017.pdf](http://www.parliament.scot/Planning%20(Scotland)%20Bill/SPBill23S052017.pdf)

“My local butcher doesn’t get all of his meat locally and I was trying to get hold of some Ayrshire lamb from him, and he said, farmers don’t want to deliver it here because of the scale I can sell, I can go through one lamb a week so it’s not really worth their while delivering it here yet we’re surrounded by lambs. It’s ridiculous especially when I’ve got groups of tourists coming to me and they want to use local produce.” (Kilmarnock)

2.43. Participants argued that prime food produced in Scotland should be available locally in Scotland and not always exported. They discussed the importance of a verifiable food chain to the rural economy, which could be strengthened by giving local communities the infrastructure to control the production and processing of their own products.

“The fact that there’s a verifiable food chain is really important. You don’t have to have it written on the menu to know where your eggs or your beef came from when you’re in a local restaurant a lot of the time.” (Perth)

2.44. Participants highlighted the need to develop infrastructure to support new products and production facilities locally in rural areas.

“Move towards processing the food and keeping the wealth locally.” (Stirling)

Suggested solutions

Government investment into local production plants

2.45. Participants suggested that Government could help establish local production plants that could supply produce to local schools, prisons, and businesses.

“You could have Government investing in processing facilities to supply red meat to all of the prisons, schools, etc. Use the subsidy money to invest in that and pay us a proper price.” (Kilmarnock)

“We need a national understanding of how the supply chains work within that to be fair to all with locally accessible processing facilitates. Vertical diversification so you can go straight to market easily. As opposed to traditional horizontal diversification such as opening a camping site, this vertical diversification is the provenance, getting the route to market, it’s everything. There’s some definite opportunities for the government around the infrastructure of what that would look and feel like.” (Stirling)

2.46. Linked to this, a participant suggested how farming subsidies could be used across the rural economy to support the whole production chain, not just the farms, using an example of local abattoir closures leaving farmers with limited/no options for slaughtering their meat locally, therefore increasing costs and having a potential knock-on effect on their 'local' / provenance brand.

“An abattoir that doesn't have the throughput to sustain itself economically is closed. Whereas if it had been a beef farm it would have had access to some form of revenue support to sustain itself. So, it's one rule for a farmer but a different set of rules for just down the road, which has a knock-on effect of affecting the farmers who need their livestock slaughtered.” (Stirling)

2.47 Participants also discussed some examples where having better local production facilities would help absorb spikes in production.

“When there's overproduction in the liquid milk market and a lack of demand, there's no infrastructure in place to turn that into cheese to the extent that's needed to iron out the spikes.” (Stirling)

Linking the producer and consumer

“Improve distribution systems to link the producer and consumer. Online isn't as democratic a shop-front as it's made out to be.” (Stirling)

3. People



“We need to be able to keep our young people entertained to try and encourage them to stay and not just all drift off to the big smoke [...] that’s where the infrastructure piece comes in and it has that direct interaction with people because younger generation connectivity, social time, just being able to watch a movie, whatever it might be. These are all factors that help people identify with community.” (Dingwall)

3.1. Discussions on the topic of ‘People’ focused largely on ways to retain young people, how to attract people to move / return to rural areas, and how to encourage business and community development. Discussions involved the need for rural life to have a better image, for people to be more aware of what opportunities are available, and for the whole country to have an improved understanding of the value and contribution the rural economy makes. They also discussed the importance of a strong social infrastructure to support families and community life, such as cafes, pubs, family support, community groups, cultural opportunities, peer support, and effective local democracy.

Image

“Rural needs to be seen as a positive choice, making sure that people want to live here or want to have a career here or develop a business here. Rural should be a positive lifestyle choice.” (St Boswells)

3.2. Participants discussed image in relation to how rural life and work is perceived by those not living rurally. Participants talked a lot about the relatively poor image of rural life and the rural economy/careers and the opportunities available. They talked of the impact of this poor image not only on their sense of feeling valued, but also around the negative impact on retaining young people and encouraging economically active people to move to rural areas.

3.3. Participants discussed the importance of improving the image and raising people’s awareness of what happens in the countryside, particularly around quality of life and food production, and talked about the need for better education (for young people) and more awareness raising for the general public. They also want the diversity of the rural economy to be clearly understood. They believe that by improving the rural image it would help to retain young people and encourage others to move to rural areas.

Quality of Life

3.4. Participants discussed the need to communicate the benefits and the quality of rural life; recognising that while there are challenges to living rurally, these are often offset by the benefits.

“We spoke a lot about selling the benefits of working and living in the rural economy. We don’t want people to feel that there is a barrier or that they are being negatively impacted by living and working the rural economy.” (St Boswells)

“Sometimes we get caught up in all the challenges that living in a rural environment can offer but I think when you’re actually living it and you’re in it, the amount of opportunities that can arise are off the charts.” (Perth)

“Ambitious, in terms of it’s a positive choice, and contribution, that the rural economy makes in its own right but also to Scotland and being proud of that as opposed to apologising for it or feeling that it’s secondary to what else is going on.” (St Boswells)

Jobs, careers and opportunities

3.5. Participants highlighted the diversity of jobs, careers and opportunities in the rural economy, and the need for this to be better understood and communicated, particularly to young people in schools and colleges. They talked of the negative perceptions surrounding some jobs and professions available in the rural economy and how these can discourage young people to train in or take up these opportunities.

“Certainly, food and drink, it’s an issue that the perception is that it’s just a job rather than a career. There’s managerial, there’s a whole raft of jobs.” (Orkney)

“Anything but higher education is viewed as a failure.” (Orkney)

“We need to see the rural economy promoting a much higher profile with young people as a career opportunity.” (Oldmeldrum)

3.6. Participants talked about the need to think differently about careers, and the importance of being innovative and entrepreneurial, and how living rurally can encourage and celebrate this way of working.

“It doesn’t all need to be about growth and scale, it’s about individuality and diversity in the different industries.” (St Boswells)

“It’s about inspiring future generations as well, that there are opportunities in the rural community.” (Dingwall)

Suggested solutions

Using the education system to promote a positive message

3.7. Participants discussed how to get the positive message across, ideas included using the education system to promote rural life and opportunities.

“Engage teachers to promote rural – we talk about going into schools and speaking to children, but realistically we turn up one day whereas a teacher’s there every day.” (Stirling)

“When you look at the schools and the colleges there is very little about the rural opportunity in courses, whether that’s Careers Scotland, the teachers, but what are the opportunities for people moving out into the world of work? Where are the case studies?” (St Boswells)

Creating new opportunities

3.8. Participants discussed the option of migrating traditionally urban jobs to rural areas, aided by digital technology; suggesting that public bodies should lead by example.

“We want to migrate more urban jobs to rural places. With the digital age that we’re in now, a lot of traditionally urban-based jobs could come out to the rural economy, they could be based out here. We want to see more of that.” (St Boswells)

Taking ownership and improving self-image

3.9. Some workshops discussed the need to build more of a sense of pride and ownership within local rural communities, highlighting the sense of neglect that some rural communities suffer from. This, they hope, could help to improve the image and attractiveness of rural areas as somewhere to live and have a business.

“Some of the areas you go through are bleak and neglected, even in rural towns. [...] yet, we talk about this landscape being beautiful.” (Kilmarnock)

“Local Authorities need to take a bit more organisational pride in their responsibilities for public areas. It’s a disgrace that our tourists have to come and see litter along the highways, it really is tragic.” (Dingwall)

3.10. Participants at one workshop also highlighted the role the wider community is often willing to have in supporting the upkeep of local areas.

“Respecting the role that farmers can play and actually helping that.” (E.g. farmers fixing potholes, ploughing snow.) (Kilmarnock)

3.11. They also highlighted the perceived sense that some rural areas are just a ‘dumping ground for urban problems’ and how this could negatively impact on self-image, purporting that this attitude needs to change.

“Respect rural, it’s not a dump for urban problems.” (Kilmarnock)

The Workforce

3.12. A significant amount of discussion across the workshops was about the workforce; participants referred to an ageing population, the difficulty rural Scotland has in retaining its young people, encouraging professionals to move to rural areas, and the potential impact of migrant labour leaving rural areas post-Brexit, all issues crucial to the sustainability of the rural economy.

Retaining Young People

3.13. Participants discussed issues around retaining young people and what rural areas need to do to encourage them to stay or come back. Many appreciated the need of many young people to leave the area to gain experience elsewhere. However, they also highlighted that young people’s desire to move away may be as a result of them failing to be made aware of the opportunities that the rural economy could provide them, or that they are not fully equipped with the skills appropriate to work

within a rural context.

“[We need to have] a vibrant economy that attracts them to stay and have meaningful jobs.” (Dingwall)

“Keeping a productive population rather than an aging population is important.” (Orkney)

“A lot of them will return if there’s something to return to. Jobs, decent phone signals, etc.” (Orkney)

Suggested solutions

Relevant education, skills development and advice

3.14. Participants called for an education system that encourages young people to stay in rural areas, and fit-for-purpose careers advice services that help school-aged young people to identify and consider opportunities available in rural areas, rather than being urban-centric.

“We need something that’s relevant to the rural area in the education system.” (Dingwall)

“Further and higher education needs to be adaptable to be more relevant for rural places. A set framework isn’t helpful.” (St Boswells)

“Education is key to the future of any country. If you don’t educate the next generation properly, you don’t get the experts in every field.” (Orkney)

3.15. Participants highlighted the need for lifelong education and skills training. They called for a “rural skills work experience academy” within each secondary school to help young people access work experience and reduce the number of young people leaving rural areas for education opportunities in urban areas.

“Trying to get links between business and education is a good idea but it’s not easy to develop that. There are definite benefits in doing that. Folks see from a very early stage in their education, their secondary education, that there is actually options and opportunities in places like Orkney so you don’t have to go to university or college. But I’m not sure that we’re getting the message out.” (Orkney)

“That rich mix of opportunities that can have step-off points at various levels is absolutely the way to go forward. And work-based learning is key.” (Oldmeldrum)

3.16. Participants discussed the need for place-based, bespoke and in-house skills training for rural businesses.

“We talked about placed-based skills training. Some apprentices are sent away to colleges that are quite far away and they’re learning skills that aren’t entirely appropriate to the organisations and local organisations that they are coming back to. There is a need for flexible skills training area that local companies where come together and develop very, very tailored training designed for their apprentices specifically.” (St Boswells)

3.17. Participants indicated that the Modern Apprenticeships Programme in its current form is not suitable to rural Scotland and that apprenticeships are difficult to come by outside of rural centres such as Perth. They explained that Modern Apprenticeships could be crucial as they can help encourage young people to stay in rural areas. They explained that small businesses, commonplace in the rural economy, find Modern Apprenticeships difficult to access and that shared apprenticeships should be an increasingly utilised option.

“We’re got the Modern Apprenticeships where, rurally, it doesn’t always work, it’s disparate in areas where it does work.” (Perth)

“Work-based learning and work placements are not held in as high regard as they might be for the long-term health of the rural economy.” (Orkney)

3.18. Linked to this was the importance of valuing the opportunities available.

“We need practical tradespeople and we need to value them.” (Stirling)

Understanding the younger generation

3.19. There was discussion about the need to have a better understanding of the younger generation so that rural Scotland can be more responsive to its needs. They talked of the Association of Scottish Visitor Attractions doing a study into the employment and retention of millennials, and how findings from this work could help inform future priorities of the Scottish Government and Local Authorities.

“The Association of Scottish Visitor Attractions is now doing a study into the employment and retention of millennials. I think this is a really important piece that Scottish Government and Local Authorities should actually take on board because it’s all very well us talking about our generation and our generation’s attitude, but the millennials are a completely different cup of tea and then [those even younger], we haven’t got a hope of understanding them. [...] I think we need to start gaining this information about the next generation. If we’re talking about in-flows to local rural economies or mechanisms for keeping the youth in the rural economies, we really need to understand their mentalities.” (Oban)

Creating meaningful and innovative job opportunities

3.20. Participants discussed the need for meaningful employment opportunities, especially for young people. They highlighted the importance of improving perceptions of and value attached to roles available in the rural economy.

“Re-frame the kind of jobs we want for people, culture change to see it as people doing valuable jobs to service our rural economy; see care givers as professionals rather than “bum-wipers”; ‘low paid farm workers as making a valuable contribution and keeping the show on the road.” (Dumfries)

3.21. Participants discussed the need to think about creating opportunities in the rural economy beyond traditional rural industries.

“We have no opportunities for young people to learn about film or radio.” (Dumfries)

Giving young people a purpose

3.22. There were several discussions around the meaning and centrality of purpose in retaining a vibrant youth demographic, and how to bolster this.

“Young people want to have a purpose to stay, live and bring up their families in D&G.” (Dumfries)

“Ambassadors to promote rural economy opportunities in schools, careers advice that promotes the amazing skills and opportunities that we can offer locally.” (Dumfries)

Encouraging entrepreneurship

3.23. Participants suggested being more deliberate around the educational support for entrepreneurship, again with a focus on young people.

“If you provide infrastructure to support entrepreneurship then we could retain young people/ encourage them to come back after university. Encourage them to follow their dreams/ideas supported by the connectivity in infrastructure.”
(Dumfries)

Promoting Social enterprise

3.24. Participants highlighted the importance of social enterprise to the rural economy and shared strategies around how to attract people to rural areas to facilitate the establishment of social enterprises.

“Getting people who have been quite successful in straightforward commercial business to think about, actually, it would bring another dimension to my life if I looked at social enterprise as opposed to the route that seems always to be the chose route, getting people who come up through the charitable sector to suddenly think I need to start looking at business. Now, there’s nothing wrong with that and there’s nothing wrong with the other way of doing it. That comes back to getting people to think, what is the definition of success and the quality of life that you can have in a rural area is not necessarily added into that vision of what success is.” (Oldmeldrum)

Developing workforce skills

“There’s a chronic mismatch between the importance of the rural economy to Scotland’s GDP and resources available for training and development for the next generation. One of the principle constraints for the rural economy is distance and bridging the gap between people and services of one sort or another.”
(Oldmeldrum)

3.25. As well as retaining young people, participants also discussed the importance of attracting people in to rural areas and up-skilling and supporting those who have made the decision to stay. They argued that those working in rural communities should have access to opportunities to up-skill and become multi-skilled, highlighting that not only does the workforce need to be responsive to an ever-changing employment landscape, but consideration also needs to be given to the potential skills gaps in the workforce and supply of labour, post-Brexit.

*“A lot of the temporary staff that come into this country up-skill themselves and now a lot of them are not available so perhaps there’s an element of our local staff that could be upskilled, could be used. It’s a good economical thing to do.”
(Dingwall)*

The role of employers

3.26. Participants also highlighted the need for employers in the rural economy to be encouraged to be flexible, to develop and up-skill the local workforce, and to promote life-long learning and a workforce responsive to local needs.

“We want employers to have the confidence to grow local people and sell themselves to locals, to actually be able to go to a local school or a local youth bank and be able to grow the talent and the people that were there.” (St Boswells)

“Employers need to be more innovative in how they attract employees – currently too much tunnel vision. Look at career progression, development, adopt changing working conditions and hours to fit with the new generation, different lengths of shifts? Be more flexible and innovative with this.” (Dumfries)

Plugging skills gaps

3.27. Participants discussed linking further education courses with identified needs and skills gaps and the need for increased investment in agricultural college farms and business training for rural roles.

“We also spoke about developing life skills appropriate to rural areas. For example, courses at the SRUC might be quite technically good, business skills are lacking. So, developing life skills that you can appropriate to any industry. Innovation, digital – they aren’t taught.” (St Boswells)

Access to labour post-Brexit

3.28. Participants raised their concerns about the potentially limited availability of unskilled and skilled labour post-Brexit, particularly in agriculture and tourism. They noted that while local people could potentially partially fill the gaps, the numbers needed are unlikely to be available. Discussions were had about the use of flexible visas.

“In Angus, the whole sector in that area needs over 20,000 [workers] a year and the long-term unemployed in that area is 4,500. So, you can’t just replace it with local labour. [...] and there’s no machine to do it.” (Dingwall)

“If they’re looking at putting in fixed-term permits for agricultural workers, can they do similar things in the tourist industry as well to make sure that the labour supply doesn’t dry up.” (Dingwall)

Social infrastructure

“Protect and nourish the social infrastructure that draws people to move anywhere: housing, economy and lifestyle. Don’t lose the things that a 25- to 40-year-old wants: community owned pubs, park, coffee with friends, things for kids to do. Let local people have a vision for their social infrastructure.” (Stirling)

3.29. Participants across the workshops discussed the role of a strong social infrastructure in attracting and retaining people and businesses to rural areas. A strong social infrastructure, they believed, consisted of a strong sense of community with amenities and services to support a vibrant and fulfilling rural life. They discussed various ways to do this, including encouraging community ownership, rural leadership and control, and celebrating diversity.

“Protect the social fabric; the social infrastructure. [...] do you have the social infrastructure – the café you want to go to, the pub you want to drink in, the nursery for your children, the park to go for.’ Too many places in Scotland’s rural areas are not attractive to young people because of this.” (Stirling)

“The social infrastructure is one of the strongest attracting factors particularly for the 25- to 45-year-old age group.” (Stirling)

3.30. Participants talked of how a vibrant culture in rural communities can help drive business development and employment, as well as the retention of residents.

“We [want] to see a vibrant culture. We feel that that supports population growth and people wanting to stay in their rural areas and it supports diverse business development as well.” (Oban)

Developing social infrastructure

Community ownership

3.31. Participants noted that wind farms and other rural assets should be owned by the local community so that they can capture and locally invest the profits made from these.

“Wind farms must be community owned. Rural areas must have the ability to capture the value of rural assets. If multinationals come in and take all the available energy and power and give you charity money off the back of it, well no wonder rural areas are dying because their assets are being directly exported.” (Stirling)

Celebrating diversity

“Diversity of nationality and age is a good thing for the rural economy.” (Stirling)

Self-sufficiency and being open to innovation

3.32. Participants argued that rural areas should not be dependent on urban power generation but should have their own power, along with roads that have decent charging points for electric cars. They said that driverless cars could be great news for rural pubs and meeting places in terms of increasing accessibility to all members of rural communities.

Building a sense of community: rural leadership and local control

3.33. To build a sense of community and a strong social infrastructure to support it, participants highlighted the importance of local communities to be in control of their local area. Some participants felt that the new Community Empowerment Act is insufficient and that the single tier local authority system does not allow adequate representation of rural communities and local control within these communities.

“We are the only developed country in the entire world with a single tier local authority system; the others have national, regional, local. We don’t have local. I don’t want Edinburgh designing a vision for where I live. It would be so nice if just once, the people who actually live where I live could have the vision and the power to enact it, because we could do our own planning policy and our own procurement policies and so on. None of this will work if local communities can’t take control of their own development and the Community Empowerment Act isn’t close to giving enough.” (Stirling)

Suggested solutions

Community plans

3.34. Participants talked about the need for communities to have more control in their local areas. This could come in the form of being responsible for their own planning through a local action plan and strategy that is developed by local residents who know where funding is needed most.

“We talked about local communities’ plans. There is a tradition of communities developing community action plans or community development plans themselves which are quite easy to fund, a lot of funders will support that. But the difficulty then is once you’ve got the plan, how do you then implement? Quite often those plans end up sitting on shelves and are overtaken by events. If you can work how a local proposal fits with that plan, if you’ve already had that dialogue and that proposal fits with that plan, it’s much more likely to get support from local people than if it comes in clashing with that plan. You need these plans to be live living things and regularly updated. If they’re just done as one-offs and then shelved that process becomes less efficient.” (St Boswells)

“It feels like a good principle that if there is a pot of public funding available in the future again, that it is possible for a strategy to be set locally to address the particular needs of that area. It should be possible for people to come together and create a strategy and choose how to divvy up those funds, rather than have it all set by national strategies, which I can see potentially happening in the future.” (Orkney)

3.35. Participants pointed to the Borders Tweed Forum Land Use Strategy as, “a great example of how you bring communities together to address issues.” They also questioned how communities are defining success and whether benchmarks should be put against this.

“In some rural communities, we’ve never really lost the community spirit in that there’s a lot happening which would be classed as third sector but which is just being a good neighbour and it’s trying to visualise that and allow people to understand exactly what they’re doing to enhance that, to make it more successful.” (Oldmeldrum)

3.36. To support this, participants called for more locals to be encouraged to contribute to community life, rather than just a few burning themselves out.

“More people doing a little. If everyone gave a little, we’d achieve more than if just a few people try and burn themselves out.” (Kilmarnock)

“The issue is getting folk involved enough to actually do that, but the best method of delivery of money is local.” (Orkney)

3.37. Linked to this, participants also discussed the need to reinvigorate young rural leadership drawing on initiatives like Young Farmers.

“[Young Farmers is] all organic as well. We’re not doing enough to support them. The good ones disappear.” (Kilmarnock)

Collaborative working

3.38. Participants want more emphasis on collaborative working between businesses and local communities, to encourage buy-in to new rural opportunities and increased awareness of the value of new rural business to the whole community.

“We talked about demonstrating the value of rural businesses to the whole community, trying to get communities involved in potential developments, thinking about developments prior to them happening. We had an example of an AD plant that was maybe presented wrongly to the local community and they were very anti it from that start whereas if there had been an example of the economic income it could generate and the benefit it could bring, it may have taken a different route.” (St Boswells)

3.39. Participants at the Dingwall workshop said that fuel has become unaffordable for some rural communities and so communities are working together to ensure all residents are able to heat their homes.

“Encouraging communities to collaborate on purchasing fuel for their homes. In Nigg, quite a few of the people in the community have come together to buy fuel for heating their homes because by doing it together they’re saving money.” (Dingwall)

Supporting communities to access funding

3.40. Participants talked a lot about the need for innovation, and the appetite of communities to innovate and change to support a new vision for the local rural economy. However, they also highlighted many challenges they face to making this a reality, particularly in relation to the availability and management of funding, such as grant funding, (e.g. Capital Grants, LEADER and other community-based funding pots). These challenges included the human capacity needed to attain and then manage the funding, the application process, and the limited scope for real innovation encouraged by the funding. They called for “Simple, beneficial and meaningful grant schemes” and raised concern about the funding landscape post-Brexit.

3.41. Participants noted the disparity between communities and their ability to access funding to develop community life, they called for more support for those communities to access funding.

“We were talking about villages having life and not having life, and how we get the life to happen, and some villages [...] you get streams of applications from some communities and none from others. Is there a role for the government to go into the less active communities and help them understand that these facilities are open to them, that they are proactively engaged with to stop just having the same communities involved, or target them?” (Stirling)

3.42. Some participants had ideas for alternative initiatives to bolster rural economies, with tried and tested examples from different regions.

Interest free loans: “As seen successfully in Orkney; they had very, very few defaults. It could be hitched into the Scottish national investment bank.” (Dumfries)

“Look at possibility of regional bonds, where local people can be encouraged to put extra in.” For example: “Aberdeen city council was oversubscribed for their bond, from local people, they are floating another bond to try and meet the demand.” (Dumfries)

Additional discussions

3.43. There were a small number of issues discussed at the workshops that we feel did not fit into the themes outlined above but are necessary to include in the reporting.

Recognising deprivation and disadvantage

3.44. In Perth, participants felt that SIMD is unsuitable to measuring deprivation in rural areas and that Acorn** is more accurate considering the vast expanses rural areas cover and that significant pockets of social deprivation may be small and therefore missed by SIMD. They indicated that funders should use Acorn and not SIMD. They also drew a distinction between deprivation and disadvantage and argued that rural areas are disadvantaged rather than deprived.

“The [funding opportunities] we aren’t excluded from like RBS Skills and Opportunities, these large organisations focus mainly on areas of social deprivation and they use mainly the SIMD tool which in a rural area, doesn’t work at all and PKC, very sensibly, have moved towards the Acorn system. SIMD measures rural deprivation geographically, so in pockets of approximately 350 houses. Acorn, on the other hand, will measure it according to every 10-12 houses so in vast rural areas like our school catchment, there are pockets of social deprivation that if you look at it on paper in SIMD you will not see, at all. Our SIMD goes from deciles 6 to 10, primarily, whereas if you look at Acorn it’s a fairly even spread: big chunk of 50% in the middle and then 25% either side going from most affluent to most socially deprived. If the

** <https://acorn.caci.co.uk/> a tool that segments the UK population into demographic types

council's going to be using any tool to identify that or focus on that, the sensible thing is to use Acorn and ignore SIMD completely." (Perth)

"The tools are not there to measure things in rural areas, pockets of impoverished areas in rural towns, the measurement tool that is there doesn't account for the fact that there may be only be 20 people living in that place as opposed to 500." (Dumfries)

"It's important because the exclusion is horrendous. So many other funders using the wrong data to be able to fund rural areas and this comes through from the Big lottery. They're using deprivation whereas rural areas are disadvantaged and that's the element that needs to be taken into account." (Perth)

Diet and nutrition

3.45. In Kilmarnock, participants spent a lot of time discussing worsening levels of nutrition in rural Ayrshire. They pointed out the irony that high quality food is produced in the region, yet it is often unavailable to local residents.

"Rural towns [should] be nutritious places not fast food nations." (Kilmarnock)

"If you look at the health of the people in these areas, it's shocking. Children who are 7, 8 years old with malnutrition because their diets are shocking, yet they live in a landscape where they're producing some of the best food." (Kilmarnock)

3.46. Participants also highlighted the increasing influence big companies have in rural communities and the impacts this has on local high streets and what local residents are consuming.

"Are the big companies too powerful? Is that something we should be saying to government, you've got to curb the powers of the people, because McDonald's are controlling what children are eating through their advertising, largely. The supermarkets to my mind are too powerful, they'll tell you what you're getting." (Kilmarnock)

4. Vision



4.1. Discussions on the topic of 'Vision' focused largely on the participants' desire to have a 'shared' and 'inclusive' vision driven by the people responsible for its delivery. They want a vision which equally recognises regional differences as well as the inter-connectedness of those communities and businesses operating within the rural economy across rural Scotland.

4.2. Discussions on the development and delivery of the vision involved the importance of capitalising on Scotland's assets and positive brand, of having a positive, can-do attitude and working collaboratively. They talked of strong leadership and an openness to innovate and to learn from good practice elsewhere. Additional points included the need to use up to date data and information, a need for 'growth' to be re-defined within a rural context, and the importance of recognising differentiation within the rural economy, and 'one size does not fit all'.

The Vision

4.3. Participants talked about what they hoped for the rural economy in Scotland. This included:

*"The strategic aim has to be to retain more young people, attract more young families and young business people in. That's fundamental to so many communities."
(Dingwall)*

A shared, inclusive vision

4.4. Participants want a shared vision that is driven by people.

“We want policy to be driven by people – regulations and governance to be people-led, bottom-up.” (Kilmarnock)

“Any vision has to be relevant to people and to the people that are in these communities. Anything has to be place-based, has to be very unique to that local economy.” (St Boswells)

“Let’s not just accept what’s coming along but actually drive it for what we want.” (Dumfries)

4.5. Participants want decision-makers to be rurally inclusive and for rural Scotland to be a normal part of all discussions, rather than something requiring a different solution.

“We want to mainstream rural, we don’t want it to be an add-on. We want it to be part of the full conversation.” (St Boswells)

“We need to have a strategic vision about what we want, to move assets, people, and commodities around the place in a holistic sense. We need a big picture about what we really need [...], not just to export people and stuff out but to bring people in. [...] We need a really, really big strategic picture.” (Dumfries)

4.6. Participants noted the challenges that will be faced when developing and delivering a vision for the rural economy. This was particularly in relation to the need for an overall vision that all can work to, which at the same time has a recognition of the independence of the various sectors that operate within it.

“The rural economy is inter-dependent but independent, so a lot of rural businesses are inter-dependent on each other but tend to be independent in what their own vision is but also are part of a much wider vision.” (St Boswells)

“It’s easier to be a single-issue campaigner – it’s hard in the rural sector because there’s so many variations and different priorities and messages. I don’t think we’re going to easily find clarity of message but it’s about being more holistic.” (Stirling)

Ownership of the vision

4.7. Participants discussed who should ‘own’ the vision. However, there was not always agreement amongst participants about who should put a vision in place. In Stirling, for example, there were participants who felt that the Scottish Government should put a vision in place, whereas other participants felt it should be rural people who develop the vision.

“It’s not the Scottish Government’s vision, it’s our vision.” (Stirling)

Achieving the Vision

4.8. Participants discussed approaches and strategies to develop and deliver an effective vision for the rural economy.

Capitalising on Scotland’s image and assets

4.9. Participants talked of the need for any vision to capitalise on Scotland’s positive image.

“Maintain the fact that we are a small, friendly country – that’s a fabulous sales point for our rural economy.” (Stirling)

4.10. Participants discussed the need to capitalise on the assets that Scotland’s rural economy has, such as the landscape, soil quality and natural capital.

“Profitable industries which can use the competitive advantage that we actually have in rural areas, whether that’s around utilising the landscape or it’s aquaculture, renewable energies. Really using our natural assets.” (Oban)

“There needs to be some fresh thinking on how we properly express the value and potential within [natural capital] with respect to economic growth.” (Oldmeldrum)

4.11. Participants discussed the need for appropriate governance and leadership of the development of “Scotland the brand”.

“There is also a celebratory point about “brand Scotland” and that needs to be allowed a message from a higher level, about amazing small businesses.” (Oban)

4.12. Participants pointed to Quality Meats Scotland as a great example of Scottish provenance and said that there are lessons to be learned from California’s success in co-marketing local products.

“Quality Meats Scotland success in Scotland with Scotch provenance - that could be rolled out on much grander scale, that mind-set of complete provenance for a particular product, could be rolled out across more of the rural sectors. For example, Quality Meats Scotland provenance for production, feed, transportation, slaughter of an animal, the whole thing comes under one umbrella of provenance. It’s well known, and on the street – people still look for Scotch lamb and beef. That potentially could be rolled out across more areas of tourism, forestry, fish farming, the whole lot. There’s a blueprint there that could be expanded across the rest of the rural economy.” (Stirling)

Having a positive, can-do attitude

4.13. Participants discussed the need for all stakeholders in the rural economy to take on an attitude that is forward and outward looking, can-do, deliberate and optimistic.

4.14. Participants want the focus to be on opportunities and not problems.

4.15. Linked to this, participants argued that risk-taking should be encouraged to support development of the sector.

“We’re quite risk-averse and maybe in the future somehow we need to be more able to take risks, either as individual businesses or as communities or just as rural Scotland as a whole. [...] Sometimes, we need to take risks to make things happen.” (St Boswells)

4.16. Linked to this, participants discussed the need for positivity in the language and attitudes used by all stakeholders to promote rural Scotland.

“Proactively use positive language in all promotion and marketing of our area, with everyone talking with pride and taking self-responsibility for promoting the rural economy.” (Dumfries)

4.17. Participants also emphasised the need to adapt, learn from and respond to what has worked well and has not worked so well.

Positive marketing: communicating/engaging with consumers

4.18. Participants highlighted the disconnect between urban and rural populations and the need to communicate positively with consumers about where their food comes from and the efforts and costs involved in food production.

“I think part of the vision needs to be how you engage urban and rural populations because the people of this country need to decide what they want from their rural communities and what they want from the public expenditure that goes into them. Do they want a beautiful environment that they can go and play in at the weekends and their holidays, but do they also want cheap food? Do they care where their food comes from, do they want the welfare standards and the regulation to be high but yet when it comes to it, would they rather just buy a cheap leg of lamb from the other side of the world or some cheap chicken in Tesco? It’s getting better, but I think there’s still a real disconnect between what the urban population think they want and what they actually want and what they get.” (Dingwall)

“Educate young people and the population in general to value of the production of food and eating local.” (Stirling)

“Building leadership capacity within rural sector, to build bridges between rural and urban communities – opportunities to be supported in leadership- which gives you that wider network but also the confidence to go and articulate and represent your sector.” (Stirling)

4.19. A participant suggested that if consumers know more about where their food is coming from, they might be more willing to pay a higher price, therefore helping to sustain the Scottish food industry.

Working collaboratively

4.20. Participants across the workshops highlighted, in a variety of ways, the importance of working collaboratively in order to achieve rural economy goals.

“True cooperation: the sum of the parts working together is much greater than those individual groups. Having true cooperation to meet community goals is really, really important. Sometimes there can be tensions or almost competition and I think overcoming in terms of a shared vision is really, really important.” (Oldmeldrum)

With Local Authorities

4.21. Participants spoke of the important role Local Authorities should be playing in supporting and inspiring local rural businesses and communities.

“Local Authorities aren’t buying local produce. They’re not interested in local produce. It’s all price. That requires a change from central Government that says, actually, you will buy local.” (Kilmarnock)

Between Industries

“If we collaborate, it’s about developing strategies that add value. Farming is nearly getting there, but there still is this big disjoint between the huge value of the food and drink industry versus the value that goes to the primary producers. We need to close that gap.” (St Boswells)

“We need much more integration, in rural areas there are lots of different interest groups, whether that’s forestry, fishing, farming. But we work in our own silos; you need to ensure that there’s joined up thinking for the overall picture which is often missing at the moment.” (Dumfries)

Within Government

4.22. Participants called on politicians across the UK to work together and find common ground.

“Politicians need to work together far more. That’s probably the base of the problem. Let’s decide where we want to go and get there nationally, as the UK and if Westminster come with an idea, just because it’s a different party, doesn’t mean to say you have to disagree with it. You’ve both got good ideas, work together to get common ground and move forward across parties.” (Dingwall)

4.23. Participants called for increased cross-cabinet collaboration in government and cited an example: when the animal health and welfare budget came north of the border everybody got into the room together and started talking about how they were going to control Scotland’s diseases, both endemic and exotic. One participant said, “It was fantastic.”

Supporting innovation, creativity and good practice

4.24. Participants stressed the need for making structures (for example funding, planning and regulations) less risk averse and providing opportunities for the rural economy to be more creative.

“If you don’t risk-take you stifle innovation.” (Orkney)

“Innovators tend to work outside the box quite a lot. What we find is that the structures that are put in place to incentivise and facilitate are risk averse. They say, “no we don’t like the look of that, it’s a bit risky, we’ll not help you” and you’re thinking, “well, that’s what innovation is! It’s about taking risks and sharing that risks with the innovators so that it reduces the risk of the thing failing just because the help is not there.” (Dumfries)

“Instead of penalising bad behaviour, there’s something about rewarding positive behaviour, agricultural or otherwise, encouraging creativity and innovation. We have an opportunity to do something differently.” (Stirling)

4.25. Participants discussed innovative ideas like engineering the Scottish blueberry to be midge-repellent. Other ideas on the use of wind turbines to benefit the community were also discussed in Orkney.

4.26. Participants also discussed the need to encourage good practice, for example by acknowledging when producers are working to protect and enhance soil.

“Scotland is a small country – when we look at landscape use, whatever the activity is whether its farming or forestry, there’s an element about rewarding people who are protecting and enhancing the integrity of the soil that we have and whatever comes out of the vision or activities further down, we can be rewarded for practices that are not unsustainable or environmental, whether that’s about soil quality or whatever.” (Stirling)

Strong leadership with local control

4.27. Participants argued for the need for strong leadership to deliver a vision that everyone in the rural economy can identify with.

“We need strong leadership. We need someone that everyone within the rural economy can feel that they can follow and that they have respect for.” (St Boswells)

4.28. They also talked about the need for local control to enable them to maximise the benefits of their assets and work towards a joint vision

“Local strategy, every penny spent locally as far as possible.” (Stirling)

“Centralisation in the Central Belt is a disaster.” (Orkney)

Think International!

4.29. Participants discussed the importance of building international trade links, international investment, and learning from successes abroad. They pointed to a variety of examples, including New Zealand, California, France and Norway, involving large and small-scale agriculture, commodity production and value added.

“We want more infrastructure but not just in Scotland, growing infrastructure internationally as well and making these connections internationally as a way of trading. That would be a big win for the rural economy and something that we could develop quite well.” (St Boswells)

“Investing in developing markets worldwide. Investment doesn’t just have to be in these rural places, it could be outwith.” (St Boswells)

“New Zealand has developed 120 different markets across the world and they’re a country with a population of about half of Scotland and far further away from any of the markets than Scotland is.” (St Boswells)

“[we need to] monitor foreign initiatives where rural strategy has been successful, for example France’s latest foray into buying local.” (Stirling)

“it’s all about engaging people to buy locally. They’ve been doing very well with this in California. It’s one way of authenticating and keeping provenance transparent but it’s also about engaging with the people who want that, not just locally but export as well.” (Stirling)

One size does not fit all

4.30. In the development of a vision, participants called for recognition of rural communities’ individual characteristics and that a single aim and ambition for rural Scotland will need to be multifaceted.

“We need to recognise rural areas that are very different in Scotland.” (Dingwall)

“I don’t know if there is one aim and ambition for rural Scotland. Don’t be unrealistic. [...] I’m not sure we can have one – has to be multifaceted.” (Dingwall)

4.31. Participants also highlighted the interdependent and independent nature of rural businesses in the rural economy.

“One of the things that we picked up is this idea about recognising the interdependency, but it’s more the interconnectedness of the rural economies because we are more closely connected by definition because we have to be, because we can’t rely on people outside our community to look after us when we’re snowed in, when the electricity goes down, when we get flooded, and whatever else is going to happen. It is the inter-connectedness of the different communities, the different towns, the different towns in Aberdeenshire are all kind of little ecosystems as far as I can work out and they are self-sustaining ecosystems and that needs to be recognised and promoted as a good reason for moving into a rural area.” (Oldmeldrum)

Re-defining growth

4.32. Participants also discussed the importance of looking closely at the definition of growth in a rural context, particularly in terms of quality rather than scale.

“Different definition of growth in rural areas. It’s different, more about quality, e.g. flower industry: more about the number of enterprises than the size of them. We need to support small businesses not just based on their size. Scale isn’t everything, many enterprises are not wanting to be massive.” (St Boswells)

Use data to understand the rural economy

4.33. Participants cited a general lack of up to date information and data that can meaningfully inform policy and strategy into the future. For example, participants felt that there is limited reliable data on the number of rural businesses and the activities they engage in, blamed partly on the decline of Chambers of Commerce. They argued that the Scottish Government and Local Authorities need to invest in data collection to help inform the vision and future policy and planning.

“The Scottish Government (and people) is very good at making statements anecdotally but nobody has the data to actually make decent policy decisions. In self-catering, you’ve got the traditional approaches and the new collaborative platform operators. They’re saying the Airbnb has grown exponentially by 61%. This is not based on any form of proper data. Local Authorities are all saying that self-catering is impacting on housing stock, they’ve got no data or proof that that is the case. We are now doing a study to see if that is the case. There is no point in making knee-jerk policy decision on planning or anything else based on a lack of data. In terms of the rural economy, we need data about who is doing what, what the eco-

conomic impact is.” (Oban)

“What’s missing for me is the data. If this is a factual data-driven campaign to get people on board I think that would help an awful lot, but I’m also conscious there are huge gaps in data around small micro-enterprises because they’re below the VAT threshold, they’re not on the radar of Scottish enterprise, Business Gateway, lots and lots of different areas.” (Perth)

4.34. Participants also noted a gap in knowledge about the basic demographic necessities of a sustainable rural community and suggested academic research on this should feed into any strategic plans.

“We need academic work to understand what makes a sustainable rural community in terms of how many people do we need to live and work in a region to actually pay their taxes and have the services that we need; we need the academic work to underpin this. It took 25 years for highlands and islands to reverse their population trend – we haven’t started, so we’ve got to get our skates on and make a big vision for that.” (Dumfries)

5. Conclusion



5.1 The nine workshops provided a range of insights into the rural economy across Scotland, and provided a cross-section of stakeholders the opportunity to discuss pertinent issues and make suggestions for future improvements. Based on the discussions we heard, we hope this report provides the information and evidence necessary to allow the NCRA to provide advice to Scottish Ministers on policies or interventions to support and improve the lives of people living in rural Scotland, and to grow the rural economy. We would like to thank all those involved in the workshops for their time and contributions to this important piece of work.

Appendix A. Additional Quotes

Infrastructure

Connectivity

“Multi-level connectivity – we recognised that there are many different ways to connect: digitally, personally, physically. We need those all to be strong and if any of those links are broken or weak then that can really put negatives onto the rural economy and rural places.” (St Boswells)

Digital connectivity

“[poor connectivity is] stopping folk from working from home. If they have young kids and they want to work from home and they don’t have the broadband connection, they can’t do it.” (Orkney)

“We can mostly get 3G or 4G internet signal now but we can’t make a phone call still. [...]. One of the local vet practices had a lot of student vets up last summer and they were in digs in Kirkwall and if they were on call [...] they had to use FaceTime. That was the only way they could get in touch with them. They couldn’t phone them on their mobiles because they had no signal. I think that’s pretty poor.” (Orkney)

Suggested solution - political pressure

“It should be a key priority for the South of Scotland rural partnership going forward that they should take that mantle and run with it, make that a priority to provide that across the South of Scotland.” (Dumfries)

Transport

“We talked about better links. There are rural places in Scotland that actually are very easy to come and go from because they do have air links. Better air links is a particular area for improvement.” (Oban)

Suggested solution - thinking innovatively and big

“Make region bid for the new Space Port. D&G well placed to bid for that and it would bring automatic investment in infrastructure’ (e.g. roads, a new rail head) to enable it to happen. Scotland is well placed to serve Europe as Space Port for passenger space travel. Need regional leadership in bidding for it/ making the case within the political context, worried it’ll automatically go to Prestwick.” (Dumfries)

Infrastructure to support communities

“You need to have fundamental services for a start.” (Dingwall)

“Social care, childcare and medical services. The whole sort of package from young to elderly. You don’t just necessarily come for a short part of your life.” (Oban)

Schools

“Stop disinvestment in rural infrastructure (schools).” (Dingwall)

“We were talking about schools and education and amalgamating everything into these super-schools, for want of a better description. The four largest secondary schools in the Highlands have 30% of the secondary population in them so the teacher ratio in those schools is something like 1 teacher to 16 kids, whereas the Scottish average is 1 teacher to 13 kids, so is big necessarily best? Yes, you’re getting a choice of subjects but you’re maybe not getting the best access to teachers.” (Dingwall)

“I think the issue is there is no choice. That is our school and if, for whatever reason, you don’t want to send your child to that school then the only other option is you send your child away which is out of reach, financially, of almost everybody that lives in the rural area.” (Oban)

Housing

“Affordable housing is necessary.” (Orkney)

“Housing provision is a major blockage [...] there isn’t the availability so that’s probably critical.” (Dingwall)

“Small housing options. It’s not just the traditional models of social housing. We need a radical look at flexible housing.” (Oban)

- “We lose potential undergraduate students because of the lack of housing.”

- “We’ve got [a student] living in an ambulance in the carpark at the moment.” (Oban)

Childcare

“The problem sometimes is you’re talking about a chicken and egg situation. If you want to get people to the area you need child care and post offices but if nobody’s coming to the area nobody wants to set up something like a child-minding business, whilst if you’ve got good businesses who attract people to the area then it creates all the jobs in the form of child-minding, etcetera, so what is most important to do first?” (Dingwall)

Infrastructure to support business/industry

“The problem with tourism is it’s seasonal and so many businesses now are trying to become year-round businesses and trying to support their staff year-round.” (Dingwall)

“The way that we structure funding and the tax system, it just incentivises a certain set of people to operate in a certain set of ways, and makes it harder for anybody new to come, and these are the imbalances that need sorting out.” (Dingwall)

“There’s a broader thing there about aligning tax incentives with what we want to achieve and that level playing field across types of businesses.” (Dingwall)

Business support

“In cities, businesses are strong because there are strong networks. In rural areas, it’s difficult. We’re poorly networked. Islands tend to be better, mostly because they’re better networked than mainland areas. It’s more than just geography. It’s about having networking opportunities. I drive to networking opportunities in Glasgow. It takes me 2.5 hours to get there but I’ll go if it’s a good one. There’s just nothing locally to go to.” (Oban)

“It breaks down isolation. The more networking you can do, the better.” (Oban)

“Improved support for SMEs is a big positive, whether that’s skills development or financial support.” (Oban)

Suggested solution - being weary of big business

“For the people and the organisations charged with supporting, they need to align their vision with what rural areas need. The thinking big, supporting small strapline was generally agreed with. Unfortunately, there’s been too much of an idea of funding this one big industry, this one big solution that somehow is the magic bullet to rural problems, and a great deal of money gets invested sometimes without any great success to show for it at all. Actually, the future is going to be small and dispersed but lots and lots of small and dispersed businesses.” (Dingwall)

Suggested solution - access to finance

“If we get a tiny bit we’ll spend a lot. [...] There is a lot of long-term benefit to that. And it keeps other businesses going.” (Orkney)

“Capital grants do an awful lot for the economy, probably more than direct support payments for the downstream industries.” (Orkney)

“Capital grants do the most for the rural economy.” (Orkney)

“We need life after LEADER.” (Stirling)

“One thing the Government could do after Brexit is reduce VAT on hospitality and that could stimulate the economy no end if businesses invest that money in improving quality and wages and everything else.” (Stirling)

“The Island Beef Calf Scheme is very important to the Orkney economy. It’s kept Orkney going.” (Orkney)

“It’s quite a cheap way of putting not an awful lot of money into one part of the economy and then it has a massive effect.” (Orkney)

“It’s far better than social security payments.” (Orkney)

“The support is essential.” (Orkney)

“If the consumer wants to still buy affordable, cheap food then you have to support the primary producer because if you take subsidies away then the prices are going to go up.” (Orkney)

Suggested solution - simplifying the grants system

“Simplicity in the ability to access all the programmes, grant streams, too many layers, too much! Nobody knows where to go, it’s often a function of central government deciding “this is what we’re going to have to make the rural people do-fill in these forms” this has all got to be simplified and cleared out.” (Stirling)

“Simplify! We have so many grant systems, subsidy systems; LEADER, etc.” (Stirling)

Suggested solution - planning

“It’s very short-sighted. If we’re lacking in tourism accommodation in Orkney and you’re wanting to put pods up which will bring another half a dozen people into Orkney every week for the whole of the summer and give them somewhere to stay then that’s good for the economy, is it not? Planning is stifling developments.” (Orkney)

“The guy is admitting to me, a lot of the plans for how deep you have to dig and things like that are based on new build estates. It’s nothing to do with 200-year-old farm houses and old sheds and things like this where you’ve got 30 different types of ground on your property.” (Kilmarnock)

“We have fibre optic at the bottom of the road [...]. Our biggest problem was getting BT to plug the two ends together; it’s a regulatory problem, it’s not a physical problem. There’s an enormous amount of physical resource and good will and everything else there, but when we come up against regulatory hurdles, they’re not designed to allow us to interact with them and that makes everyone in rural Scotland feel helpless.” (Perth)

“There is no support whatsoever for putting up industrial buildings. HIE will give me no support for industrial buildings. There is no tax relief, there used to be 4% per annum depreciation allowance but that’s completely gone. If you put up a new building now you do it completely after tax. And the minute it’s up you start paying higher rates. There’s no incentive whatsoever to improve industrial buildings from the point of energy efficiency or working conditions.” (Dingwall)

“Building control is one of the biggest blocks to getting houses built, social or otherwise, anywhere, because they have a limited resource and as a result of which they have this very bureaucratic approach to everything [...] they are part of the problem.” (Dingwall)

“[We should have] zero-rated VAT on renovations of croft houses.” (Dingwall)

Suggested solutions - more flexible, fit for purpose planning

“The process and the framework around being able to run your business has to be fit for purpose. What we put into urban and new housing planning isn’t relevant to the types of businesses you run so do we have some kind of vision around making sure things are fit for purpose rather than a blanket one size fits all, because it clearly isn’t working for rural businesses. Whether that’s a flexibility, an adaptability of fit for purpose policy, across the board.” (Kilmarnock)

“The amount of stuff to deal with in the farm office. It’s a brake on being entrepreneurial.” (Oldmeldrum)

“It’s about simplification.” (Oldmeldrum)

Suggested solutions - local production facilities and supported supply chains

“30 years ago, everything was local.” (Kilmarnock)

“We’ve lost our abattoir and we’ve lost our identity on that because we can’t call it Orkney Beef anymore because it’s slaughtered off-island so we’ve lost the provenance.” (Orkney)

“How much local produce does the hospitality sector in rural Ayrshire use? Very, very little.” (Kilmarnock)

“The missing link for so many people is the processor.” (Oldmeldrum)

“Once you lose [local production facilities], they impact on viability and profitability of primary producers.” (Oldmeldrum)

“It’s a key part of the infrastructure, the primary producer is finished.” (Oldmeldrum)

“It would be nice to see more of that post-farmgate processing profit staying in the rural community, and I think that’s absolutely key.” (Oldmeldrum)

“Micro-processing in rural areas.” (Stirling)

“Push processing further down the supply chain to boost the economy.” (Stirling)

Suggested solutions - government investment into local production plants

“Address the disconnect between the food and drink vision – and the raw ingredients – so for example, we’re very good at selling whisky which we’ve made using maize imported from South America.” (Stirling)

“Similarly, with timber, it’s a long-term thing, if there’s a drop in production; Tilhill closes the doors, what do all their subcontractors do?” (Stirling)

Quality of life

“We undervalue the tangibles of living in this part of the world. Attract people to live and work here by selling the lifestyle to offset the lower income part; for example, Glentress on your doorstep.” (St Boswells)

“We enjoy living, working, and playing in Scotland primarily because of the freedom it offers us and our families and our children.” (Perth)

“We’re often told that [young people] miss out because they don’t go to soft play or tenpin bowling or whatever people in urban areas like to do in their spare time, but these things don’t cost money. Playing in the fields or jumping off hay bales, it’s all free. It also develops skills that these young people don’t actually know that they have until probably much later on. I think it makes them more resilient, I think that they are better at thinking on their feet sometimes or making the extra effort because if you have to travel an hour and 20 minutes every day just to go to school, travelling another 40 minutes every week to go to football training after school, it’s a massive commitment but they’re used to it and that’s part of their lifestyle. They can solve problems like you wouldn’t believe. The environment they grow up in, it could be argued, is safer.” (Perth)

“We talked about people actually moving their businesses to rural areas because they want to live here for the quality of life. It’s a strength that rural areas have, people actually want to live here for the quality of life. Often, they don’t care if the cost of their businesses is a bit higher.” (Oban)

“Rural communities, although they may be spread out, offer a really supportive network.” (Perth)

Jobs, careers and opportunities

“There are a lot of decently paid jobs that don’t require further education.” (Orkney)

“Agriculture is a good example of an industry that’s taken a lot of steps to train up its staff to present it as a career rather than simply a job. Forestry has a bit of a recruitment problem and I know agriculture does as well. It’s important that there is that progression, there are attractive industries for people to go into. Hospitality and tourism services are not seen as a career for a lot of people, it’s just a job, and it needs to be something that people see a career in if young people are actually going to want to go and work there rather than being the job of last resort. And that’s really important to the quality of people that we attract to live and stay in the area.” (Dingwall)

“Trying to keep young people in the countryside, not just young farmers but everybody who lives there. How do you give opportunities to young people who are not from a farm background, who might want to stay there and then you’ve got young people who have families and can populate the schools, but once the young people leave it’s very hard for them to come back again. So, it’s opportunities for all kinds of young people to get jobs and stay.” (Oldmeldrum)

“We might not have jobs in rural areas, but people make their own if they’re entrepreneurial, there’s not necessarily the number of jobs but you can still make a living being entrepreneurial.” (St Boswells)

“Showcasing what the rural economy can do and what it is capable of, rather than hiding it and people just thinking that it is just farming and food and drink. There is a lot more going on.” (St Boswells)

Suggested solution - using the education system to promote a positive message

“Could some of the learning from rural leadership go back into the schools?” (St Boswells)

Suggested solution - creating new opportunities

“Public bodies could lead by example and move themselves out to rural areas. [...] if we got more people working in rural areas then they have more of an understanding and appreciation of the benefits.” (St Boswells)

“We need to create job opportunities. Young people can find a locus here, we need to think outside of the box about what job opportunities mean.” (Dumfries)

“So, you’ve got employment for people for all ages so you’ve got things to keep young people active in the community and not having to go away and potentially not come back until they’re old people.” (Oldmeldrum)

Taking ownership and improving self-image

“People don’t respect their own environment.” (Kilmarnock)

“Stop the rural area being a dustbin for other areas. All the incineration plants – ‘let’s put them in rural areas out of the way’. Wind turbines – [urban areas] use the electricity too.” (Kilmarnock)

*“If you look at what Prince Charles has done at Dumfries House. When local authorities do something, put something in place, people don’t respect it because it’s an authority telling them to do something, but Prince Charles has come along and said, I believe in you as people. I think you’re worthwhile in investing in.”
(Kilmarnock)*

The workforce - retaining young people

“Rural kids may/should leave, but there must be avenues for them to come back into the communities that they were raised in.” (Stirling)

“The education system is quite weighted towards getting people into jobs that take them away from rural communities.” (Dingwall)

“They’re drawn to towns and cities.” (Orkney)

“The demography is getting older and older.” (Orkney)

“Regardless of what infrastructure we have, if we don’t have young people staying in Orkney, living and working in Orkney, then that’s a big issue.” (Orkney)

“It’s getting young people to come back to Orkney. There’s got to be an incentive.” (Orkney)

“Ability to create conditions for economically active people to stay. It’s about not stopping but actively allowing things to happen.” (Stirling)

Suggested solution - relevant education, skills development and advice

“In rural schools the careers development or the careers advice probably would be totally different to that in an urban school.” (Dingwall)

“There’s a slight danger in pumping young people through and raising expectations about what life will be like when they enter the world of work that aren’t necessarily true to the modern world and trying to say, actually, what we’ve got is damn good, if you want to take advantage of it in the countryside.” (Dingwall)

“Managing career expectations for young people is a challenge.” (Orkney)

“What we need is some rural skills work experience academy that sits within each high school that youngsters can access and therefore be able to gain that as part of their final few years of school. It puts them in contact with the local businesses, they’re able to get some experience but they’re also, alongside that, being able to tap into perhaps some others SVQs along the way. That makes them work-ready, but it also makes them experience the businesses that are in the local area, [hopefully] reducing the migration out to perhaps some of the cities as well, which we know is a big problem for young people. It also enables them to tap into things like GrowBiz to be able to set up their own business.” (Perth)

“What we hope will be here by 2027 is lifelong education and skills training.” (Perth)

“There are a number of examples of traditional craft training where you go to a place for some number of weeks, but the trainer then goes around to the individual businesses from which the trainees come and gives them in-house training that is appropriate to the needs of the business.” (St Boswells)

“I think [young people] have to have the opportunities where they live. 40% of pupils at our school go into employment and [...] even if a quarter of them were able to increase their skill set or gain additional qualifications, that might then open more doors for them, they might be encouraged to stay and earn and learn where they live and where they’ve been brought up. But, unfortunately, the opportunities aren’t there. Modern Apprenticeships are being pushed by everyone on almost every level but I could stand at the top of Schiehallion and look in a 30-mile radius and not find one, not one. I put all these jobs up on our school website every week and there is never a Modern Apprenticeship outwith Perth.” (Perth)

“We thought about the Modern Apprenticeships but felt they’re quite clunky and difficult to access for smaller businesses. We’re aware that there have been a few shared Modern Apprenticeships between different businesses but it’s how you access them and how you put them in contact with young people want to work in the rural areas, how do you then marry that up with rural skills training, SVQs. It all seems to be a bit out of sync with practical application of it all.” (Perth)

“Treasure our tradesmen.” (Stirling)

“More open definition of what a tradesman is – driving a piece of kit in a forest, it’s a trade.” (Stirling)

Understanding the younger generation - creating meaningful and innovative job opportunities

“Think outside the box. Think of people coming out of school now; the jobs they’ll be doing haven’t even been invented yet. Incidentally, about the space port, Glasgow is the biggest satellite producer in Europe. More satellites, electronics, gaming industry. We owe it to having a sustainable and vibrant population in D&G to think outside the box.” (Dumfries)

“I believe now that seven years is the time you stay in a job, you maybe move on to something or you get promoted, but what’s wrong with maybe moving into another sector, and that way people can up-skill, they can become multi-skilled throughout their life and maybe contribute more to their communities.” (Dingwall)

“We talked quite a lot about jobs and wanting to see high quality, well-paid, varied jobs in our rural communities.” (Oban)

Giving young people a purpose

“We’ve been told by young people “don’t fret so much about creating job opportunities for us, just give us a purpose in our community.” (Dumfries)

“If you want people to have a purpose, you’ve got to start valuing them.” (Dumfries)

Encouraging entrepreneurship

“Educate future workforce in entrepreneurship. Encourage young people to set up their own businesses and make them aware of businesses and opportunities potentially in the region. Integrate this into the education system. Not just about traditional rural skills but encouraging them to understand what their career opportunities are and what enterprises/businesses are there in the region that they can look at to develop their career choices.” (Dumfries)

Developing workforce skills - the role of employers

“Clear pathways to your jobs and on the job training – more supportive companies.” (Stirling)

“Increased mature person training. We’ve got a fabulous education system that churns out wonderfully educated clever enthusiastic 23-year-olds but by the time they get to 35 they have forgotten it all and they’re not getting any more.” (Stirling)

Developing workforce skills - plugging skills gaps

“It’s skills for life in some respects. Some practical skills are not matched to the market at the moment.” (St Boswells)

Access to labour post-Brexit

“We need flexible visas.” (Dingwall)

“In the soft fruit industry, they use such an amount of staff, could the visas be more flexible once Brexit comes in? Could it be a three-, six- or nine-month visa so that there is accessibility?” (Dingwall)

Community ownership

“Expand community owned renewable energy, revenues boost the rural economy.” (Stirling)

Celebrating diversity

“A diverse range of people keeps it sustainable: support the local garage and keep the whole agricultural mechanics show on the road.” (Stirling)

Suggested solution - community plans

“We feel that each area is unique on its own. It has unique problem, unique opportunities, unique people and each area really should have a very local action plan and strategy that’s created by young people, old people, the people that actually live there, the businesses, that covers everything from enterprise, social care, community skills, regeneration, infrastructure, everything. And it’s costed and as part of that it’s approved by a body that then can devolve budgets directly to these costed actions. And you have somebody that’s paid, in place. I’ve worked on Development Trust, it’s an absolute nightmare to get things done because they’re all volunteers, unless you’ve got paid staff, and yet they can access masses of matched funding councils can’t. So therefore, it’s a blinding opportunity to put people in place, create jobs in rural communities to deliver things that they want to see done in their area against an agreed action plan and with the Community Empowerment Act, why not? There are lots of council and Scottish Government budgets that are not devolved directly into places where they need to be delivered and communities know where the best people are and the best things are to put the money against.” (Perth)

“If you’re going to have a community-led funding pot, it’s got to be easy enough that it’s not a burden on people with the number of things people are trying to juggle these days to make a living. If you’ve got a small business idea, it can’t take four weeks’ solid work to get an application through if you’re trying to juggle three

other jobs. Making it appropriate. That really would help with keeping young people.”
(Orkney)

“You need to have the structures to actually administer that and volunteer power.”
(Orkney)

Diet and nutrition

“I always remember somebody saying that the supermarket in Maybole, it sold the class two fruit and veg, it was more expensive than the class one fruit and veg in Ayr. People in those areas were paying more for a lower class of food because it’s population driven, and that’s wrong. And it’s probably costing them more to get there because they don’t have public transport to get to the supermarket, they’re using a car.” (Kilmarnock)

“I’m a great believer in what they did in Finland where their population had the worst cases of heart disease. The Government subsidised so much of the growing and producing of good food: oats, berries, meat, fish – everything that we have. It became so cost-effective to buy it they cut their heart disease by 50% in 10 years. It’s connecting food and drink to health.” (Kilmarnock)

“You drive past any school in Ayrshire at lunch time and there will be chip vans outside. I don’t know why you can’t go to the Head Teacher and just say, ban the chip vans, they eat inside the school. If you want to buy something local here are some guys we know. It’s up to you if you do that. That just seems like a basic thing that you could do without having to go to Edinburgh to say, can you please do this.” (Kilmarnock)

“We know what’s happening to Maybole high street, as an example. All town high streets. And more power for the supermarkets, because they’re bringing the produce from all over the world. Do people understand where their strawberries come from when they’re able to get them on a supermarket shelf 12 months of the year? Is that right? Should we have strawberries 12 months of the year? And you can follow that through for almost every single thing we have. It’s seasonal. It’s all had a big impact. We’re never going to put our high streets back together again, they’re a lost cause.” (Kilmarnock)

A shared, inclusive vision

“Government regulations to meet the demands of people.” (Kilmarnock)

“it’s [...] the emotional engagement and it’s the emotional investment in that future.” (Perth)

“Decision-makers need to be rurally inclusive. We don’t want to see the rural economy separated out, silo-ed out. We want it to be an inter-running theme of everything that happens because if we do that it might become a much bigger part of conversations.” (St Boswells)

Ownership of the vision

“We need that vision. We need the Scottish Government to actually put a vision in place. If they do that we will follow but right now rural economy has been blundering around in the dark for 30 years.” (Stirling)

Capitalising on Scotland’s image and assets

“An emphasis on Scotland’s friendliness.” (Stirling)

“We talked about protected and well-managed landscapes, strategically looking at where we want to grow the population and where to want to focus resources.” (Oban)

“It frightens me that there is very little understanding of what is out there and what an asset it is. It’s soil, air quality.” (Oldmeldrum)

“Governance around Scotland the brand, without cliché.” (Oban)

“Touching on Quality Meats Scotland – in terms of marketing whisky around here is looking at a system where the provenance of everything going into the bottle is traced back, but then the supplier sources are made available. In the whisky industry everything is documented from field to bottle, that system links very closely with block chain software – the incorruptible stuff behind Bitcoin and it can then be fed to the consumer through a digital code on the product. That’s the basis of it. There’s the transparency element but also the community collaboration element, where local food and other products could be marketed – so you pick up a bottle of whisky and it says “have you tried Jean’s marmalade from up the road?” it’s all about engaging people to buy locally. They’ve been doing very well with this in California. It’s one way of authenticating and keeping provenance transparent but it’s also about engaging with the people who want that, not just locally but export as well.” (Stirling)

Having a positive, can-do attitude

“We need to be outward looking.” (Dumfries)

“More can-do attitude in D&G (how many years have we been saying that?!)” (Dumfries)

“We talked about recognising opportunities rather than problems.” (St Boswells)

“The narrative has got to be about opportunity not the underdog.” (St Boswells)

“We talked about supporting risk-takers, encouraging a bit of risk-taking.” (St Boswells)

“In marketing use positive language, talk about the positives over the issues and barriers.” (Dumfries)

“There are lots of businesses that people don’t know about [...]; we’ve got to do more to market who’s here and what’s happening and focus on the positive image not the things that don’t work.” (Dumfries)

“We need to learn from our mistakes.” (Dumfries)

“Learn from successes too!” (Dumfries)

Positive marketing: communicating/engaging with consumers

“It’s as much about educating people about the land and about where their food comes from and about how important it is to keep rural businesses going. It’s about re-connecting people with the land wherever they live and whatever they do.” (Dingwall)

“It’s about educating your next generation of consumers.” (Dingwall)

“It’s about communicating with people who are not in the rural economy – we’re good at telling each other what we’ve got to do, but it’s about telling all the other people what we’ve got to do.” (Stirling)

“We must have people in Scotland paying more for food if we want to sustain a decent Scottish food industry.” (Stirling)

Working collaboratively

“Having true cooperation to meet the community goals is really, really important.” (Oldmeldrum)

Working collaboratively with Local Authorities

“How they implement government policy, it will vary region to region. Some councils are more tuned in to rural needs than others.” (Kilmarnock)

“We have this feeling that there’s nobody – we’re not working with anyone, certainly not your local council, there’s never any sense of, what can we do to help you or how can we work together?” (Kilmarnock)

“Leadership is not inspiring. Councillors are making decisions and they’re only there for a year or two.” (Kilmarnock)

“I’ve heard so much about how the Scottish Government want to make Scotland a food tourist destination, but I’m not sure I really see feet on the ground, that that is being led in Ayrshire.” (Kilmarnock)

Working collaboratively between industries

“We want people to be sharing experience and stimulating communication, being able to share what they’re doing.” (St Boswells)

“It should be collaborative. There needs to be a lot more working together to make sure we get the most from the land.” (St Boswells)

“Need to collaborate and cooperate; it’s not something we’ve been encouraged towards culturally. Because we have up to now promoted and supported people pursuing a single vision. If we want more people to engage in the pie, we’re going to have to stop people stepping up and saying “no I don’t want you doing that because I’m already doing it” we have to get out of that frame of mind and give more people access to the pie.” (Dumfries)

“We should all get together and run the abattoir ourselves. We need to be more committed. We want to keep the beef industry going in Orkney.” (Orkney)

“We talked about Orkney being an example of good collaboration and that that could be enhanced with local decision-making continuing to be outward-looking and rebuilding historic trade links in the post-Brexit landscape.” (Orkney)

“Look for exciting opportunities to create wealth that is collaborative and inclusive.” (Dumfries)

“One thing we discussed quite a lot is the set of boundaries. We are a nation where we like to look after our own patch. We do like to keep our boundaries because that makes us feel secure, but I think we need to open those boundaries and we need rub the boundaries out slightly on the legislation and the bureaucratic side of things. [...] so that our urban can talk to our rural and just the knowledge across, transfer the funding across, get the urbans out to the rural, get the rurals into the urban, and make it the whole of Scotland as opposed to our little wee cliques.” (Perth)

Supporting innovation, creativity and good practice

“There’s a clear lack of vision. It’s really stifling the rural economy. Don’t just say no to things all the time.” (Orkney)

“Promote the creativity side of things.” (Dumfries)

- “I think that the surplus electricity that we’ve got to so much of in Orkney because of all the wind turbines should be condensing all the pot ale and converting it into pol ale syrup rather than spreading it on the land and causing problems there with high phosphate levels and all the rest of it.”

- “This could become a food source for local livestock.”

- “There’s not enough joined-up thinking to be able to do that.” (Orkney)

“We looked at trying to produce hydrogen from the wind turbines and run the ferries.” (Orkney)

“Orkney going it alone and having an Orkney Electricity Company that can utilise all the spare electricity and put into communities that have fuel poverty as well as businesses that need it.” (Orkney)

Strong leadership with local control

“Can-do from a local base, having more jurisdiction on a local level.” (Stirling)

“Services centralised, it just doesn’t work.” (Orkney)

“More control over actual funds [...] so that the decisions are made locally rather than in Edinburgh or London. It’s difficult because it’s going to create more bureaucracy but is that better or worse. It’s a conundrum. [...] We want to have more control of the money right here not just in Edinburgh.” (Orkney)

One size does not fit all

“The NFU vision is for a competitive, profitable, progressive rural Britain and I think that really resonates. I know what you’re saying about there isn’t one aim but actually that’s something that all sectors should aspire to.” (Dingwall)

“Tourism vision: regional differentiation. The Highland offer, the Outer Isles offer, the Northern Isles offer is very different from the Borders or from Glasgow or Edinburgh. There needs to be that recognition that we do things differently in different parts.” (Dingwall)

Re-defining growth

“We talked a little bit about redefining rural growth. What actually is rural growth? Is it purely financial, is it small/medium companies growing or is it single individual companies, one-man businesses?” (St Boswells)

“‘Big versus small’ for example craft beer sitting alongside large-scale manufacturing.” (Stirling)

“See small scale agriculture as viable – it doesn’t have to be industrialised to be viable.” (Stirling)

“Agricultural support based on production.” (Stirling)

Use data to understand the rural economy

“The Chambers of Commerce are pretty defunct. The businesses that have been here for generations are all represented but they don’t attract new members. I’ve never been to a Chamber meeting. I don’t think anybody knows really how many businesses there are and what we do.” (Oban)

“Increased research into carbon capture and water retention in Scotland – area that will have a huge influence on how our landscape is managed – right now we’re blundering around in the dark.” (Stirling)

“We need a benchmark to help us understand how we’re doing environmentally.” (Oldmeldrum)

