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## **Social Exclusion and Marginalised Voices in Scotland's Rural and Island Communities: A Persistent Challenge (Policy Spotlight)**

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# Social Exclusion and Marginalised Voices in Scotland's Rural and Island Communities: A Persistent Challenge

**Policy Spotlight**

**Authors: Ana Vuin and Jane Atterton**

**July 2023**

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**Scottish Government Strategic Research Programme 2022-2027**

**SRUC-E2-2:** Reimagined Policy Futures: Shaping sustainable, inclusive and just rural and island communities in Scotland (ReRIC)

**Deliverable 2.4:** Literature review on Social Exclusion and Marginalised Voices in Scotland's Rural and Island Communities



## Context

*The Scottish Government funds a programme of strategic scientific research through the Rural and Environment Science and Analytical Services (RESAS) division to advance the evidence base in the development of rural affairs, food and environment policies. This research forms part of the 2022-27 Strategic Research Programme in Project SRUC-E2-2 'Reimagined Policy Futures: Shaping sustainable, inclusive and just rural and island communities in Scotland, ReRIC'. It aims to generate new understandings of persistent and emerging challenges and opportunities in Scotland's rural and island communities. The project combines innovative, large-scale citizen science (through a new Rural Exchange web portal) to gather information, ideas and commentary from rural and island residents and communities, quantitative analysis of secondary data, in-depth qualitative work with stakeholders and communities, comprehensive policy reviews, international evidence gathering and horizon-scanning activities. This policy spotlight is the fourth in a series of five that address the key challenges of rural housing, depopulation, and exclusion/marginalisation. It provides some context as to the reasons why people experience exclusion and marginalisation in rural and island Scotland, including those experiencing poverty, and some of the implications of that. The other spotlights in this series are: Rural and Island Policy in Scotland, Contextualising the Rural, Scotland's Rural Landscape, Implications and Emerging Opportunities, Population and Migration in Rural Scotland, and Housing in Scotland's Rural and Island Communities.*

## Highlights

Exclusion and marginalisation in rural and island communities may take many forms. Aside from poverty in a financial sense (sometimes referred to as financial hardship, financial vulnerability, deprivation or as someone having low financial resilience or wellbeing) leading to exclusion and marginalisation (as people cannot afford to purchase basic essential items), there may be a range of other interconnected factors which contribute to exclusion in rural and island communities including:

- Low uptake of social and welfare benefits due to distance and cost of travelling to urban centres to access face-to-face services, as well as poor knowledge about benefits availability and entitlements.
- A shortage of affordable housing (both private and social rented housing and housing for purchase)
- Limited employment opportunities, and a dominance of seasonal, temporary, and low paid jobs
- Absence of affordable and accessible childcare provision
- Limited local services (and additional access related costs for services that are not available locally)
- Difficulties accessing family planning services and chemists
- Lack of leisure and recreation facilities for teenagers
- Poor local transport provision and high costs of running private transport
- An individual being part of a minority group or having other 'protected characteristics' due to enhanced experiences of stigma (or perhaps perceptions of it) in rural communities.

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***This introductory Policy Spotlight briefly introduces these issues, highlighting some of the current policy initiatives that exist to tackle these challenges.***

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## **1 Rural Poverty and Social Exclusion**

Rural disadvantage is still an insufficiently explored area of research. While there is a substantial amount of literature looking into different forms of disadvantage in the UK since the 1970s, such as rural poverty, social exclusion, and deprivation, this matter still requires a more comprehensive and timelier overview.

The concept of ‘rural disadvantage’ can be interpreted in many ways. It involves multiple levels of rurality and diverse populations, as well as encompassing meanings ranging from poverty, marginalisation, exclusion, and deprivation experienced on an individual level, to the same attributes experienced at a more general level (e.g., living in a deprived or impoverished area, lack of access to services and amenities, lack of access to information and knowledge, etc.).

The term poverty is often interpreted narrowly to refer to individuals or households that have incomes below a certain threshold, which means that they cannot fully participate in society. However, the term social exclusion is usually taken to be a broader, multidimensional, and more dynamic concept, referring to the processes occurring in society from which people or families may be excluded. People may be excluded from the labour or housing markets for example, or from accessing services. These processes of exclusion may work in particular ways in rural communities. The challenge of accessing affordable housing (for rent or purchase) in rural and island communities is a long standing one; without this access, local people are excluded not only from the housing market itself, but potentially also from fully participating in the rural economy and society, i.e. if they cannot find a house locally then they may not be able to work and participate socially in the local community.

Professor Mark Shucksmith in his work on the housing market and the planning system in rural areas has written about the ‘[exclusive countryside](#)’ (see for example this work for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation) which is a domain only for the wealthy who can afford to live there, while local people are forced to leave.

There are other ways too in which rural people may be excluded. Research has focused, for example, [on young people being excluded from the community if they do not have safe, accessible places to socialise](#), or if they cannot access job opportunities as they are only advertised through 'word of mouth' networks. [Young children and their parents may be](#)

[excluded due to an absence of local childcare facilities](#) and therefore an inability to participate in the labour market or access social facilities.

Older people may be excluded because of limited personal mobility, a lack of public transport and few places to meet locally ([Jaye et al. 2023](#)). For those older people who have personal mobility challenges, practically getting around on foot in villages and towns where pathways may be uneven and narrow may be a particular challenge (this is discussed in Powe, Hart and Shaw's 2007 book on [\(England's\) Market Towns](#)). Those on benefits may be excluded if they cannot travel to their local welfare office or job centre, which may be some distance away if they live in a remote location, or do not have the digital connectivity and/or skills to access the welfare system online. This is aligned with the findings of Shucksmith et al. (1994) in their study on '[Disadvantage in rural Scotland](#)'. These results indicated that poverty (as one form of disadvantage) was widespread in rural Scotland.

The recent work on rural poverty by Mark Shucksmith and others on the [Rural Lives](#) project has revealed the extent of poverty and exclusion in rural and island communities (three study areas formed the focus of this project, two in Scotland and one in northern England). While poverty can be depicted on a monetary level by highlighting differences in individual/household income and pay levels or describing the higher costs [faced by rural and island households](#), including in the [current cost of living crisis](#), the situation in rural areas is often considerably more complex.

For some individuals, exclusion is depicted as a subjective comparison of their situation with the harder lives of previous generations lives rather than an objective comparison with other groups in the population. Low-income households also have a tendency to describe themselves as 'rich in spirit, poor in means', often referring to the positive features of rural living (clean air, low levels of crime, strong communities) which more than made up for material possessions and money.

Therefore, it is apparent that we must consider disadvantage through a multifaceted lens. Disadvantage, particularly in rural areas, takes on many shapes and forms, and requires nuanced interpretation that accounts for the potential range of factors contributing to it.

**Deprivation can be interpreted in several ways:**

- **social deprivation,**
- **household deprivation,**
- **income deprivation**
- **opportunity deprivation**
- **mobility deprivation**
- **service deprivation**

**Deep-rooted deprivation**  
 – some areas include data zones which have consistently been among the 5% most deprived in Scotland since SIMD 2004. This map shows a selection of those areas, where over two-thirds of data zones are among the 5% most deprived for SIMD 2020.



Figure 1 Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation 2016: introductory booklet

Six council areas have a larger share of the 20% most deprived data zones in Scotland compared with SIMD 2016. Three council areas have a smaller share. The rest have changed by less than 2 percentage points. SIMD measures relative deprivation, so changes in SIMD rank for one area may be due to other areas becoming more or less deprived.

**Change map**

- Decrease in deprivation
- Increase in deprivation
- Change in deprivation less than 2 pp

**Council areas with the largest decrease:**

- Glasgow City
- Renfrewshire
- City of Edinburgh

**Council areas with the largest increase:**

- Aberdeen City
- North Lanarkshire
- Moray
- East Lothian
- Highland
- North Ayrshire

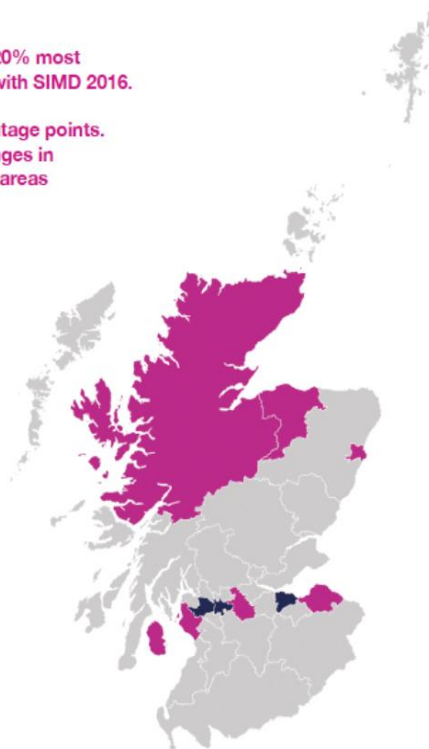


Figure 2 Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation 2016: introductory booklet

SOME OTHER FORMS OF DISADVANTAGE, MARGINALISATION AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION IN RURAL AND ISLAND COMMUNITIES IN SCOTLAND IN 2023 ARE:	
<p><b>Financial hardship</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Inability of rural population to meet their financial commitments and needs comfortably</li> <li>◦ Inability to share in a lifestyle of the majority</li> <li>◦ Household income below 60% of the national median</li> </ul>	<p><b>Poverty</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Insufficient resources (material, cultural and social) to enjoy a minimum acceptable way of life</li> <li>◦ This usually implies exclusion and marginalisation (access to fundamental human rights may be restricted)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Financial vulnerability</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Low financial resilience</li> <li>◦ Less able to engage with their finances or financial services (e.g. low financial capability)</li> </ul>	<p><b>Social exclusion/ marginalisation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Limited or denied access to a range of processes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ markets (labour, finance, housing),</li> <li>▪ state (bureaucratic)</li> <li>▪ community (associative)</li> <li>▪ friends and family (reciprocal)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p><b>Lack of financial wellbeing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Inability to meet financial commitments and needs comfortably.</li> <li>◦ Having insufficient income/savings for more than life's essentials and financially struggling, including having the capacity to deal with unexpected financial shocks, and savings for retirement</li> </ul>	<p><b>Rurality (and its implications for Protected Characteristics)*</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ potential socio-economic divide driven by access, mobility and income</li> </ul>

Figure 3 \* stands for the forms of disadvantage driven by the combination of special characteristics and specific rural areas (e.g. access to specialized treatments, or prevention programmes)

Previous research has suggested that individuals from minority communities and/or with protected characteristics, including relating to gender, ethnicity or [sexual orientation](#) may be particularly at risk of exclusion and marginalisation in rural areas. This may be a result of several factors, including lack of access to, or knowledge about, appropriate support services and a stronger sense of stigma in rural communities.

While the 'tight knit' nature of rural communities may provide a strong support structure for some, it may also heighten a sense of marginalisation and 'difference' for others. At the same time as some people may experience discrimination and active exclusion in the countryside because of 'difference', there are others who actively move to the countryside to seek out or establish '[alternative' lifestyles](#)' (e.g. [ecovillages](#) ).

Unfortunately, in such scenarios often the focus remained on the complex interpersonal relations, gender, and age groups issues, regardless of their engagement with the land in their everyday life, making it even more challenging for the alternative lifestyle seekers to remain in the area.

Residents of rural and island Scotland whose first language is not English may also experience exclusion and marginalisation. These individuals may be Gaelic or Scots language speakers, who may be a small group in terms of absolute numbers, but their languages are a key part of the cultural heritage and identity of Scotland as a whole, and of local communities, with Gaelic particularly prominent in the north and west of Scotland, for example. [Fenyö \(2000\)](#) describes attitudes towards Gaelic as being a combination of



'contempt, sympathy and romance' and notes that there is a historic legacy of stigmatisation of the Gaelic language and culture as inferior and backwards and related to poverty and limited opportunities.

***“In 2018, 54% of rural consumers in the UK were defined as financially vulnerable.”***

[Atterton et al \(2020\)](#)

Legislation, policy interventions and institutional changes over the last couple of decades have helped to shift this narrative somewhat and raise the profile of the Gaelic language, such as through the [Gaelic Language \(Scotland\) Act](#) in 2005 and the [Gaelic Language Plan](#) published in May 2017. However, challenges still remain for those individuals and communities where English is not a first language in terms of accessing services in their native language, for example. This may be a particular challenge when someone is experiencing poor physical or mental health. McLeod (2020) describes a situation in Scotland where the public perceives Gaelic as a reclaimed and recovered language, policy makers are hesitant to make provisions for the language, and Gaelic speakers are potentially demoralised and discouraged, while also socially excluded from their heritage, language and culture (McLeod 2020).

These examples indicate that marginalisation and social exclusion is a multi-layered and multi-faceted concept that goes beyond financial poverty measured in terms of income levels. The complexity of the issue was confirmed in the recent book 'Rural Poverty Today' (2023), based on the Rural Lives work in England and Scotland, which again confirmed that rural poverty, marginalisation, and social exclusion are less visible, recognised and addressed by policy makers.

There is a need for recognition of contextual differences that prompt these challenges, such as volatility and irregularity of rural incomes (which may prompt disadvantage when individuals are seeking to purchase or rent a house in a rural community and lifestyle contrasts between newcomers and locals). There are challenges that come with government interventions that tend to provide short term support, and that also often do not recognise the particular circumstances of rural residents which affect the ways in which they experience exclusion, including the enhanced social stigma of being on benefits, the recent centralisation and digitalisation of services, an inability to access information and support due to poor quality (i.e. slow and/or unreliable) broadband or lack of digital skills and/or mental health challenges.

The Scottish Government has developed a number of initiatives to acknowledge and address the exclusion often experienced by individuals no matter where they live, including: the Fuel Insecurity Fund, the Cost of Living Support Package, the Package of energy relief for households, the Energy Bill Relief Scheme, Scotland's National Strategy for Economic Transformation, the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Scotland) Act, the Adoption and Children (Scotland) Act 2007, the Offences (Aggravation by Prejudice) Act 2009, the Fairer Scotland for Disabled People Action Plan, the Equality and Human Rights Commission 2017, the Fairer Scotland for All: Race Equality Action Plan (2017-21), the “Discrimination by



Association” Act, the Carers (Scotland) Act 2016, the Carers Strategic Policy Statement and more recently the public consultation held to inform a draft Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill.

Unfortunately, as argued here, exclusion and marginalisation tend to be experienced differently and have different contributory factors for rural and island residents compared to those living in urban centres. Therefore, it is always necessary to reevaluate these initiatives in the light of recent and current events, and to develop adequate solutions that are fit-for-purpose for rural settings, populations, and communities.

This leads to the following questions:

1. How can we support populations with protected characteristics (e.g. Gaelic speakers in the preservation of their culture and language) in rural settings in a meaningful way?
2. How do we include rurality as a key contextual factor in development of any place- or person- based initiative?
3. How do we increase the visibility of these issues in rural areas?
4. How can we learn from and share examples of successful approaches to integration and inclusion?

## 2 CONCLUSION

Scotland still lacks a clear vision, strategy, and policy for its rural communities; in comparison to Scotland’s Island communities that have dedicated legislation and plans. A number of challenges have persisted in Scotland's rural communities for decades, including experiences of exclusion and marginalisation amongst particular groups, challenges with accessing affordable housing and long-standing population decline. These challenges need to be revisited in the context of current policy priorities and socio-economic and environmental challenges and opportunities, including the climate and biodiversity emergencies, ambitious net zero targets, and recovery from Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing cost of living crisis, particularly given the Scottish Government's emphasis on a just, fair and inclusive transition. Only by achieving an up-to-date understanding of these persistent challenges in their current context and taking into account emerging opportunities (such as new labour requirements to meet the net zero targets), can we ensure that rural and island communities can maximise their potential to contribute to the creation of a just, inclusive Scotland in future.

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