

**Scotland's Rural College**

## **Population and Migration in Rural Scotland (Policy Spotlight)**

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# Population and Migration in Rural Scotland

## Policy Spotlight

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**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 2.3:** Literature review on Population and Migration in Rural Scotland



## 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, comprehensive policy reviews, international evidence gathering and horizon-scanning activities. This policy spotlight is the third in a series of five that address the key persistent challenges of rural housing, depopulation, and exclusion/marginalisation. It provides some context about rural populations and population change as well as an overview of some rural initiatives in Scotland relating to population change. The other spotlights in this series are: Rural and Island Policy in Scotland, Contextualising the Rural, Scotland's Rural Landscape, Implications and Emerging Opportunities, Housing in Scotland's Rural and Island Communities, and Social Exclusion and Marginalised Voices in Scotland's Rural and Island Communities.

## 1 Scotland's Rural Population

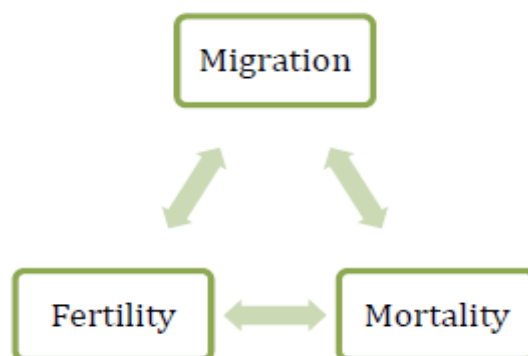
As in many other developed countries, Scotland is faced with an ageing population, with the proportion of the population that is older estimated to substantially increase by 2050 (the prediction is that one in four people in the UK will be aged over 65 by 2050). The implications of this scenario will be substantial and complex, based on the usual assumption that the (declining) younger population of working age will economically support the (growing) elderly population.

However, the current scenario where people are living (and working) longer has prompted new ways of thinking and measuring this complex situation. Not only have individuals' overall lifespans expanded, but their working lifespans have too. People nowadays live longer, but also have a presence in the labour market for longer, and therefore contribute economically for a longer period than previous generations. These changes imply that once most of the currently economically active population retires, there will be substantial labour, social and economic challenges for policy makers and communities.

Scotland, like many other OECD countries, is attempting to slow down and reduce the negative implications of the ageing population,

These structural shifts will also impact on:

- Public finance
- Health and social care systems
- Our working lives
- Education, skills, and learning
- Housing, and
- Infrastructure



including through encouraging international migration. However, since the referendum on EU-exit in 2016 and the Covid-19 pandemic, which began in 2020, it is apparent that these mobility flows have been impacted by these wider processes.

In 2019, [The Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population](#) estimated that the new post EU-exit immigration system (proposed by the UK Government) will lead to 50-80% reduction in net EU migration to Scotland after 2020, and an overall reduction in overseas migration to Scotland of 30-50%. An update in July 2020, prompted by revised Home Office proposals, retained the same projections. Additionally, the introduction of international tuition fees for undergraduate students from EU countries, in combination with the [new visa processes](#) and complex immigration process, might further deter potential migrants to Scotland. These substantial and structural changes will have an impact on the Scottish economy, landscapes, and communities.

As a response to these emerging challenges, the Scottish Government published its first national population strategy, [‘A Scotland for the future: opportunities and challenges of Scotland's changing population’](#), in March 2021. While this report is not a (policy) commitment (by the Scottish Government), the findings and recommendations should have several practical uses for policy makers and the public. The document also indicates that the Scottish Government is willing to engage in international knowledge exchange, prompt collaboration and to share knowledge and positive practices for informing Scotland’s future strategies and approaches.

The findings may also inform the development of the ‘Addressing Depopulation Action Plan’ due to be published in 2023, the objective of which will be to enable population retention and repopulation across rural and island communities currently being affected by long term trends around depopulation. It should also support the ongoing delivery of Scotland’s National Islands Plan, which was launched in 2019. The Population Strategy was developed as a response to diverse and crosscutting challenges that Scotland faces at national and local level. The majority of Scotland’s mobility flows were driven by strong outmigration flows until the beginning of this century, peaking at record high 5.46 million people in 2021. Still, regardless of the population increase, in the last decade, there are some persistent demographic challenges that continue to shape Scotland’s demographic picture. According to the NRS Scotland (2021), it is estimated that Scotland’s population will gradually decrease after peaking in 2028 with a population of 5.48 million.

By 2045, the estimated number will decline to 5.39 million, which is a substantial reduction in the overall population. Additionally, by 2045 it is estimated that Scotland’s population will have fewer children (-22%), roughly the same number of people of working age (with only a small change of -2%), and more people of pensionable age (+21%) (Roughsedge, 2021).

The predictions are that rural areas will experience further decline and deterioration as the local population of working age will continue to out-migrate, and the numbers of incoming migrants will be insufficient to compensate for this population loss. According to the HIE report presented at the Rural Housing conference in February 2023, this is already happening

across the Highlands and Islands. It could be assumed that this scenario will also further increase gender inequality as proportionally less women will be able to meet the salary threshold ([Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population](#)). The Covid-19 pandemic has also exacerbated this situation. Lockdowns and serious health concerns led to extremely limited population movements of all population groups, including prospective, temporary, seasonal, and labour migrants that extensively contributed to the economies of OECD countries. While apparent, the implications of these events are still not being fully measured and therefore are not fully understood.

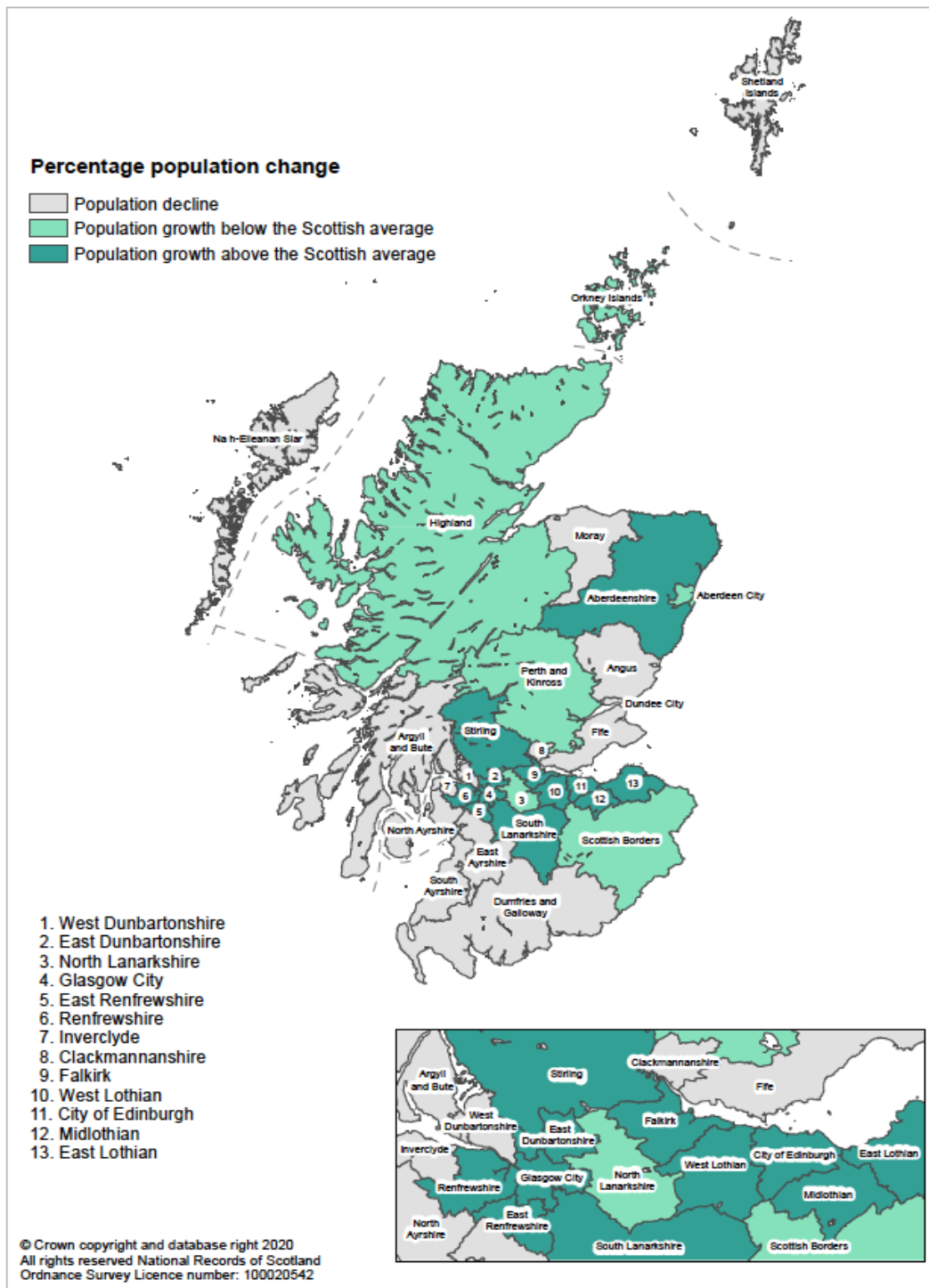


Figure 1 Projected percentage change in population, by council area, mid-2018 to mid-2028 (Map)

In accordance with these estimations and the ongoing issues relating to EU-exit and the Covid-19 pandemic which have further exacerbated already existing inequalities, the Scottish Government has framed the country's demographic challenge around four key building blocks:

- **‘A Family Friendly Nation’** - As Scotland’s birth rate is falling (and is the lowest in the UK), we must ensure Scotland is the best place to raise a family.

- **‘A Healthy Living Society’** – As Scotland’s population lives longer, which is to be celebrated, we must ensure that our people are healthy and active.
- **‘An Attractive and Welcoming Country’** – As Freedom of Movement ends, Scotland needs to be able to attract people who can make a positive contribution to our economy, communities, and public services.
- **‘A More Balanced Population’** – With rural communities and those in the west experiencing population decline, while many in the east experience increased population growth, we must ensure our population is more balanced and distributed so all our communities can flourish.

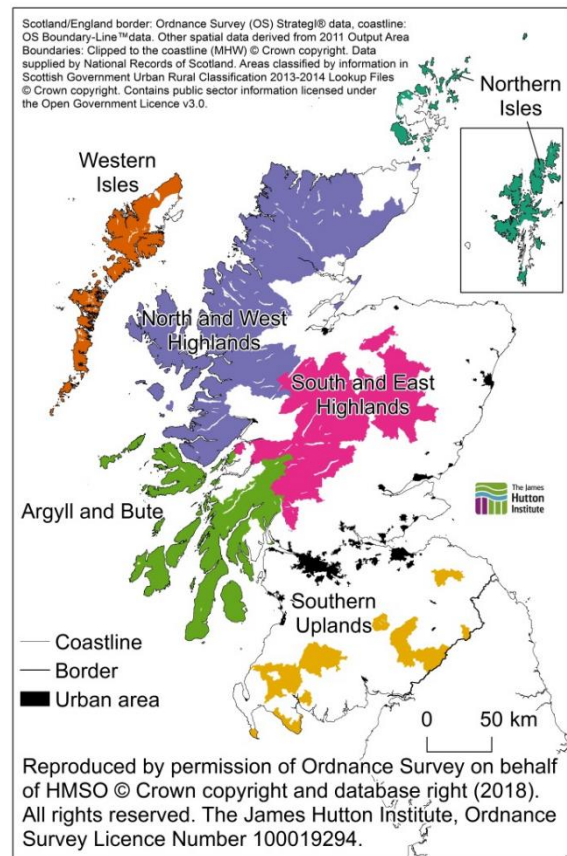


Figure 2: The Scottish SPA and its sub-regions

These four blocks allow the government to evaluate the complex and crosscutting issue of population change and connect existing and ongoing economic and infrastructural actions, local investments and planning, migration patterns, housing, education, health and social care services, and public finance. Based on the future projections outlined above, the Population Programme is much needed as Scotland will face demographic challenges that will require strategies for:

- **maintaining a sustainable total population size**
- **maintaining sustainable age structures within the population**
- **maintaining a sustainable spatial balance in the population, across Scotland's urban, rural, and remote locations.**

This is particularly relevant for the landscapes, communities, and population residing in rural Scotland. Remote rural areas make up a much higher percentage of the [landmass \(70%\) in rural areas in Scotland \(and worldwide\) than accessible rural areas \(28%\)](#).

### 1.1 Population change, implications, and rural areas

Any discussion of 'rural' or 'rurality' must be contextualised, appropriately defined, and presented. It must go beyond the mere classification of distinct rural typologies to account for diversity, population, and culture. It should take into consideration amenities, services, and the capacity, strengths and limitations of each place, and their populations and communities.



Scotland's rural areas generally, and its sparsely populated areas (SPAs) specifically, have a legacy of depopulation (as with other OECD countries). Consequently, without appropriate interventions, this will lead to a shrinkage of the working age population, limited economic development, and landscape and ecology related issues that are yet not fully known ([Copus & Hopkins, 2018](#)).

Copus and Hopkins (2018) defined the Scottish SPAs as rural areas and small towns where less than 10,000 people (the minimum population of an urban area) can be reached within 30 minutes travel using roads and ferries. The SPA extends to almost half (48.7%) of the area of Scotland but contains only 2.6% of its population. By utilising the population data sources (Population Census 1991, 2001, 2011) and National Records of Scotland's (NRS) population estimates, Copus & Hopkins (2018) produced population projections for every five years from 2011 until 2046 (using standard assumptions from the official NRS projections, combined with a projection model specifically designed for use with smaller populations).

	2011	2016	2021	2026	2031	2036	2041	2046
Northern Isles	13,430	13,410	13,300	12,790	12,290	11,830	11,350	10,860
Western Isles	13,580	13,190	12,720	11,800	11,030	10,410	9,810	9,250
N and W Highlands	39,210	38,630	37,800	35,740	33,840	32,080	30,220	28,400
S and E Highlands	20,600	20,350	19,970	18,990	18,110	17,270	16,390	15,510
Argyll and Bute	42,440	41,510	40,330	37,680	35,380	33,340	31,340	29,530
Southern Uplands	8,270	8,090	7,870	7,360	6,930	6,530	6,130	5,780
<b>SPA</b>	<b>137,540</b>	<b>135,180</b>	<b>132,000</b>	<b>124,360</b>	<b>117,580</b>	<b>111,470</b>	<b>105,240</b>	<b>99,350</b>

Note: all figures are rounded to the nearest 10 persons. Sub-region totals may not sum to the SPA total due to rounding.

Figure 3 [Projected population of the SPA and its sub-regions, 2011-2046](#)

According to these initial projections, Scottish SPAs will lose more than a quarter of their population by 2046. This projection is well aligned with NRS data indicating a general declining population trend. The most affected population group will be the working age population that is estimated to decrease by 33% by 2046, while the presence of children and the elderly population will decline by approximately 20%, resulting in higher dependency ratios of working vs retired/inactive people (100 working age individuals per 74 inactive/retired individuals).

These projections call for a more nuanced approach to these challenges. While the inception of the Population Programme by the Scottish Government is a clear step forward in this process, it still leaves room for the development of a more inclusive and diversified strategy that will acknowledge geographical, population, landscape, community, and infrastructural diversity among urban, accessible rural and remote rural areas in Scotland.

## 1.2 Rural visa pilot

One of the potential solutions is the introduction of the Rural Visa Pilot Programme. The Expert Advisory Group on Population and Migration identified three possible models for a rural pilot:



### **Expanding Skilled Worker route**

- This would involve relaxing conditions for the Skilled Worker route in the new UK immigration system, specifically for employers in designated areas. This could potentially be done through a bespoke 'Shortage Occupation List' for remote and rural areas.

### **Scottish Visa**

- This would build on the Scottish Government's proposal for a Scottish Visa as set out in the January 2020 migration paper but aimed specifically at designated areas. Instead of entrants being identified by employers, it would involve a points-based system, which could prioritise targeted characteristics.

### **Remote and Rural Partnership Scheme**

- Modelled on the Canadian Atlantic Pilot scheme, this would be an employment-based scheme but as part of a wider partnership between local authorities, employers, public services, and the voluntary sector. Stakeholders would play a more active role in identifying which types of areas and employers would benefit most from the scheme and would be engaged in delivering an integration plan'.

The introduction of the Rural Visa Pilot Programme could potentially be beneficial for compensating for the loss of population in rural areas, but there are challenges (e.g. minimal length of stay vs minimal time for full integration in the community; community vs migrant fit, the community's background and nature, available infrastructure and services, etc.). These challenges potentially reduce the impact of any programme, regardless of whether the migration movements are local or international. The best approach would be to carefully develop a range of scenarios, account for rural diversity and the profiles of the incoming in-migrants, and explore, evaluate, and learn from other rural programmes and their outcomes prior to implementation.

## **2 Conclusion and Recommendations**

The Scottish Government has already started implementing a range of initiatives and actions across all four building blocks (family friendly, health, migration, and balance) to address population change in Scotland. The complex interplay of land, housing and migration in rural and island Scotland requires a well thought out, strategic and durable, but flexible, approach that acknowledges the diversity of landscapes and communities. Considering the extensiveness and multifaceted nature of population change and its implications, it would be insightful to evaluate the mobility patterns of local populations within the last two years (related to the Covid-19 pandemic) and attempt to evaluate the im/mobility drivers for those local populations.

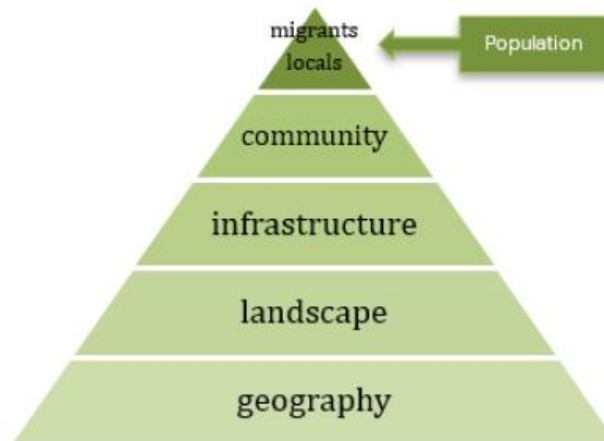


Figure 4 Factors that impact the mobility patterns of both local and newcomer population (access is not included in the figure).

While it could be presumed that the mobility drivers will resemble those commonly found in the literature, it would be interesting to evaluate if EU exit and the Covid-19 pandemic prompted increased social immobility amongst the working age population, and what the implications might be of these processes. Additionally, as a part of the Rural Visa Pilot (and general in-migration to rural areas) it would be worthwhile exploring the existing barriers for these movements. Rural literature discusses the capacity issues of rural areas, but this problem is rarely elaborated on a larger scale as rural areas are generally regarded as having valuable open and vacant spaces and a high quality of life.

The capacity, however, goes beyond these open green spaces, and includes infrastructural capacity (housing, services, amenities), human capacity (human capital, skills, knowledge to develop, draw, operate and maintain specific industries or landscapes), and permanently lost capacity (e.g. turning former amenities or services into residential areas). These factors shape rural areas and their populations and have the potential to appeal to or deter potential migrants from rural areas. In conclusion, the scope of the proposed initiatives is multifaceted and multi-structural, suggesting that the ongoing actions are setting a solid groundwork for the initiatives that are to follow in the coming years to tackle Scotland's (rural and island) demographic challenges.

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