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# Rural Living Project

## Briefing Paper Three

### Retaining Diverse Population in Rural Scotland

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## Executive Summary:

This briefing paper summarises the online workshop '*Rural Lives: Retaining Diverse Population in Rural Scotland*' that was organised in collaboration with Migration Policy Scotland. The key points that arise from discussion can be summarised as follow:

- Addressing population decline requires a real **need to work across policy areas**, but also to bring together national and local government, local stakeholders, and community to recognise the sort of insights that research and community expertise and insights can bring not only at local or Scottish levels, but also learning from international experiences and comparisons
- Policy and/or practical initiatives supporting retaining diverse populations in rural context should equally focus on **the development of rural assets** including sustainable transport, education, housing, and infrastructure (broadband) but also community and social relations. These social 'assets' in rural, play important role in creating anchors in rural places and support a sense of belonging
- Developing policies and/or practices addressing population decline in rural needs to ensure that people and institutions are listening to and can gain from each other's insights. Such approach however requires **greater investment in community capacity building** to ensure communities have resources to take ownership of the policy and practice development and implementation

## Introduction:

Scotland is facing a number of long terms demographic challenges related to an aging population, youth outmigration, declining birth rate, uncertain net migration, and spatial population imbalance ([Scotland's Population Strategy, 2021](#)). However, the role of migration and the complex reasons why people move to, stay in, or return to rural places are not always foregrounded in discussions on rural depopulation. The online workshop held on 30th September, organised in collaboration with [Migration Policy Scotland](#), brought together over 75 participants ranging from local authorities, regional development agencies, academics, and a wide variety of local, regional, and national organisations working on and with rural communities, to discuss the issue of population decline in rural Scotland and explore their relevance for policy and practice.

## Expert Panel Discussion:

The event started with a panel of experts discussion including Mike Andrews and Ben Jones, from the Scottish Government population team, Ruth Wilson and Jonathan Hopkins from the [James Hutton Institute](#) and Catherine MacNeil from [Highlands and Islands Enterprise](#), and [Emilia Pietka-Nykaza](#) from the University of West of Scotland that provided more context around current policy concerns and priorities regarding rural populations decline with particular focus on challenges in attracting and retaining rural populations.

- The recording of the expert panel presentations can be accessed via the link provided [https://youtu.be/ 9mxS1BVUcQ](https://youtu.be/9mxS1BVUcQ)
- The Panel presentation can be accessed via the link provided [here](#)

Following the panel of experts, the event move on to include a workshop discussion where participants based on their own work, expertise, or lived experiences, discussed ideas for policy and/or practical initiatives that could help support rural communities to retain diverse populations.

## Summary of key points of the workshop discussion:

*How and what policy and/or practical initiatives can support rural communities to retain diverse populations?*

### **Holistic and interconnected approaches supporting retaining rural communities are needed**

Population decline creates complex and interconnected economic and social challenges that require more holistic responses that move away from binary approaches (e.g. urban-rural; permanent – temporary migration, staying in – moving out), or the focus on particular rural sectors (e.g. agricultural and land use), but instead recognises and captures complexities of rural living. Supporting retention of the rural population, therefore, requires a more interconnected and cohesive rural movement that applies cross-cutting approaches and corresponds with existing policy frameworks including National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4), Scotland’s National Strategy for Economic Transformation, or Land Use Strategy.

### **Access to diverse rural assets in rural can support retention and return to rural places**

While there is wide recognition of the need for access to sustainable housing, transport, infrastructure (broadband), and education to support population retention in rural places, the role of social assets in forms of social and community networks in rural should also be recognised and supported. This is because social and community networks in rural provide valuable instrumental support, assistance, and provision of welfare services in rural contexts that support the development of a sense of belonging and general well-being and as result may support retention or return to rural places. Therefore policies supporting the retention of the rural population should also recognise the role of community cohesion and a sense of belonging in supporting staying in or returning to rural places

### **Supporting community ownership and engagement is a key condition for developing policies and/or practices addressing population decline in rural**

Supporting community ownership and engagement is a key condition for the process of decision making and policy and /or practice development in rural. Such approach, however, requires greater investment and support in capacity building among community groups in rural Scotland to ensure community groups have resources to engage in and take ownership of policy development and implementations.

Community engagement activities however should also ensure that social and economic diversities within the rural communities (e.g. ethnicity, social class, gender, occupation, residency) are reflected and included in community development work.

### **Good practices and international examples**

Scotland’s demographic challenges in the rural context are not unique, with a number of western regions in Europe but also Canada, and Japan facing population decline, outmigration of young people, and low birth rate in rural places. Scotland therefore can learn from good practices and international examples to address population decline in rural regions.