

Review and Update on NW2045 Vision: Call to Action 2025

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Completed: 3 April 2025

Published: 18 June 2025

Amendments: 24 June 2025

Table of contents

Table of contents	2
Review and Update on NW2045 Vision: call to action 2025	3
Information on figures, geography and sources	4
About NorthWest2045	5
Introduction	6
Defining depopulation	8
The impact of depopulation in Coigach and North West Sutherland	10
Young people, education and childcare:	11
Health and wellbeing	16
Social care	18
Transport	19
Housing and land	21
The local economy	27
Poverty and the cost of living	35
The case for action	38
Environment	39
Biodiversity	39
Carbon sequestration	39
Renewable energy	40
Community benefit from renewables development	41
Scenery and tourism	42
Science	44
History	45
Language and cultural heritage	46
Policy context	48
National action	50
Policy design	50
Public spending	52
Economic growth	54
Connectivity and collaboration with, capacity and resilience within rural communities	56

Review and Update on NW2045 Vision: call to action

2025

This report has been produced with funding from Scottish Government's Addressing Depopulation Fund, and the Community Regeneration Fund. It was first conceived as an *"Addressing Depopulation Action Plan"*, with the aim of articulating the next steps required in order to translate the NorthWest 2045 (NW2045) [Community Vision](#), published in 2021, into action.

It's only been four years since the vision was published, but already a lot has changed. The most recent Scottish Census showed the deepening of worrying demographic trends. At a national level, 2021 – 2024 were characterised by high inflation and low economic growth, the impacts of the subsequent cost of living crisis uniquely felt in the rural context of Coigach and North West Sutherland. Closer to home, recent months saw the decision to mothball the Sutherland Spaceport development, thwarting efforts to develop much needed housing, local jobs and infrastructure.

The years since the vision have also seen positive developments. Community housing initiatives across Coigach and North West Sutherland have taken major steps forward. The coming years will see community led housing developments create up to seventy new homes for local people. Development trusts, landowners, eNGOs and local communities continue to pursue a range of initiatives towards community and economic development. The number of assets in community ownership in the area has continued to grow, with the Badentarbat estate entering community ownership being a significant recent development. At a local and regional level, there is an abundance of will, energy and inventiveness for solving the issues faced by our area.

Population issues are coming higher and higher up the agenda at a regional and national level. Scottish Government published an Addressing Depopulation Action Plan in 2024 and population is becoming an increasingly important theme across Highland Council policy and delivery. There are further opportunities on the horizon, through continuing agendas in relation to land reform, community wealth building, emerging natural capital markets, and renewables development.

That same horizon also contains huge challenges, which in many ways start and end with population. The starting point for this document was in compiling an up-to-date, detailed and joined up understanding of those challenges – the current state of affairs in Coigach and North West Sutherland, and information on the huge range of actions already being undertaken locally to alleviate some of these key issues and work towards a more positive future.

What compiling this information has made abundantly clear, is that the challenges the area faces are systemic in nature, and beyond redress by local action alone. The next steps towards addressing the chronic depopulation our area is experiencing can only be enabled by change in approach to the issue at a national level, informed and guided by local knowledge and experience.

Therefore, the resulting document is not an action plan in that it does not outline further actions requiring to be taken at a local or regional level. Instead, through drawing together existing and newly commissioned analysis and research, relevant work by public authorities, academics and public bodies, we've sought to provide the widest possible view on the fundamental drivers of the challenges we face.

We've also sought to provide a call to action. Solutions to the challenges outlined in this report cannot be achieved by national government, public authorities or local communities alone. Systemic action to tackle systemic problems is absolutely required, but so too are greater than ever levels of collaboration, partnership and investment if there is to be any hope of achieving meaningful progress towards turning the tide on depopulation.

This paper concludes with some early indications as to possible next steps towards transformational change. Now and in future, NorthWest2045 will continue to work to develop and represent a detailed local view on these high level issues, and ensure that community voice drives and remains at the heart of any and all discussions and decisions relating to the future of our area.

Information on figures, geography and sources

As much as possible, figures, research and analysis used in this paper reflect the reality of the NorthWest 2045 local area. This has primarily been achieved through sources gathered at Scottish Government Data Zone geographies.

The NorthWest 2045 area - Coigach and North West Sutherland consists of seven Community Council areas, which map to those geographies as outlined below:

Data Zone name	Data Zone code	Community Council area(s)
Ross and Cromarty North West - 04	S01010693	Coigach
Sutherland North and West - 02	S01010811	Tongue Bettyhill, Strathnaver and Altnaharra
Sutherland North and West - 03	S01010812	Durness
Sutherland North and West - 04	S01010813	Assynt
Sutherland North and West - 05	S01010814	Scourie
Sutherland North and West - 06	S01010815	Kinlochbervie

Further information about Data Zone geographies can be found [here](#)

Further information about Community Council areas can be found [here](#)

The terms NorthWest2045 Area, NW2045 Area, Local Area and Coigach and North West Sutherland are used interchangeably. Please note that all these terms refer to the same geography as outlined above.

Some sources are only available at larger geographical areas. Information and analysis relating to Highland Council region, the Scottish parliamentary constituency of Caithness, Sutherland and Ross, the UK parliamentary constituency of Caithness and Sutherland and the historic county area of Sutherland, are also referenced.

Context in terms of these sources' relation to the local area is provided throughout.

Sources are outlined/linked at the bottom of each page. These links are up-to-date as of 25 March 2025.

About NorthWest2045

NorthWest 2045 is

- A network open to those in North West Sutherland and Coigach interested in working towards a sustainable, repopulated rural economy and resilient, thriving communities,
- its activities are undertaken with the aim of working towards (and updating) the future articulated in the [NW2045's 2021 community led vision](#)

It seeks to:

- Provide a collective voice on issues and areas of consensus across the region,
- Undertake policy, advocacy and research work in relation to those cross-cutting issues,
- Take up specific projects and initiatives crucial to the area's future but not being worked on by other groups/organisations,
- Act as a network, enabling information sharing and collaboration between different groups and organisations in the area.

At its heart, the Northwest 2045 project is a partnership, of: Community groups; local development trusts; statutory bodies; charities and trusts, local government, and community, private and eNGO landowners between Coigach and Bettyhill.

NW2045 also hosts one of five [Regional Land Use Partnerships](#) - a Scottish Government funded initiative developing new approaches to stakeholder collaboration on land use – addressing emerging natural capital markets, climate change and biodiversity loss. Notably, the NW2045 RLUP is the only pilot not held within an institutional structure (such as a National Park); it is community-led, and work to-date has focused on facilitating collaboration between local and national government, communities, crofters, landowners, land managers, and wider stakeholders.

The project has produced learnings on the different stakeholders and interests in land and land use in our region, as well as identifying areas of opportunity to deliver multiple benefits through specific land use change projects. This learning is influencing the development of land use policy at a national level, as well as feeding into the creation of a Regional Land Use Framework for the NW2045 area.

Since mid-2024, NW2045 has undertaken a period of internal development, to create a mechanism that can meaningfully facilitate local communities to become deeply and consistently involved in regional and national conversations relating to the future of our area and others like it. From spring 2025, the work of our team will be overseen and directed by a community steering group composed of seven members, each representing a community council area within Coigach and North West Sutherland.

Our intention is that this way of working will provide us with a foundation upon which to advocate for much needed change at a national level, connecting local knowledge with policy and decision makers across the range of organisations, portfolios and policy areas that affect life in the area now, and our prospects for the future. This document also provides the foundation for this work.

Introduction

The NorthWest 2045 project is based in Coigach and North West Sutherland, a large geographical area of over 2,000km²¹. The area represents 2-3% percent of Scotland's total landmass.²

Our local area is home to 3,225 people³, around 0.058% of Scotland's population⁴. With 1.6 people per km²⁵, this is one of the areas of lowest population density in mainland Scotland, and indeed in Europe – Lapland in Finland is more densely populated, at 1.98 people per km²⁶. For comparison closer to home, Edinburgh, with a population density of 1,981.25 people per km²⁷, is 7.6 times smaller⁸, but home to 163 times as many people⁹.

In 2019, NatureScot carried out a Landscape Character Assessment of Sutherland, and neighbouring Caithness, and found the following in terms of our population:

*The peripheral location of Caithness and Sutherland on the very northern edge of mainland UK is challenging for human subsistence. This has demanded and resulted in an extremely determined and resourceful population both in the past, and in the present*¹⁰.

For those living and working in the area, determination and resourcefulness is part of day-to-day life. Locally this is known as 'Strategic living'. Over centuries, our communities continued to adapt, survive, and by some measures, at some points in our history, thrive. But since the beginning of the 20th century, our area has experienced the growing need to adapt to falling population numbers, which have now reduced by around 65% since 1900¹¹, representing a population loss of around 2% per year.

¹ [SLR Consulting \(2022\) - NW2045: Natural Capital Assessment](#) defines NW2045 geographical area

² [Scotland Info Guide](#) - Scotland's total geographical area is 78,789 sq km

³ [National Records of Scotland \(2024\) - Small Area population Estimates at Mid-2022 by single year of age](#)

⁴ [National Records of Scotland \(2024\) - Small Area population Estimates at Mid-2022 by single year of age](#) Scotland's total population is 5,447,000

⁵ Population of local area ÷ landmass of local area

⁶ [Lapland Above Ordinary – Living in Lapland FAQ](#)

⁷ [National Records of Scotland \(2024\) - Small Area population Estimates at Mid-2022 by single year of age](#) and [Urban Logistics as an on-Demand Service – Edinburgh Factsheet Baseline and City Profile](#)

⁸ [Urban Logistics as an on-Demand Service – Edinburgh Factsheet Baseline and City Profile](#) and [SLR Consulting \(2022\) - NW2045: Natural Capital Assessment](#)

⁹ [National Records of Scotland \(2024\) - Small Area population Estimates at Mid-2022 by single year of age](#) comparison between Local Area and Edinburgh

¹⁰ P10: [NatureScot \(2019\) - Landscape Character Assessment Review](#)

¹¹ Analysis by Highland Council Repopulation Coordinator of historic census data for the parishes of Farr, Tongue, Durness, Eddrachillis & Assynt

In historic terms, the creeping effect of this trend is not necessarily that easy to identify. Small annual outflows of people are not necessarily immediately noticeable; neither are their mutually reinforcing social and economic causes and consequences.

Indeed, of his first visit to Coigach in 1955, leading folklorist and ethnologist Calum Maclean remarked:

My friend, Sandy Folkarde, and I arrived in Achiltibuie late one dark Friday evening in autumn. We had never been there before, and we knew no one. We left the following Tuesday and, in the interval, had got to know practically everyone in the place. But what a grand, gay, lively little community there was there! There were quite a number of young people too, in fact a large number for so remote a district ¹².

Twenty-two years later, the-then Highland Regional Council's local plan for North West Sutherland also painted a mixed yet positive picture:

Overall population stands at approximately 1,850 people. This level was maintained between 1971-81, although important spatial and structural changes took place during that period. In general, the southern and costal parts of North West Sutherland have tended to gain population, with corresponding losses in the north and landward margins. The underlying trends in terms of population structure are more favourable, with a significant increase in the proportion of young adults for the area as a whole. This reflects improving job opportunities and enhances the area's capability to regenerate its own population ¹³.

n.b. the geographical area covered by the 1987 plan is considerably smaller than outlined definition of Coigach and North West Sutherland hence apparent variation in population figure.

The picture painted by Mclean in 1955 and Highland Councillors in 1987 has not endured. In the intervening years, our population has changed drastically with number declining and average ages rising - driving and further reinforcing a cycle of economic, social, and cultural decline.

Recent analysis commissioned by NW2045 from BiGGAR Economics tells us that our population has fallen by a further 8.8% since 2001, to a historic low of 3,225 ¹⁴. That headline figure belies more worrying trends still. In the same period, the number of young people (age 0-15) in the area has fallen by 47%, while our working-age population has also fallen. The only demographic to have seen an increase is those aged 65 and over, which has done so by more than one third ¹⁵.

Despite concerted, ongoing efforts and action by a range of parties, there is no understatement in our consultants' conclusion that: *Coigach and North West Sutherland (the Local Area) is locked in a spiral of social and economic decline so serious and so far advanced that it is not an exaggeration to describe it as an existential crisis. The challenges are so severe and so far*

¹² Calum MacLean (1959) - The Highlands

¹³ P5: [Highland Regional Council \(1987\) - North West Sutherland Local Plan](#)

¹⁴ P6: [BiGGAR Economics \(2025\) - NW2045: Socio-Economic Profile](#)

¹⁵ P7: [BiGGAR Economics \(2025\) - NW2045: Socio-Economic Profile](#)

advanced that even under the most optimistic assumptions local action alone is only likely to delay the inevitable. It could help but is unlikely to change the trajectory ¹⁶.

The challenges we face are great, but so are our communities' appetite to take action, to secure a positive future as outlined in the NW2045 2021 Community Vision:

- 1) A place that is attractive for young people and families to live and work,
- 2) A model for a new diverse and sustainable rural economy,
- 3) A place where our communities can determine their own prospects¹⁷

There's no doubting BiGGAR Economics' further conclusion, that: *Coigach and North West Sutherland are facing an existential crisis, but the situation is not irreversible. The area has natural strengths and existing competitive advantages that could provide the basis for renewal. Doing this will require concerted national action.* ¹⁸

This paper seeks to articulate the NorthWest 2045 view on the future of that national action. It begins by defining our understanding of depopulation and providing a detailed overview on its impact at local level, and local actions being taken to mitigate these impacts. It goes on to summarise the positives – how despite challenges, in many aspects Coigach and North West Sutherland punch well above their weight in terms of contributing to the nation's fortunes. Then it examines the national picture, in terms of policy and delivery, concluding with an articulation of next steps required at this level in order to towards a more positive future.

N.b. detail given in terms of local interventions on the various areas outlined is not exhaustive – there is undoubtedly more happening than has been captured in this report.

Defining depopulation

Solutions to the depopulation we're experiencing in Coigach and North West Sutherland could be found by answering a set of easily understood questions - what is preventing people from being born here, from staying here, from moving back here, or moving here for the first time?

Of course, answers to these questions are anything but straightforward, and we are far from the only ones asking them - as work to arrest declining populations in rural areas continues in other parts of Scotland, the UK, Europe and beyond.

We know that depopulation does not occur in isolation. In our local area, ongoing reduction in the number of residents is occurring alongside a decline across a range of economic, social and cultural measures, closures of local schools, increasing difficulties in accessing childcare, health and social care, transport and housing being notable examples.

¹⁶ P2: [BiGGAR Economics \(2025\) - NW2045: Opportunities and Potential Development Models](#)

¹⁷ P3: [NorthWest 2045 \(2021\) - Community Vision](#)

¹⁸ P1: [BiGGAR Economics \(2025\) - NW2045: Opportunities and Potential Development Models](#)

It is vital to understand the interrelation between those falling population numbers, and that wider decline. To do so, it is necessary to make a key distinction, essentially as to whether depopulation is a cause, or an effect.

A report commissioned in 2018 by Scottish Government from the James Hutton Institute takes the former view: *The Sparsely Populated Areas (SPA) of Scotland have a demographic legacy which, in the absence of intervention, will result in decades of population decline, and shrinkage of its working age population, on a scale which implies serious challenges for economic development, and consequences for its landscape and ecology which are poorly understood.*”¹⁹

While a 2017 report published by The European Observation Network for Territorial Development and Cohesion (ESPON) found that *depopulation is the symptom rather than the cause of shrinkage which results from a complex ‘vicious circle’ of interrelated economic and social factors, presenting acute challenges for regional development and governance*²⁰.

The answer to this question of cause or effect is important as it points to how and where we might begin working towards a better future. Is the first step attracting more people to live in the area, therefore arresting that wider economic, social and cultural decline? Or does that ‘vicious cycle’ need to be understood, and its causes addressed, in order to arrest falling population numbers, and make the area a more attractive place to live and work? Our experience points toward the latter view. We know that it is not lack of desire to be here that prevents people from being born here, from staying here, from moving back here, or moving here for the first time.

Attitudinal research on this topic specific to the local area is limited and would benefit from further expansion. But existing studies covering Highland region support this conclusion. In 2018, Highlands and Islands Enterprise produced a piece of work examining the changing attitudes and aspirations of young people aged between 15 and 30, in relation to living in the Highlands and Islands. This found that in the context of net outflows of young people, across the Highlands and Islands more young people wanted to stay than leave, but that depended upon critical factors such as decent jobs with prospects, having somewhere nice and affordable to stay, and digital connectivity²¹.

The existence of the NW2045 project, as well as the huge ongoing efforts of our partners and stakeholders - those working towards a better future through community, economic and environmental regeneration are further testament to this fact. So too is the presence of rural mainland population issues on the policy agendas of local and national Government. If our declining population were simply a lack of desire to live in the area, this would not be the case.

¹⁹ P1: [James Hutton Institute \(2018\) - Demographic Change in Remote Areas](#)

²⁰ P3: [ESPON \(2017\) - Shrinking Rural Regions in Europe](#)

²¹ [Highlands and Islands Enterprise \(2018\) - Young People and the Highlands and Islands: Maximising Opportunities](#)

Our population issues are the result of a complex set of social and economic factors - symptoms of a wider social economic and cultural decline. These factors create circumstances that make it impossible for people to be born, stay, or move back.

The impact of depopulation in Coigach and North West Sutherland

A limitation of the current lens of looking at depopulation is that it focuses on the people *not* living in our area. In policy terms it creates a disconnection in thinking between the issue of falling population numbers, and the broad range of policy areas and public service provision that impact on people still living in the area.

In a policy paper for the Welsh Centre for Public Policy, Rebecca Kay Senior Researcher at Migration Policy Scotland wrote:

Population ageing and decline pose significant challenges because they bring with them mutually reinforcing economic, social, and cultural consequences. A reduced working age population impacts on labour supply with knock- on effects for employers and the wider economic viability of an area. If local businesses close or relocate, they take with them employment opportunities for the remaining population.

Labour shortages affect public services, vital to supporting an ageing population. The deterioration of local services, especially if accompanied by loss of commercial and leisure facilities, may influence the decisions of younger people and families to leave. The interconnectedness of these impacts can create a negative spiral effect (EAG, 2021). As people and businesses leave an area, it becomes increasingly difficult either to retain existing residents or to attract potential newcomers ²².

The above was written with rural Wales in mind, but rings entirely true for Coigach and North West Sutherland. All the evidence – anecdotal, lived and academic – tells us that the spiral effect that Kay describes is now well underway.

The latest figures make this clear in terms of population loss – those *not* resident in the area. But what is the effect of depopulation and this negative spiral on those who are?

In the starkest of terms, the effect of depopulation on existing/remaining communities is outlined in a report by the Scottish Human Rights Commission (SHRC), published in November last year. The paper examines the state of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the Highlands and Islands. In creating the report, researchers consulted the lived experience of residents across the Highlands and Islands, including local communities of Kinlochbervie, Tongue and Lochinver.

Key findings are as follows:

²² P1: [Wales Centre for Public Policy \(2023\) - Tackling rural depopulation](#)

- *There are significant challenges in the current enjoyment of economic, social, and cultural rights for people in the Highlands and Islands;*
- *Evidence of apparent regression or deterioration of rights across the Highlands and Islands;*
- ***Across all rights examined, there is not a single human right that meets all the conditions of adequacy under international law.***²³

These findings are supplemented by analysis undertaken by BiGGAR Economics, that the local area has higher levels of deprivation than Highland and Scotland as a whole, with local communities within falling within the 2nd and 3rd most deprived quintiles²⁴.

These measurements - the Human Rights Framework, and Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) - are about the here and now; the health of communities, the local economy, public services and living standards. They are a hugely concerning snapshot in a period of decline, as the SHRC report goes on to highlight:

*Another area of concern is the apparent regression or deterioration of rights across the Highlands and Islands, as reported by rights-holders. This is exacerbated by decisions to reduce budgets or indeed the complete elimination of previously existing services, without sufficient mitigating measures or consideration of the impact on human rights*²⁵.

The evidence is clear, that the negative spiral; vicious circle of population decline, brings with it a profound impact, increasing challenges for remaining, fragile communities. In this context, our argument that understanding depopulation, and taking steps to address it must begin with addressing the drivers of that vicious cycle that impact those already living in the region becomes only more urgent.

Sustainable population growth is essential for our long-term future, but can only be achieved by foundational work to address economic social and cultural outcomes in Coigach and North West Sutherland in the present.

Young people, education and childcare:

In analysis commissioned to inform this report, BiGGAR Economics outline worrying future:

*Over the past two decades the number of children living in the Local Area has already fallen by half. If current trends continue then by 2045 older people will make up 60% of the population and children will have become vanishingly scarce. Unless something changes radically in the next few years, the long-term prospects for human communities in the area seem bleak*²⁶.

There are seven primary schools with catchment areas entirely or partially in the local area. Coigach and North West Sutherland is home to one high school, at Kinlochbervie, with the

²³ P6: [Scottish Human Rights Commission \(2024\) - Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the Highlands and Islands](#)

²⁴ P15: [BiGGAR Economics \(2025\) - NW2045: Socio-Economic Profile](#)

²⁵ P6: [Scottish Human Rights Commission \(2024\) - Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the Highlands and Islands](#)

²⁶ P1: [BiGGAR Economics \(2025\) - NW2045: Opportunities and Potential Development Models](#)

catchment areas of Farr and Ullapool High Schools covering young people at the furthest North and South ends of the area.

	2009 roll	2023 roll	% change
School			
Achiltibuie Primary	25	12	-52%
Lochinver Primary	47	29	-38%
Scourie Primary	25	22	-12%
Kinlochbervie Primary	29	19	-34%
Durness Primary	23	2	-91%
Tongue Primary	26	27	+4%
Farr Primary	24	28	+17%
Total Primary students	199	139	-30%
Ullapool High	250	173	-31%
Kinlochbervie High	65	27	-58%
Farr High	95	68	-28%
Total secondary students	410	268	-35%
Total all students	580	388	-33%

²⁷

In the last 14 years (date of earliest available data), all but two primary schools have seen significant falls in their rolls, of between 12 and 91%. The variance shows the differences in population shift in each of our communities. The net decline in primary age pupils of 30% in Coigach and North West Sutherland is of huge concern.

All high schools have seen a noticeable fall in numbers too, especially Kinlochbervie, who's roll has dropped by more than half over the period. The school was built in 1995 to accommodate 182 students and currently operates at 17% of that capacity ²⁸.

The number of schools listed above has fallen by four in recent decades.

- In 1996 Drumbeg primary school closed, becoming part of the catchment area of Stoer and then Lochinver primary school.
- In 2016, Achfary primary school, which had been mothballed since 2012 closed, re-assigning the school's catchment area to that of Scourie Primary School.
- In 2019, Altnaharra primary closed, the school's catchment area was then divided between Tongue, Farr, and Lairg Primary Schools.
- And in 2020, Stoer primary school closed, having been mothballed since 2016, its catchment area reallocated to Lochinver Primary School.

²⁷ [Education Scotland - Schools Information Dashboard](#)

²⁸ [Highland Council \(2022\) - School Roll Forecast - Kinlochbervie High School](#)

Especially for our primary schools, many of which are operating far below their building's capacity, their survival might be determined by decisions made by one or two families. Experience tells us that once a facility is mothballed and staff relocated, it can be extremely challenging to bring it back in to use.

In the villages no longer home to primary schools, a young person would now be faced with between 40-90mins of travel per day in order to attend the nearest school. The potential impact of this amount of travel on young people, and the subsequent effect on communities can be profound. It's easy to understand how this amount of travel might be considered impossible by families with primary-age children, and therefore how parts of the area at the edges of school catchment areas might be considered un-liveable.

The greatest impact of shrinking school rolls is on young people. In Highland, schools' funding is allocated through the Devolved School Management (DSM) scheme. Revenue funding is allocated on a combination of a base amount plus per head funding. Although smaller schools receive more per head, it remains the case that shrinking school rolls translate directly in to shrinking school budgets ²⁹. Dedicated, capable teachers and education staff are in an ongoing position of having to do more with less, with potential impacts for all aspects of a young person's learning experience ³⁰.

Related to the above, the recruitment and retention of education staff has been a long running issue in the area, and has been the subject of coverage in the national media ³¹.

For example, following the retirement of a long-serving head teacher, Achiltibuie Primary School (now part of a cluster arrangement with Lochinver Primary School) has had five head teachers in the last 10-12 years.

And in recent years Tongue primary school has been heavily reliant on probationary teachers to fill vacant positions. Following this period of ongoing uncertainty in this regard the school has recruited two permanent teachers.

These are just two of a number of anecdotal examples of the difficulties associated with recruitment and retention in rural education settings.

A number of local organisations engage with local schools in a range of ways, with the aim of enriching young people's educational experiences.

For example, as part of [a long term project to enable people to Access, Connect and Take part in the heritage of the North West Highlands Geopark](#), the Geopark have been working closely with schools, to support the curriculum and embed local examples into history, art, geography, and science teaching, also developing an out of school 'Young Geologists Club', engaging and upskilling young people in their world-class landscape.

²⁹ [Highland Council \(2023\) - Devolved School Management Scheme](#)

³⁰ [The Herald \(2024\) - Highland parents say staff policies hurt rural schools](#)

³¹ [Scottish Daily Express \(2024\) - Parents fear for future as third attempt launched to find a headteacher for two of the UK's remotest schools](#)

The NW2045 RLUP ran as a Scottish Government pilot project until March 2024 and then moved into a further 3 year funded period. During this time the project has engaged with local schools, primarily via the North West School nursery to high school campus in Kinlochbervie. In developing the NW2045 natural capital approach the RLUP methodology has aimed to ensure that local people are informed about and have agency in any decisions. The project worked with people in Kinlochbervie – and included the input of parents, Children and Young People - to develop a 1st Manifesto whereby to articulate the views, needs, hopes and ambitions at this locality level.

Strathnaver Museum engages with local schools along the North and West Coast as far south as Kinlochbervie, providing opportunities for young people to engage with local history and culture.

Primary and secondary school provision is only one part of the picture – childcare provision for young people pre-school age faces their own challenges. Scottish Government research on rural childcare provision in Argyll and Bute, Highland, Moray and the Scottish Borders points to a number of difficulties experienced in our area:

Fewer services, resulting in pressure on existing providers; sustaining provision in more remote settings with lower numbers of staff and children; a shortage of transport provision, including drop-off services and public transport; a shortage of suitable venues, with many shared with other groups; and difficulties recruiting staff ³².

In 2020, Scottish Government's Programme for Government set out a range of commitments in relation to childcare - universal entitlement to 1140 hours of free early learning and childcare, as well as increasing service provision for rural and remote communities. The Programme for Government also set out a commitment to look at wraparound care options, with the stated aim of giving families more choice, greater opportunities to work, and greater financial freedom.

³³

For 'very remote rural' areas such as Coigach and North West Sutherland, delivering on these commitments has proven challenging, particularly in relation to cost. As part of an ongoing redesign of Early Learning and Childcare (ELC), with the aim of delivering £500,000 in cost savings ³⁴, Highland Council have acknowledged:

There are 41 ELC settings in Highland with 8 or less children the majority of which are HC operated. Direct costs of HC provision ranges from £3.46 per hour to over £14 per hour. The higher end costs are linked to the provision of ELC in remote and rural communities, where typically only the Council operates ELC, based on local needs, and the significant costs of delivery arise ³⁵.

³² P38: [Scottish Government \(2021\) - Rural childcare provision, innovative models and the needs of agricultural families](#)

³³ P39: [Scottish Government \(2021\) - Rural childcare provision, innovative models and the needs of agricultural families](#)

³⁴ [Highland Council \(2025\) - Person Centred Solutions Portfolio Board Update: Early Learning & Childcare Progress](#)

³⁵ P7: [Highland Council \(2023\) - Early Learning and Childcare Redesign](#)

In 2024-15 there are seven council run ELC settings within the local area, six of which are operational. Of those six, five are attended by 8 or less children ³⁶. A welcome development in recent days is news that the seventh setting – in Durness – will reopen for the next school year.

Given both the huge financial pressures facing the Local Authority, and extremely low and fluctuating pupil numbers, the long term operational status of these ELC settings is far from secure. Last year, NorthWest 2045 set up a Childcare Working Group, in response to plans to mothball two local nurseries, in Kinlochbervie and Melvich.

The working group were motivated to take action for a number of reasons:

- Children attending an early years setting outwith their community has an immediate effect on that community and is likely to impact on the local primary school roll and the community thriving and surviving.
- Every child in Scotland has the same rights for services – not having access to early years provision is an infringement on their human rights.
- Gaps in the availability of ELC facilities are often filled by the local community – family and friends. Everyone's circumstances are different, therefore the ability to rely on this sort of informal support is not universal.

Although the efforts of the working group were successful, in terms of retaining these facilities for the short term, there is a critical need to work towards resilient sustainable, solutions to ELC provision within the local area.

This is understood by Highland Council, who with funding from Scottish Government's Addressing Depopulation Fund have been working with the NW2045 Childcare Working Group and a range of additional partners in order to explore alternative childcare solutions.

At the inception of this work, Chair of The Highland Council's Economy and Infrastructure Committee, Councillor Ken Gowans said: *A lack of access to and availability of high quality and affordable childcare is a key aspect of encouraging young families to stay and move to an area. This is a key challenge in the rural and remote areas which tend to have fewer children and less opportunity for childcare businesses to be financially viable. Families in these areas are more likely to need access to flexible childcare to accommodate non-standard seasonal work patterns; childcare before/after school, weekends and holidays; and they need to be very local to avoid long travel times and to avoid routes that can be disrupted in adverse weather. Part of the funding from the Scottish Government will be used to investigate potential new models to deliver childcare that meets the particular needs of rural communities in NW Sutherland. It is expected that models tuned to local needs could be replicated across other rural areas of the Highlands* ³⁷.

In recent months this work has taken three strands, as outlined below:

Rural Childcare Practitioner - a new childcare model which has the nurturing nature of a childminder, but also the ability to deliver childcare in a non-domestic setting, such as in the local village hall. Current legislation in Scotland does not allow for this hybrid model but there is

³⁶ [Highland Council - Early Learning and Childcare Providers in Highland](#)

³⁷ [Highland Council \(2024\) - Tackling Population Challenges in the Highlands](#)

significant interest to see if this role is viable and if it could be salaried/subsidised. Bryden Associates took on this feasibility work and produced a report with their findings, conclusions, evidence and rationale for change and recommendations.

Single Care Model (SCM) – led by CALA and looked at possible options for care provision across the age spectrum within a rural community where there have been difficulties with recruitment of staff within adult care as well as childcare. A Highland Working Group was formed to help support the identification of two pilot areas and how the model could potentially be delivered in Highland region; and a Regulatory Advisory Group at national level, brought together to establish the regulatory parameters within which a Single Care Model could be delivered and to get a SCM Pathfinder which could be taken forward into 2025/2026. International research was also undertaken, providing the opportunity to learn from other countries to understand how they have developed sustainable models in rural locations addressing recruitment difficulties, sparsity of population, changing demographics and depopulation challenges.

Subsidised Childminder feasibility – to explore the possibility of providing a subsidy to a rural childminder to bring their income up to the value of the Living Wage, in addition to ensuring a viable business which doesn't depend on the number of children in their care. This work has highlighted the challenges of recruiting childminders in the Northwest Highlands but, with no legal barriers, it is hoped that this business model could be piloted in the near future, and adapted to local needs.

Health and wellbeing

Existing research provides a degree of understanding of both health and wellbeing, and healthcare provision in larger geographical areas intersecting with Coigach and North West Sutherland. Although further research would be required to produce a more detailed picture for the local area, key findings of relevance are summarised here.

In 2023 NHS Highland's Public Health Intelligence team produced a health profile of Sutherland³⁸. Headline findings include:

- *Male and female life expectancy is higher in the partnership area than in Scotland. Long-term trends for increasing life expectancy have stalled in recent years. It is a significant concern that a sentinel measure of population health and social progress is not improving.*
- *Prescriptions for anxiety, depression or psychosis have increased over time.*
- *Common long-term conditions include cardiovascular diseases, cancers, neurological disorders, mental health disorders and musculoskeletal disorders. The prevalence of many conditions and the number of people with frailty are likely to increase as the number of older people increases.*

Analysis undertaken for NorthWest 2045 by BiGGAR Economics looked at wellbeing at a Highland region level using the wellbeing-adjusted Life Years (WELLBYs) scale. This analysis

³⁸ [NHS Highland \(2023\) - Sutherland Partnership Profile - Adult Health & Wellbeing](#)

finds that the average wellbeing in Highland is 620 WELLBYs/person, greater than the average across Scotland of 587 WELLBYs/person ³⁹.

However, when viewed in conjunction with a number of additional factors, BiGGAR also found that the socio-economic profile of the Local Area is likely to contribute to increased rates of loneliness ⁴⁰.

- *In Highland, 81% of the population never or almost never feel lonely, whilst 17% feel lonely some of the time, and 2% feel lonely most or all the time.*
- *Although these rates of loneliness are not as high as other parts of Scotland, loneliness rates tend to be higher for those living in small towns (21% feeling lonely some of the time and 4% most or all the time) and for single pensioners (28% feeling lonely some of the time and 5% most or all of the time).*
- *Given the characteristics and demographics of the Local Area, it is likely that loneliness is more prevalent across the Local Area.*

The Scottish Human Rights Commission's recent work highlights a number of pieces of qualitative evidence from residents in Sutherland and neighbouring Caithness ⁴¹:

- *For young people in Sutherland, face-to-face mental health services are virtually non-existent. Drop-in services are only available in Inverness, which is 2.5 to 3 hours away, and the waiting list for a mental health referral in Inverness is currently two years. In Tongue, the local school offers just three counselling appointments per week for a student population of 90 pupils, which is far from sufficient.*
- *In areas like north Sutherland, there are no dental services at all, with the nearest service located in Lairg. This has resulted in many people not visiting a dentist for 10-15 years.*
- *Sexual and reproductive health services were highlighted as a critical issue in areas such as Caithness, Sutherland, and Argyll and Bute.*
- *Of particular concern is the provision of maternity care and gynaecological services in Caithness and Sutherland. In 2016, a decision was made to downgrade the maternity provision at Wick hospital, requiring women to travel to Inverness for care. This raised concerns about the centralisation of healthcare services to Inverness, meaning that more than 14,000 patients per year now have to travel there for routine, emergent, and acute cases, with no risk assessments for patient safety.*
- *The current situation requires women in labour to travel up to four hours to Raigmore Hospital in Inverness, often relying on public transport if private transport is unavailable. For those in most areas of Sutherland, no public transport is available.*
- *Women surveyed by human rights defenders reported feeling unsafe, terrified by the journey due to night-time travel, the possibility of giving birth en route, adverse weather conditions, and the presence of deer on the roads. As a result, some women are choosing not to have more children or are moving out of the area to avoid giving birth at*

³⁹ P26: [BiGGAR Economics \(2025\) - NW2045: Socio-Economic Profile](#)

⁴⁰ P27: [BiGGAR Economics \(2025\) - NW2045: Socio-Economic Profile](#)

⁴¹ P51-57: [Scottish Human Rights Commission \(2024\) - Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the Highlands and Islands](#)

Raigmore. Additionally, in cases of premature birth, mothers are sometimes sent to Aberdeen, Glasgow, or Edinburgh, as Inverness lacks sufficient beds.

- *Testimonies highlighted that sexual health clinics for young people are an important concern, particularly in Sutherland and Caithness. According to human rights defenders, there is only one clinic available in Wick, with appointments offered just once a month via phone, which is often not answered. In Sutherland, the lack of public transport makes it difficult for young people to access sexual health clinics in Inverness, leading many to avoid seeking services due to fear of family stigma or reprisal, which is especially challenging for LGBT+ youth.*
- *Many people expressed frustration to the Commission about feeling unheard by authorities and that their dignity was not respected in the delivery of health services.*
- *This concern was particularly evident among women in Caithness and Sutherland, where there is a lack of sufficient support for maternity and gynaecological services.*
- *In Caithness and Sutherland, concerns were voiced about the high rates of induced births and C-sections. These interventions were often scheduled to manage the timing of births due to the long distances women had to travel. However, this has led to a high rate of emergency procedures, significantly affecting mothers' recovery, baby bonding, and overall health and wellbeing. This includes elevated infection rates, such as sepsis, and lower breastfeeding success rates*

Finally, analysis conducted by Highlands and Islands Enterprise in 2022 found that in Caithness and Sutherland, 34% of residents aged 16+ can't access mental health services ⁴²

Social care

In the context of our ageing population, the ability to meet an increasing demand for high quality social care has never been more important. Analysis by BiGGAR economics finds that:

The expected surge in the elderly population will create immense pressure on health and social care services. Demand for geriatric care, home care, and specialised medical facilities is likely to increase significantly, potentially exceeding the capacity of existing services. Recruiting and retaining qualified healthcare professionals in the area is also likely to become more difficult ⁴³.

Staff recruitment and retention is a critical issue. At present, Health and Social work employment are underrepresented in the local area, providing a clear indication of capacity issues currently being experienced ⁴⁴.

The Scottish Human Rights Commission found further anecdotal evidence to this point:

- *Areas such as Sutherland and Caithness were described as “social care deserts.”*
- *Care home closures in Ullapool and Tongue were noted, with the latter closing due to an absence of staff despite the area's elderly population requiring care. Additionally, some areas in Sutherland have no day care centres for older or disabled people* ⁴⁵.

⁴² P14: [Highlands and Islands Enterprise \(2022\) – My Life In the Highlands and Islands](#)

⁴³ P33: [BiGGAR Economics \(2025\) - NW2045: Socio-Economic Profile](#)

⁴⁴ P9: [BiGGAR Economics \(2025\) - NW2045: Socio-Economic Profile](#)

⁴⁵ P60: [Scottish Human Rights Commission \(2024\) - Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the Highlands and Islands](#)

Once again this is an area in which communities have acted in order to fill gaps in provision.

North Coast Connection: Formed in response to the closure of the local day care service in Tongue, a statutory service which had been operating five days a week at the Kyle Centre in Tongue for the previous 17 years. North Coast Connection took over the building as an asset transfer from The Highland Council and have a service level agreement with NHS Highland to run a community health and well-being hub based at the Kyle Centre. The charity now provide a full and varied program of events and services for the whole community.

Further positive progress to address this lack of provision can be found in plans for the new North Sutherland Health and Social Care Hub, a partnership between Highland Council, NHS Highland and Wildland Limited, which will bring together under one roof a new residential care facility, a GP surgery and an integrated care team. While the ambition here is extremely positive in terms of creating greater capacity to meet local health and social care needs, the reality is that the development is moving extremely slowly ⁴⁶. While private capital funding has been committed toward building the centre, a lack of ability to increase the quantum of public funding available for the centre's operation has been cited locally as a critical limiting factor.

These plans are all the more urgent given the 2023 closure of the NW2045 area's only residential care home facility - Calah Sona in Talmine, due to unsustainable staffing levels. This resulted not only in the loss of residential care home places, but also an essential car service, with the interim care at home service not meeting the needs of the area ⁴⁷.

Transport

The geographical dispersion of Coigach and North West Sutherland means that access to transportation is fundamental to almost every aspect of life.

In the Local Area, only 18% of residents live within 10km of their place of work, compared to 32% in Highland and 33% across Scotland. An additional 11% of residents in the Local Area must travel 30km or more to reach their workplace, nearly double the proportion of that in Highland and Scotland ⁴⁸.

People are heavily reliant on private cars as a primary mode of transport. Across the area, less than 1% of workers commute by bus, minibus, or coach, compared to 6% across Scotland ⁴⁹. In the most recent census, 86% of households in the NW2045 area reported owning at least one car, compared to 79% of Highland and 69% of Scotland ⁵⁰.

While greater reliance on car use in our area is perhaps inevitable to some degree, these large disparities contain a number of causes for concern.

⁴⁶ [Northern Times \(2024\) - NHS chiefs come under fire over delays to £10.5m north coast health hub at Tongue](#)

⁴⁷ [Northern Times \(2024\) - NHS chiefs come under fire over delays to £10.5m north coast health hub at Tongue](#)

⁴⁸ P22: [BiGGAR Economics \(2025\) - NW2045: Socio-Economic Profile](#)

⁴⁹ P23: [BiGGAR Economics \(2025\) - NW2045: Socio-Economic Profile](#)

⁵⁰ Scotland's Census (2022) - Table KS404SC

From an environmental perspective, recent work by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) found that:

While people understand the need to act on climate change by reducing car use, they feel limited in the options available to them. For years, rural communities in Scotland have faced transport challenges such as insufficient service access, limited travel options, and commercial hurdles for operators in remote and thinly populated areas. Consequently, people in rural Scotland are often left with no choice but to fall back on private vehicles ⁵¹.

That same report pointed to difficulties that those on low incomes will face when relying upon a car as their primary means of transportation.

In addition to fewer transport options, people in rural areas are at greater risk of transport poverty due to the ‘rural premium’ that remote communities face. The rural premium describes how goods and services are more expensive in rural areas, something that has been exacerbated by the cost of living crisis. Scotland’s National Transport Strategy suggests that these costs are due to larger distances and more expensive fuel costs in rural Scotland (Transport Scotland 2020a) ⁵².

Local knowledge tells us that for those on low incomes, the likelihood of being in a one-car-household is greater. In this situation, where one person works, the remainder of the household is stranded when the worker drives to work. This impacts especially on young families and households with caring responsibilities. These are both groups likely to make up poorer households

The IPPR report went on to outline that:

Due to the reduced access to services that people living in rural areas already face, those in transport poverty in rural areas face a significant barrier to access necessary services. The Scottish Affairs Committee (2024) found that these higher costs mean that standard cost of living support schemes did not provide adequate support for some remote Scottish Communities ⁵³.

A report prepared by Poverty Alliance and the Scottish Parliament Cross Party Group on Poverty found that: *For people living in rural Scotland, transport is the most significant additional cost compared to people living in urban areas, amounting to an additional £50 per week* ⁵⁴.

Evidence provided to the Westminster Scottish Affairs Committee by NHS Highland and the University of the Highlands and Islands found that older individuals in rural Scotland rely heavily on personal vehicles due to limited public transportation options. This reliance is particularly pronounced in remote areas where essential services are not within a 15-minute drive ⁵⁵.

⁵¹ [IPPR Scotland \(2024\) - Wheels of change: Promoting fair and green transport in rural Scotland](#)

⁵² [IPPR Scotland \(2024\) - Wheels of change: Promoting fair and green transport in rural Scotland](#)

⁵³ [IPPR Scotland \(2024\) - Wheels of change: Promoting fair and green transport in rural Scotland](#)

⁵⁴ [P3: Cross Party Group on Poverty \(2024\) - Inquiry into poverty in Rural Scotland](#)

⁵⁵ [Scottish Affairs Committee \(2023\) - Written evidence submitted by NHS Highland and University of the Highlands and Islands](#)

Therefore, our ageing population's continuing ability to drive is crucial for maintaining independence and accessing necessities.

At a local level, communities and private enterprise have taken a number of steps to address some of these issues

The Far North Bus is a small company running scheduled services across the far North of Scotland, including servicing a number of local school runs. Most importantly, the company offers a 'dial-a-bus' service, where users can book a journey in the part of the North-West coast where there is no public bus service.

Connect Assynt is a voluntary organisation based in Lochinver, which provides community transport in Assynt and the surrounding areas, getting people to local activities as well as beyond as well as helping people to connect with other local voluntary groups and statutory services.

Transport for Tongue Ltd (T4T) is a Community Transport organisation, formed as a result of a lack of public transport provision in the area, exacerbated by the withdrawal of the post bus passenger service. T4T began by providing a door to door service enabling those without transport to access essential local services and healthcare appointments.

Sutherland Resilience Initiative Community Cars The Sutherland Resilience Initiative is a not-for-profit company set up by Sutherland's six Highland councillors amid growing concerns about depopulation, with community surveys showed that a lack of transport to access services was a factor in the depopulation crisis. The SRI has provided two new electric cars to Sutherland communities for use primarily for health, education and employment purposes - taking local patients to hospital appointments, children after-school activities, and workers to their place of employment, but also for other activities.

Housing and land

Housing is frequently cited as a number one issue in terms of addressing population challenges in rural areas.

There is no understating the importance of addressing the housing issues facing our area, and others like it. As Community Land Scotland put it upon launching their *Right to Live* declaration: *Across Scotland young people are in danger of being cleared from their communities. The problem is often most acute in rural areas where a lack of affordable housing, transportation and economic issues are decimating communities and pushes many young people to move away to find a home* ⁵⁶.

The above rings absolutely true for Coigach and North West Sutherland, but it is important to understand that the situation does vary for the different communities within our area.

In terms of existing housing stock, analysis undertaken by Highland Council's Repopulation Coordinator for Northwest Sutherland and Coigach, Boyd Alexander, finds that average house

⁵⁶ [Community Land Scotland \(2024\) - Young people should have the right to live in the Community where they grew up](#)

prices vary across the area – coming in both below and above the national average, but trending upward (sometimes greatly above the national growth rate) over time ⁵⁷.

Key

Ross and Cromarty North West – 04 - Coigach
Sutherland North and West – 02 – Tongue, Bettyhill, Strathnaver and Altnaharra
Sutherland North and West – 03 - Durness
Sutherland North and West – 04 - Assynt
Sutherland North and West – 05 – Scourie
Sutherland North and West – 06 - Kinlochbervie
Highland
Scotland

2018		2023	
Location	Avg price	Location	Avg price
City of Edinburgh	£265,344	City of Edinburgh	£333,579
East Renfrewshire	£260,690	East Renfrewshire	£328,784
East Dunbartonshire	£242,806	East Lothian	£326,905
East Lothian	£239,613	Sutherland North and West - 04	£318,688
Ross and Cromarty North West - 04	£217,034	Ross and Cromarty North West - 04	£302,000
Midlothian	£216,467	East Dunbartonshire	£300,422
Aberdeenshire	£216,107	Midlothian	£292,239
Stirling	£201,165	Stirling	£261,876
Aberdeen City	£196,642	Perth and Kinross	£248,026
Perth and Kinross	£195,160	West Lothian	£237,744
Highland	£181,223	Sutherland North and West - 03	£232,500
Scotland	£178,568	Aberdeenshire	£231,798
Sutherland North and West - 05	£175,644	Highland	£228,368
West Lothian	£172,037	Scottish Borders	£221,185
Moray	£166,076	Scotland	£221,166
Argyll and Bute	£165,776	Argyll and Bute	£220,057
Angus	£165,407	Moray	£211,181
Shetland Islands	£165,245	Sutherland North and West - 02	£208,579
South Ayrshire	£163,193	Orkney Islands	£206,616

⁵⁷ [Registers of Scotland House Price Statistics 2018 and 2023](#)

Fife	£160,619	Fife	£205,107
Glasgow City	£159,236	Glasgow City	£203,755
Sutherland North and West - 04	£158,439	South Ayrshire	£202,517
South Lanarkshire	£155,107	South Lanarkshire	£195,871
Orkney Islands	£154,758	Shetland Islands	£191,821
Falkirk	£147,926	Angus	£187,714
Dumfries and Galloway	£147,650	Falkirk	£185,775
Clackmannanshire	£146,964	Clackmannanshire	£182,156
Renfrewshire	£144,056	Renfrewshire	£182,116
Dundee City	£138,745	Dumfries and Galloway	£181,385
Sutherland North and West - 03	£137,782	Aberdeen City	£178,942
North Lanarkshire	£137,505	Sutherland North and West - 05	£177,527
Inverclyde	£127,484	Sutherland North and West - 06	£168,750
East Ayrshire	£123,746	Na h-Eileanan Siar	£167,361
North Ayrshire	£121,581	North Lanarkshire	£165,628
West Dunbartonshire	£121,568	Dundee City	£163,849
Sutherland North and West - 02	£120,816	North Ayrshire	£151,035
Na h-Eileanan Siar	£111,959	East Ayrshire	£149,656
Sutherland North and West - 06	£98,996	West Dunbartonshire	£148,513
		Inverclyde	£134,666

Housing cost is only one part of the picture and must be considered alongside average local salaries to understand how affordable existing housing is for local people. Boyd's analysis shows that across most of the local area, less than half of households are able to afford the local average house price ⁵⁸.

Datazone	Area	% households able to afford average house price 2018
Sutherland North and West - 02	Tongue & Bettyhill	49%
Sutherland North and West - 03	Durness	42%
Sutherland North and West - 04	Kinlochbervie & Raey Forest	33%
Sutherland North and West - 05	Scourie & Stoer	31%
Sutherland North and West - 06	Lochinver & Elphin	55%
Ross and Cromarty North West - 04	Coigach	24%

⁵⁸ [Scottish Government Centre for Housing Market Analysis \(CHMA\) \(October 2020\)](#)

This is supported by 2025 analysis from BiGGAR economics, which found that house prices in the Local Area are 6.0× the median full-time salary, compared to 5.6× in Highland and 5.2× in Scotland ⁵⁹.

Considering that mortgage affordability rules limit borrowers to 3-5 times their annual salary ⁶⁰, it's clear our area faces greater housing affordability challenges than regional or national comparisons.

The question of what the primary drivers of the local housing market are, in terms of both availability and cost is complex and subject to some disagreement. But there is no escaping the fact that the local area contains a far greater proportion of properties either vacant or used as second homes, compared to regional and national averages.

According to 2023 Small Area Statistics on Households and Dwellings, against a national average of 1.66%, 20% of Scourie's housing stock is in use as a second home, while in Coigach, where average house prices are significantly above the national average, within touching distance of Central Edinburgh's property prices, 17% of existing houses are second homes. In Kinlochbervie, Tongue, Bettyhill, Strathnaver & Altnaharra, 10% of properties are vacant, against a national average of 3.26% ⁶¹.

Area	Occupied Dwellings %	Vacant Dwellings %	Second homes %
Coigach	74	9	17
Tongue, Bettyhill, Strathnaver and Altnaharra	79	10	11
Durness	79	8	13
Assynt	87	5	8
Scourie	72	8	20
Kinlochbervie	78	10	12
NW2045	78.17	8.33	13.50
Highland	92.87	4.38	1.67
National	95.94	3.26	1.66

With second homes and vacant dwellings making up such a disproportionate component of our housing stock, it is possible to conclude with a relative degree of confidence that this constrains availability of housing for use as primary dwellings. Although existing data does not provide the ability to draw absolute conclusions in terms of the impact of second and empty homes on average house prices, it is extremely likely that there is an interrelationship here.

⁵⁹ [P21: BiGGAR Economics \(2025\) - NW2045: Socio-Economic Profile](#)

⁶⁰ [Equifax - How much can I borrow for a mortgage?](#)

⁶¹ [Small Area Statistics on Households and Dwellings \(2023\)](#)

With the above challenges in relation to the existing housing market in mind, efforts to increase the area's housing stock are a key consideration. Historically, the number of new build completions in relation to existing housing stock has been extremely low. 2000-2023 saw 258 private new builds completed, at a mean rate of 10.75 per year ⁶². The same period saw 38 completions by housing associations – Albyn Housing and Community Housing Trust, at a mean rate of 5.43 per year ⁶³. Of course, figures relating to private builds do not tell us how these will be used – as primary or second homes.

In terms of new builds, land is a further key consideration – its availability and affordability. The following paragraphs describe the range of efforts taking place at a community level to progress small scale housing developments – i.e. multiple units on one site. Primarily on community and Council owned land.

However, it is worth noting that land can often be a key constraint in terms of enabling new-builds at an individual level. In some settlements such as Lochinver the potential area to build has been exhausted and is constrained by the lack of available suitable land (with regards to slope, elevation above sea level, and suitable ground conditions for building). Other settlements may have available flat land for building but are constrained by site designations (e.g. National Scenic Area), ownership or price. Again, research in this area is limited, so the following stems largely from anecdotal and local knowledge.

Much of the land in our area suitable for developing new builds on at an individual level is crofted, meaning for those outside of the crofting system, acquiring a site suitable for building a house on can be challenging. Limited supply will of course have a knock on impact in terms of price. The cost of building materials and construction in the Highlands is becoming significantly more than in Central Scotland, and with limited funding available for affordable housing, the price of building sites is a major factor.

For those able to acquire land suitable for development within the crofting system, historic titles can often bring with them issues relating to boundaries, site access and planning. These can be costly and time consuming to resolve. The above also proves to be a constraint in terms of buying and selling of older housing stock (which is often a more affordable prospect for local people). Once boundary issues for a piece of croft land or common grazing have been confirmed then Planning in Principle (PiP) approval is required before the Crofting Commission process of decrofting croft land or resumption of common grazing.

But as a result of concerted local efforts, the years ahead stand to see almost eighty new houses completed, for use as primary residences with a cumulative 65 units submitted planning applications and plans for a further 10 houses in Kinlochbervie ⁶⁴.

This is the result of a huge amount of work from Local Government, Development and Community Housing Trusts and private landowners, working together to create local solutions to one of the most critical drivers of population decline.

⁶² [Highland Council New Housing Completion Statistics](#)

⁶³ [Highland Council New Housing Completion Statistics](#)

⁶⁴ Data gathered by HC Repopulation Coordinator

In 2022, as a result of conversations with the NW2045 project Highland Council and Highlands and Islands Enterprise created the new position of Repopulation Coordinator – a dedicated member of staff to support people who want to live, work or study in north west Sutherland. Since then, the appointee – Boyd Alexander has been working with local communities to identify potential sites for the construction of housing. As of 2024/25, the continuation of this post has been part-funded between the Scottish Government and Highland Council, following a commitment to do so within the Addressing Depopulation Action Plan.

An initial survey was made across the NW2045 area identifying 19.4 ha of potential land of which 2.3ha covering 4 projects for 24 units have been taken forward. Additional assistance has been provided to communities to facilitate their housing aspirations , and facilitating local place planning.

That assistance has led to developments including:

In June 2023, Coigach Community Development Company were successful in their bid to buy Achiltibuie’s former Hydroponicum site on behalf of the community, with funding from the Scottish Land Fund, and are [progressing plans to build ten new homes](#).

In March 2021, Assynt Development Trust were successful in enabling the community purchase of the Lochinver Glebe from the Church of Scotland went ahead at the end of March 2021, and are progressing [a first phase development of ten housing units in two clusters on the site](#).

In March 2022, Scourie Community Development Company were successful in their bid to buy land in the centre of the village, with support from the Scottish Land Fund. The community are now [progressing plans to develop up to 20 houses on the site](#).

Melness Crofters' Estate have sought permission to build 11 new homes along with a community space, two business units and associated infrastructure on land at Talmine. Recent developments relating to the mothballing of Sutherland Spaceport caused a number of uncertainties. The local community are determined to continue progressing the development and will now take a phased approach.

Wildland LTD are building ten homes in Tongue. Eight are for use by Wildland staff, with an additional two being built for community use.

These developments represent a vital first step, but action to secure a longer term increase in the area’s housing stock is required - the projects outlined above will see the number of dwellings in the area rise by only 3.4%⁶⁵.

As Community Land Scotland stated: *‘Many community landowners are building affordable housing at the moment but it can be a huge task for community organisations with voluntary*

⁶⁵ [Comparison of data gathered by HC Repopulation Coordinator and 2023 Small Area Statistics on Households and Dwellings](#)

boards to take on in their spare time. The housing crisis is not something they can solve on their own’⁶⁶.

The local economy

Employment and economic activity in the local area are focused on a few key sectors.

- The accommodation and food services sector accounts for 24% of local jobs,
- The agriculture, forestry and fishing sector contributes 22% of local employment
- The construction sector, which accounts for 12% of local employment, is around twice as concentrated in the Local Area than elsewhere in Highland or Scotland.

Industry	Local Area (%)	Highland (%)	Scotland (%)
Accommodation and food service activities	24.3	12.5	8.6
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	22.0	10.9	3.4
Construction	12.1	6.2	5.1
Education	8.3	7.0	8.2
Wholesale and retail trade	7.3	13.3	13.2
Human health and social work activities	5.8	15.6	15.6
Manufacturing	3.8	4.7	6.7
Real estate activities	3.8	1.4	1.5
Transportation and storage	3.2	4.7	4.5
Public administration and defence	3.2	4.7	6.2
Administrative and support activities	2.6	4.7	6.8
Arts, entertainment and recreation	1.9	3.1	2.7
Professional, scientific and technical activities	1.0	4.7	7.2
Information and communication	0.3	1.8	3.1

67

n.b. (It is important to note the above figures are taken from the Business Register and Employment Survey, which does not capture economic activity undertaken by those under the VAT threshold or not registered for PAYE).

The above is doubly important to bear in mind as self-employment in local area is more than twice as prevalent as national average (19.25% vs 7.5%)⁶⁸.

BiGGAR Economics’ analysis finds that the Local Area has experienced greater volatility in employment rates than both Scotland and Highland, most notably during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the employment rate fell by 9.8 percentage points. This is perhaps because the local economy relies more heavily upon sectors which are more vulnerable to economic instability - agriculture, tourism and construction. BiGGAR Economics concluded that due to the above, *the Local Area’s economy is more fragile and less resilient to economic shocks*⁶⁹.

⁶⁶ [Community Land Scotland \(2024\) - Young people should have the right to live in the Community where they grew up](#)

⁶⁷ P9: [BiGGAR Economics \(2025\) - NW2045: Socio-Economic Profile](#)

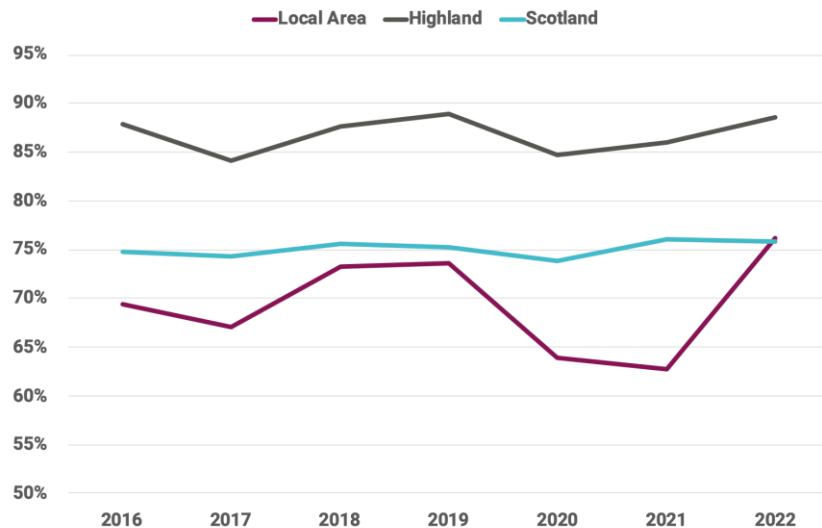
⁶⁸ Scotland’s Census (2022) Table KS601SC

⁶⁹ P11: [BiGGAR Economics \(2025\) - NW2045: Socio-Economic Profile](#)

Employment Trends



Employment rates in the Local Area are significantly lower than in Highland.



biggareconomics.co.uk — © BiGGAR Economics

Crofting plays an important part in the local economy. BiGGAR Economics analysis undertaken for the Crofting Commission suggests there were 1,093 crofts in the Local Area in 2022/23 and at least 54% of the local population lived in crofting households. It also showed the crofting population has increased by around 3% since 2016. This contrasts with total population, which fell by 4% over the same period ⁷⁰.

A survey from 2022 found that around two thirds of crofters were self-employed or had another job instead of or as well as crofting. It also showed that although food production remains the most common crofting activity, around 13% of crofters operate a B&B or holiday let, and 7% are engaged in another leisure-based activity ⁷¹. This sort of plurality of activity and income is a characteristic of our local economy, and a reality for many – with households combining income from a range of activity in order to attain a decent standard of living.

Fish farming and aquaculture is an additional, vital contributor to the local economy. The area plays host to some twenty six active sites, in both fresh and saltwater primarily producing Atlantic Salmon as well as shellfish including Mussels and Oysters ⁷².

The area is home to two fishing ports – Lochinver and Kinlochbervie. Sea fisheries statistics from recent years (2019-2023 being the period for which comparable data is available) paint a complex picture in terms of these ports performance and contribution to the local economy. Of course fishing is an industry subject to a range of external as well as local factors. The below

⁷⁰ P31: [BiGGAR Economics \(2025\) - NW2045: Socio-Economic Profile](#)

⁷¹ P12: [BiGGAR Economics \(2025\) - NW2045: Opportunities and Potential Development Models](#)

⁷² [Environment Scotland – Scotland's Aquaculture](#)

information is included to highlight the important role it plays in some parts of our local economy.

In terms of total value of catch landed, the figures below make clear that in this respect, local ports have not recovered to pre-pandemic levels.

Value of landings by Scottish vessels

	Value 2019 (thousands of pounds)	Value 2020 (thousands of pounds)	Value 2021 (thousands of pounds)	Value 2022 (thousands of pounds)	Value 2023 (thousands of pounds)
Kinlochbervie	17,929	12,288	10,168	11,349	13,651
Lochinver	3,110	1,468	1,703	1,637	1,825

73

In terms of active vessels operating locally from these ports, the years between 2019 and 2023 have seen a mixed yet relatively stable picture regarding vessel numbers.

Number of active Scottish registered vessels by district and length group

Year	District	10 metres and under	Over 10 metres to 12 metres	Over 12 metres to 15 metres	Over 15 metres to 24 metres	Over 24 metres to 40 metres	Over 40 metres	Total number of over 10 metre vessels	Total number of all vessels
2019	Kinlochbervie	15	2	-	3	-	-	5	20
2023	Kinlochbervie	12	3		2	1		6	18
2019	Lochinver	8	1	-	1	11	1	14	22
2023	Lochinver	9	2			12		14	23

74

In terms of employment, both ports have seen a slight drop in terms of the number of fishers employed:

Number of fishers employed on Scottish registered vessels by district

Year	District	Regularly Employed	Irregularly Employed/crofters	Total
2019	Kinlochbervie	41	4	45
2023	Kinlochbervie	37	3	40

⁷³ Table 27: [Scottish Government \(2023\) – Sea Fisheries Statistics](#)

⁷⁴ Table 37: [Scottish Government \(2019\) – Sea Fisheries Statistics](#) and Table 40: [Scottish Government \(2023\) – Sea Fisheries Statistics](#)

2019	Lochinver	205	6	211
2023	Lochinver	197	5	202

75

While further disaggregation of BRES figures to understand the total proportion of the local population employed in land based agriculture and crofting vs aquaculture vs fishing, it is important to note that all three play an important role in the profile of the local economy.

More widely, the local economy is moving at a rate that is markedly lower than Highland and Scottish economies. Between 2017-2022 (date of latest available data), local GVA grew by 2.7%, while by the same measure, Highland and Scotland grew by 15.5% and 17.9% respectively ⁷⁶.

This headline figure of marginal local economic growth is underpinned by a story of wildly differing fortunes for individual communities within the NW2045 area. Assynt, Scourie and Kinlochbervie have seen significant contractions in GVA over the period (in Scourie's case by 1/5th), while Coigach, Durness, Tongue, Bettyhill, Strathnaver and Altnaharra have seen varying degrees of growth ⁷⁷.

Data Zone	Community Council area	GVA £mil 2017	GVA £mil 2018	GVA £mil 2019	GVA £mil 2020	GVA £mil 2021	GVA £mil 2022	% Change 2017-2022
Ross and Cromarty North West - 04	Coigach	10.584	10.989	12.422	11.621	9.967	14.779	39.6
Sutherland North and West - 02	Tongue, Bettyhill, Strathnaver and Altnaharra	10.665	11.966	13.803	12.999	12.162	12.661	18.7
Sutherland North and West - 03	Durness	8.49	9.633	9.57	7.629	9.026	9.379	10.5
Sutherland North and West - 04	Assynt	9.234	9.908	9.064	7.072	7.495	8.461	-8.4
Sutherland North and West - 05	Scourie	14.045	13.079	15.523	11.165	14.981	11.128	-20.8

⁷⁵ Table 42: [Scottish Government \(2019\) – Sea Fisheries Statistics](#) and Table 45: [Scottish Government \(2023\) – Sea Fisheries Statistics](#)

⁷⁶ [Nomis - UK small area gross value added estimates](#)

⁷⁷ [Nomis - UK small area gross value added estimates](#)

Sutherland North and West - 06	Kinlochbervie	18.504	18.352	21.35	16.745	15.658	17.057	-7.8
NW2045 total		71.522	73.927	81.732	67.231	69.289	73.465	2.7

Although further research would be required to fully elucidate the barriers to economic growth, there can be no doubt that the factors relating to population discussed in this paper have a fundamental bearing on the situation.

Speaking in the press last year, the Federation of Small Businesses Highland and Islands regional development manager highlighted that based on the experiences of FSB members, population decline is at the heart of staffing issues in Caithness and Sutherland ⁷⁸. This example accompanies the aforementioned in relation to the Calah Sona care home closure due to acute staff shortages ⁷⁹.

Local businesses have cited housing as being a key issue in recruiting and retaining staff. Surveying undertaken locally identified the following in terms of need:

- In Kinlochbervie three posts advertised by local businesses were accepted but not taken up due to lack of accommodation;
- In Scourie, three businesses aim to expand within the next five years but would require more homes for employees in order to do so.
- In Assynt, businesses identified that a total of eight houses were required immediately (2019 survey), with a further six needed in five years' time. Additionally, a total of 25 working respondents with family connections, but not currently resident in the area said that they are considering moving home ⁸⁰.

Remote work also plays a significant role in the local economy, with rates higher than the national average. In local area, 42% of people work mainly from home, compared to 31% in Highland and 32% across Scotland ⁸¹.

Recent shifts in terms of normalisation of remote working practices present a huge opportunity for the area – making it possible to access a diverse range of quality opportunities that would not otherwise be available.

In this, high-quality digital connectivity is a critical factor, availability of which is far from guaranteed or universal across Coigach and North West Sutherland.

⁷⁸ [The Northern Times \(2024\) - Population decline at heart of staffing issues in Caithness and Sutherland](#)

⁷⁹ [NHS Highland \(2023\) – Update on Caladh Sona Care Home](#)

⁸⁰ Surveys undertaken by Local Development Trusts

⁸¹ P22: [BiGGAR Economics \(2025\) - NW2045: Socio-Economic Profile](#)

The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation measures digital connectivity as a measure of deprivation. In the local area it finds the following, in terms of percentage of premises without access to broadband of at least 30Mb/s download speed ⁸²:

Area	% of premises without access to adequate broadband
Coigach	86%
Assynt	29%
Scourie	76%
Kinlochbervie	56%
Durness	65%
Tongue, Bettyhill, Strathnaver and Altnaharra	46%

Although the importance of reliable broadband connectivity has long been recognised by Scottish Government and reflected in its commitment to the Reaching 100% (R100) program, geographical difficulties mean that it is unlikely that fibre-optic broadband will ever reach many parts of the Local Area.

Take up of the voucher scheme put in place to fill these gaps has been extremely low ⁸³. In the local area, quoted connection costs often vastly exceed the value of the voucher.

The voucher scheme does not make any provision for advances in low level satellite connections, which have become a viable alternative to fibre optic in terms of providing adequate internet in hard-to-reach places. Satellite solutions have a comparatively low setup cost but high ongoing running cost, places this technology out of the reach of many.

In terms of investment, the local area suffered a major blow with the recent decision by space firm Orbex to mothball the Sutherland Spaceport Project, following eight years of planning and development, as well as significant investment by Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Nuclear Decommissioning Authority as well as Scottish and UK Governments ⁸⁴.

Addressing multifaceted challenges faced by the local community was central to the planning of this development

- The creation of 40 jobs in Sutherland and Caithness, including a commitment from Orbex to offer job openings to those without technical experience or who are looking to retrain ⁸⁵.
- Economic impact assessments commissioned by Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) conclude that the presence of the spaceport has the potential to generate almost £1 billion in gross value added (GVA) for the Highlands and Islands economy over the next 30 years ⁸⁶.

⁸² [Scottish Government \(2020\) – Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation \(SIMD\) 2020](#)

⁸³ [The Herald \(2024\) - Claim of 'stitch-up' as Scottish Government says R100 scheme delivered](#)

⁸⁴ [The Scotsman \(2024\) - Scottish Highland community 'blindsided' by spaceport bombshell as future hopes turn to dust](#)

⁸⁵ [Orbex \(2022\) - Orbex to Hire Fifty New Staff Over Next Six Months, in Final Countdown to UK Rocket Launch](#)

⁸⁶ [Highlands and Islands Enterprise \(2023\) - Construction begins at Sutherland Spaceport](#)

- Sutherland Spaceport was intended to become the first carbon-neutral spaceport in the world, both in its construction and its operation. One illustration of this is how peat lifted during the construction will be re-used to repair large areas of peatland that have degraded over centuries.

The potential income from the site once up and running led to a high degree of confidence and subsequent planning within the community toward a number of projects to benefit the local area.

Those included:

- Housing – 12 new houses in Melness in planning. In a small community, where lack of housing availability plays a part in the challenges, this would be a transformational step
- Taking over a disused care facility and re-developing it for use as HQ by Orbex
- Feasibility studies for a science center near the spaceport site
- Assisting with a community asset transfer of the village hall
- Assisting with renovations to the local church

Members of the local community worked closely with both Orbex and HIE (on a voluntary basis) for a number of years in order to progress to a stage where the site was under construction. The local community are undoubtedly the most deeply impacted by the shock decision to mothball the development. Progress on all of the above has ground to a halt, with no clear picture in terms of the longer-term future. This situation highlights inherent difficulties that can arise when working with private enterprise to secure local futures ⁸⁷.

The third sector plays a vital role in the local economy. Right across the area, there are countless examples of community led efforts towards economic growth, with an integral social purpose. BIGGAR Economics' work for NW2045 finds that in Highland, there are approximately 24 social enterprises per 10,000 of the population. This figure is double the number in Scotland, which stands at 11 per 10,000 of the population ⁸⁸.

The Development Trusts Association Scotland (DTAS) most recent membership survey found that regions with the highest concentration of development trusts per capita are Na h-Eileanan Siar, Orkney Islands, Argyll and Bute, and the Highlands ⁸⁹.

This is certainly true in our local area, where community owned and operated enterprises include:

Assynt Leisure Centre: A community run Charity operating a sports, youth and learning centre from a multi-purpose facility, providing affordable access to facilities, including a 3 court games hall and fitness suite, a youth area for socialising and educational support and a learning centre with a range of adult learning courses, IT equipment and Internet access.

⁸⁷ [The Scotsman \(2024\) - Scottish Highland community 'blindsided' by spaceport bombshell as future hopes turn to dust](#)

⁸⁸ [P28: Biggar Economics \(2025\) - NW2045: Socio-Economic Profile](#)

⁸⁹ [Development Trusts Association Scotland \(2023\) - Membership Survey](#)

Former Fishermen's Mission, Lochinver: A multi-purpose building owned by Assynt Development Trust hosting a Cafe, Bunkhouse, and offices of local third sector organisations.

Coigach Community Wind Turbine and Hydro: A wind turbine and hydroelectric scheme owned and operated by Coigach Community Development Company producing income for the local community.

Seaweed Farming Proposal: Jointly between Kinlochbervie, Assynt and Scourie development organisations, a business plan was commissioned, building up a proposal for a sustainably farmed seaweed business in the Northwest. The business plan proposes 3 buildings, including one in Lochinver, for processing harvested seaweed along with spare space for local business rental, and suggests potential for several seaweed farm sites around the coastline from Coigach as far North as Kinlochbervie, subject to future discussions with local coast users including creelers. The farms would be similar to mussel farms, with seaweed, mainly kelps, grown on seeded lines in relatively sheltered locations.

North Coast Leisure Centre: Is currently celebrating 30 years since the facility opened. The centre is entirely community owned by Tongue and Farr Sports Association, managed by Highlife Highland and enjoying its highest ever levels of popularity.

North Sutherland Community Forest Trust: Is a Community owned and run area of plantation forestry in Forsinain as well as a sawmill and sheds. In 2024 NSCFT were successful with both a Community Asset Transfer application to Forestry and Land Scotland for taking over Rosal clearance village is a scheduled ancient monument, comprising the remains of a once thriving Highland township, which was cleared of its inhabitants to make way for sheep in 1814.

There is no doubting the contribution that development trusts and the wider third sector make to the local area – their inherent social purpose helps to retain wealth locally and generate spend within the regional economy.

This role in the local area is further highlighted in research undertaken by Highlands and Islands Enterprise, where 72% of residents in Caithness and Sutherland said that voluntary organisations and volunteers are having to provide services in their local area that should be done by local authorities ⁹⁰.

As is true across Scotland, third sector organisations in Coigach and North West Sutherland experience a range of challenges in relation to capacity and security of funding. The SCVO's recent analysis that *costs are climbing, funding is falling, and demand for services continues to increase. As a result, eight out of ten organisations report that financial difficulties rank among their most significant challenges* ⁹¹, rings true for the local area.

For example, in most of the cases outlined previously, responsibility for community led housing developments has landed on development trusts who are subject to annual, or in some cases

⁹⁰ P11: [Highlands and Islands Enterprise \(2022\) - My Life in the Highlands and Islands Research](#)

⁹¹ [Scottish Council on Voluntary Organisations \(2024\) - Briefing: Scottish Budget 2025/2026](#)

month by month funding. This poses significant challenge to progressing those developments, as well as the variety of initiatives outlined throughout this paper. The asks contained within the [Scottish Council on Voluntary Organisation's fair funding charter](#) point toward solutions that could better secure the third sector in our area.

Poverty and the cost of living

A report by the Scottish Government in 2021 estimated that the minimum cost of living in remote rural Scotland was between 15% to 30% higher than urban parts of the UK ⁹². This disparity has come to be widely described as a “rural premium” ⁹³.

Despite this, there is a relative degree of consensus that rural poverty is a hidden issue. In evidence to the Westminster Scottish Affairs Committee, Ruth Boyle, Policy and Campaigns Manager at Poverty Alliance stated:

Poverty is often seen as being an urban issue, with rural areas being seen as idyllic and not having issues of poverty. That is often down to the fact that the metrics we use to measure poverty across the UK are not overly applicable to rural areas; they are very focused on things such as income and place, rather than outgoings. That means that they do not take into account the particular issues with poverty in rural areas that stem from there being a higher cost of living in those areas ⁹⁴.

While in Rural Poverty Today, Experiences of Social Exclusion in Rural Britain, the authors find: *Some rural dwellers don't claim benefits they are entitled to, preferring to get by and to rely on friends and family, often due to the stigma attached. Also, the affluence of many incomers can obscure the hardships of others* ⁹⁵.

The rural premium means that those living in areas such as Coigach and Northwest Sutherland experience generally experience higher transport, food and accommodation costs compared to urban areas ⁹⁶. But by far one of the most concerning metrics in relation to poverty, cost of living and living standards in the area is fuel poverty.

Although qualitative information in terms of exact rates of fuel poverty in the local area could only be gained by further research, existing analysis paints an alarming picture, much of which we know to be true here.

Changeworks 2019 report on rural fuel poverty presents the starkest of findings: *In 2019, 24% of households in Scotland were in fuel poverty, and 12% in extreme fuel poverty. Remote rural areas of Scotland face significantly higher levels of fuel poverty, at 40%. Even more significant is that 33% of households are in extreme fuel poverty. In the Highlands and Islands, 36% of households were in fuel poverty and 24% in extreme fuel poverty. No official data is available for*

⁹² [Scottish Government \(2024\) - Reflecting higher living costs in remote rural Scotland when measuring fuel poverty](#)

⁹³ [Scottish Affairs Committee \(2024\) - Cost of living: impact on rural communities in Scotland](#)

⁹⁴ [Scottish Affairs Committee \(2023\) - Oral evidence: Cost of living: impact on rural communities](#)

⁹⁵ [Mark Shucksmith, Jayne Glass, Polly Chapman and Jane Atterton \(2023\) - Rural Poverty Today Experiences of Social Exclusion in Rural Britain](#)

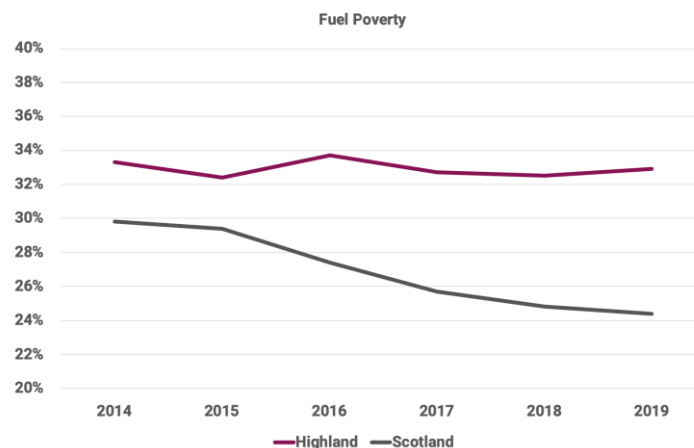
⁹⁶ [Scottish Affairs Committee \(2024\) - Cost of living: impact on rural communities in Scotland](#)

Caithness and Sutherland but based on location and analysis of fuel bills and energy efficiency levels, similarly high rates of fuel poverty can be assumed ⁹⁷.

More recent analysis by BiGGAR Economics confirms these trends. Despite the proportion of households experiencing fuel poverty across Scotland decreased from 30% to 24% since 2014, Highland has continued to see high levels of fuel poverty, with the proportion of residents affected remaining between 32% and 35% over the same period ⁹⁸.

Fuel Poverty Trends

Fuel poverty continues to be an ongoing challenge for Highland despite progress across Scotland as a whole.



biggareconomics.co.uk — © BiGGAR Economics

Whilst the proportion of households living in extreme fuel poverty fell from 15% to 12% in Scotland between 2014 and 2019, the gap between Highland and the national average continued to widen.

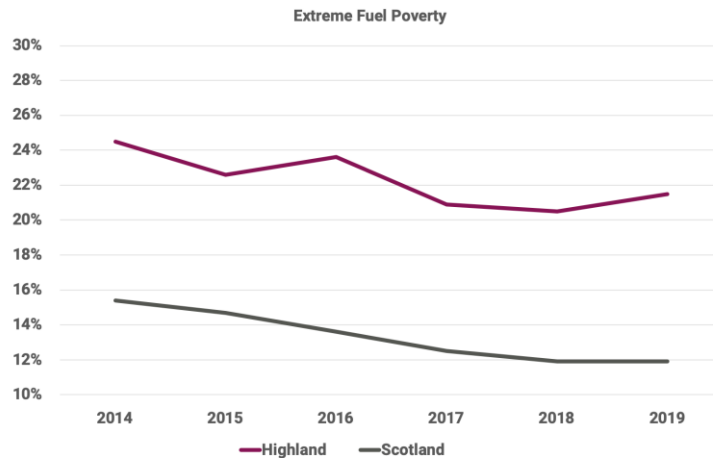
⁹⁷ [P1: Changeworks \(2019\) - A Perfect Storm: Fuel Poverty in Rural Scotland](#)

⁹⁸ [P18: Biggar Economics \(2025\) - NW2045: Socio-Economic Profile](#)

Fuel Poverty Trends



Fuel poverty continues to be an ongoing challenge for Highland despite progress across Scotland as a whole.



biggareconomics.co.uk — © BIGGAR Economics

Despite progress in reducing fuel poverty in Scotland on the whole, these trends show that it remains a disproportionate and persistent challenge in Highland. Given the relatively high concentration of older people living in the Local Area and the availability of heating solutions, this pattern is likely to be similar, if not worse, at the local level ⁹⁹.

In our area, it's possible to infer a relationship between type of central heating and fuel poverty. None of the area is connected to the mains gas grid, with the 7% of households within the Local Area equipped with gas central heating being supplied by off-grid solutions. Across the area, there is a far greater reliance on more costly off-grid fossil fuel solutions, increasing the likelihood of greater fuel poverty ¹⁰⁰.

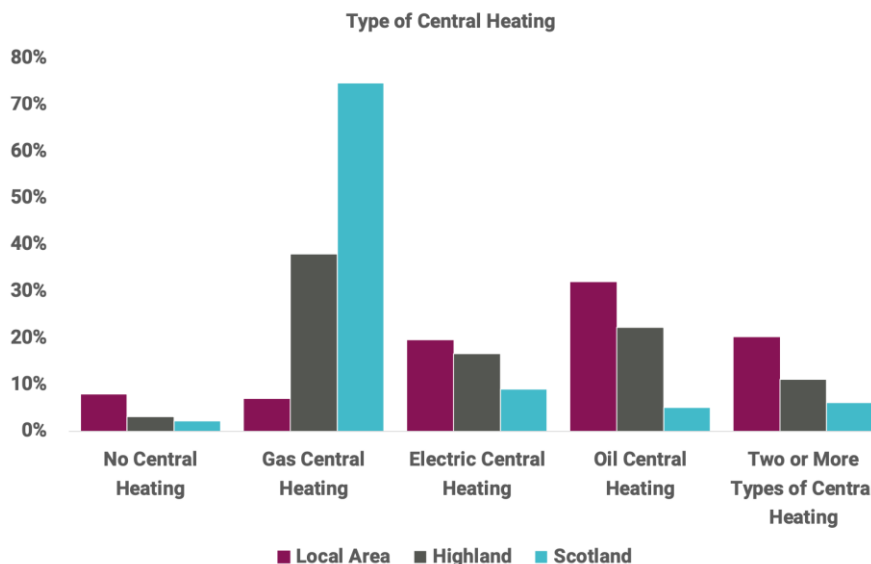
⁹⁹ [P19: Biggar Economics \(2025\) - NW2045: Socio-Economic Profile](#)

¹⁰⁰ [P20: Biggar Economics \(2025\) - NW2045: Socio-Economic Profile](#)

Type of Central Heating



The Local Area is likely to have less availability of on-grid heating solutions, increasing the likelihood of greater fuel poverty.



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Locally, a number of ongoing efforts to alleviate the most acute impacts of poverty exist. These include:

Assynt Food Larder: Set up during Covid-19, the Assynt Food Larder continues to provide nutritious food to those in need. It also aims to help provide in other ways such as essential toiletries and sanitary products, and winter fuel.

Storehouse Food Bank: Durness and Kinlochbervie Church of Scotland operates The Storehouse Food Bank for the communities of Durness, Kinlochbervie, Scourie, Kylesku, Achfary, and locations in-between.

Coigach Energy Fund: In response to rising electricity and solid fuel costs, Coigach Community Development Company introduced Electricity and Solid Fuel Grants, available to local residents.

The case for action

The preceding has outlined the interlinked and systemic nature of the challenges facing communities in Coigach and North West Sutherland, as well as on the ground solutions developed by local communities in order to tackle some of the most acute impacts. Bearing in mind BiGGAR's earlier conclusion that this local action alone will not be enough to stabilise and begin improving the situation, but that the area's natural strengths and existing competitive advantages could provide basis for renewal through concerted national action, what follows is a case for taking that action.

Environment

The “2045” in the project’s title refers to Scotland's net zero and biodiversity targets. The area’s abundant natural resources have a huge part to play in this key aspect of our national future. Our small population and low population density means that our land and natural resources punch far above their weight in terms of their contribution to the national picture. How these resources are used and managed in future will greatly impact on our prospects, at both a local and national level.

Biodiversity

The land, sea and wildlife in Coigach and North West Sutherland have multiple protections and designations that demonstrate their value on a national and even global level. Around 60% of the area’s land is protected, as either National Scenic Areas, Special Areas of Conservation, Special Protection Areas or Sites of Special Scientific Interest ¹⁰¹.

In recent years, we have learned a great deal from a Natural Capital Assessment (NCA) undertaken by SLR Consulting for the NW2045 Regional Land Use Partnership. The assessment used Natural England's Biodiversity Metric 3.1 to quantify both the distinctiveness and condition of the NW2045’s land mass from a biodiversity point of view, producing results on a relative scale of 0-24 biodiversity units/ha.

Our land has a significantly different asset composition from Scotland on the whole and scored towards the upper end of the biodiversity scale, with 16% of the land in the 23-24 units/ha range and 30% in the 17-18 units/ha range. The report also found there is potential for further improvement ¹⁰². From this strong position, the local area can contribute even further to meeting Scotland's biodiversity goals, that:

- By 2045, Scotland will have restored and regenerated biodiversity across our land, freshwater and seas.
- Our natural environment, our habitats, ecosystems and species, will be diverse, thriving, resilient and adapting to climate change.
- Regenerated biodiversity will drive a sustainable economy and support thriving communities and people will play their part in the stewardship of nature for future generations ¹⁰³.

Carbon sequestration

The NCA also found that carbon stored in the area is extremely valuable to society. If one tonne of carbon dioxide equivalent (tCO₂e) has a societal value of £248, then the estimated 68.7 million tCO₂e stored within the land side of the NW2045 region is worth £17bn ¹⁰⁴. In terms of local communities, this quantum is almost unimaginably vast. £17 billion is twenty-four times

¹⁰¹ [SLR Consulting \(2022\) - NW2045: Natural Capital Assessment](#)
[Scottish Government \(2010\) - National Scenic Areas of Scotland: maps](#)

¹⁰² [SLR Consulting \(2022\) - NW2045: Natural Capital Assessment](#)

¹⁰³ [Scottish Government \(2024\) - Scottish Biodiversity Strategy to 2045](#)

¹⁰⁴ [SLR Consulting \(2022\) - NW2045: Natural Capital Assessment](#)

the Highland Council's annual budget and represents almost a third of the value of Scottish Government's annual budget ^{105 106}.

In terms of population, this means that, nationally Scotland's soil stores approximately 550.76 tonnes of carbon per member of Scotland's population¹⁰⁷, while in Coigach and North West Sutherland, our land stores approximately 21,302.33 tonnes of carbon per person living in the local area ¹⁰⁸.

As with biodiversity, the NCA also found there is potential for further improvement, meaning our area can contribute even further above its weight in terms of meeting essential net zero targets.

Of course, in terms of both biodiversity and carbon sequestration, land is only one part of the picture. Our oceans also have an important role to play, but further assessment would be needed to understand this picture at a local level.

Renewable energy

Increasing renewable energy generation is a further, critical part, of the national future in terms of Net Zero. Scottish Government's targets being that by 2030 we will generate 50% of Scotland's overall energy consumption from renewable sources, and by 2050 will have decarbonised energy almost completely ¹⁰⁹.

By far the largest component of Scotland's current renewable mix is onshore wind. As of March 2024, national onshore wind generation installed capacity stood at 9,617 mw ¹¹⁰.

Approximately 2000mw, or 22% of this installed capacity is sited in the Highland Local Authority area ¹¹¹. Around 14% of that highland capacity can be found in Coigach and North West Sutherland and its 15km surrounding radius, with four sites with capacity for 275.4mw per year.

In terms of distribution of development at a population level, this is another area in which we punch above our weight. Scotland has the installed capacity to produce 1.77 kW of onshore wind energy per person per year ¹¹², while in Coigach and North West Sutherland, the figure is vastly higher, with installed capacity for 85.4 kW of onshore wind energy per person per year ¹¹³.

¹⁰⁵ [Highland Council \(2025\) - Budget 2024 to 2027](#)

¹⁰⁶ [Scottish Government \(2024\) - Scottish Budget 2025 to 2026](#)

¹⁰⁷ [NatureScot \(2023\) - Soil carbon management](#) and [National Records of Scotland \(2024\) Mid-Year Population Estimates 2022](#)

¹⁰⁸ [National Records of Scotland \(2024\) Mid-Year Population Estimates 2022](#) and [SLR Consulting \(2022\) - NW2045: Natural Capital Assessment](#)

¹⁰⁹ [Scottish Government \(2024\) - Renewable and Low Carbon Energy](#)

¹¹⁰ [Scottish Government \(2024\) - Energy Statistics for Scotland - Q1 2024](#)

¹¹¹ [P18: BiGGAR Economics \(2025\) - NW2045: Opportunities and Potential Development Models](#)

¹¹² [Scottish Government \(2024\) - Energy Statistics for Scotland - Q1 2024](#) and [National Records of Scotland \(2024\) Mid-Year Population Estimates 2022](#)

¹¹³ [P18: BiGGAR Economics \(2025\) - NW2045: Opportunities and Potential Development Models](#) and [National Records of Scotland \(2024\) Mid-Year Population Estimates 2022](#)

Future development of onshore and offshore wind will take this capacity higher still, with two approved expansions of onshore sites at Creag Riabhach and Bettyhill, as well as a number of additional sites in earlier stages of planning and development.

For example, West of Orkney Windfarm is being developed around 30km off the west coast of Orkney and around 25km from the north Sutherland coast. With an expected capacity of around 2GW, and first power scheduled by 2030, the project will be capable of powering the equivalent of more than two million homes ¹¹⁴.

Community benefit from renewables development

Over the past 20 years, it has become standard practice for developers to make voluntary contributions to local communities hosting wind energy projects. While voluntary, these contributions are the subject of guidance from both national and regional Government.

At time of writing, Scottish Government are consulting on improving their policy on how communities will receive additional benefits from renewable energy developments. In June 2024, Highland council adopted a new social value charter, with the stated aim of *maximising the opportunities and social value that could be derived from renewables investment* ¹¹⁵.

In terms of community benefit, current Scottish Govt policy is that best practice is for onshore wind developments to provide £5,000 per installed megawatt per annum in community benefit, index linked for the operational lifetime of the project. This is done on a voluntary basis ¹¹⁶.

The Highland Council's newly-adopted Social Value Charter, sets out a much more comprehensive set of expectations and commitments. In addition to the above £5000 per MW, *that developers will contribute £7,500k per MW for each renewable energy development to a central fund which will support and enable economic development, increase prosperity and achieve equity for communities across Highland* ¹¹⁷.

This is accompanied by additional expectations and commitments around housing, supporting development of the Highland Investment Plan, providing opportunities to participate in an integrated shared ownership model, skills and training, match funding for local projects, fast tracking grid connections and maximising socio-economic prosperity through the planning system.

Increased stringency in terms of expectations at a Local Government level has seen broader packages of initiatives being offered alongside community benefit funds.

For example, Bettyhill Wind Farm Phase 2 will provide contributions of up to £250,000 per year, index-linked over the project's 35-year lifespan, amounting to a possible total of over £8.5 million. Benefit funding will be allocated as follows:

¹¹⁴ [West of Orkney Wind Farm – About the Project](#)

¹¹⁵ [Highland Council \(2024\) - Social Values Charter for Renewables Investment](#)

¹¹⁶ [Scottish Government \(2022\) - Onshore wind: policy statement 2022](#)

¹¹⁷ [Highland Council \(2024\) - Social Values Charter for Renewables Investment](#)

- 50% directed to the Bettyhill, Strathnaver, and Altnaharra communities as the primary host area.
- 50% shared among six neighbouring community councils: Strathy & Armadale, Tongue, Durness, Kinlochbervie, Scourie, and Melvich.

Bettyhill Wind Farm Phase 2 is also set to introduce a Local Electricity Discount Scheme, which promises to offer annual savings of up to £200 per household and businesses. It is also set to introduce an index linked annual programme fund of £5,000 to provide funds to Bettyhill, Melvich, and Tongue Primary Schools, as well as Farr Secondary School.

Up to 20% of the wind farm's ownership will be made available for community shared ownership through the Farr North Community Development Trust ¹¹⁸.

Both expecting and gaining increasingly meaningful contributions from onshore wind developers is a vital and positive step. While the direction of travel in terms of strengthening community benefit from renewables is positive, it is starting from quite a low place. Although, in the local area, all operational renewables developments are delivering community benefit at around the £5k/mw/year guideline, internal analysis undertaken by NW2045 indicates that the wider area of Caithness and Sutherland, operational onshore renewables schemes have capacity to produce 731.59 MW of electricity annually. Across these developments, if Scottish Government's £5k per MW of community benefit guideline was met, communities in the local area might expect to see £3,657,950mil in community benefit funding annually, while the actual figure being delivered by these developments on a yearly basis stands at £3,169,004 ¹¹⁹.

This is in part due to the fact that a number of these developments would have been conceived before the £5k/mw/year guideline but underscores the importance of proactivity in ensuring that these developments are delivering for the local communities that host them. It is also important to acknowledge that while we continue to see increasing development of onshore wind and associated grid infrastructure, the impacts of this – visual and otherwise – are not felt universally within the local area. There are a huge range of views on developments of this nature which makes ongoing work by developers and operators to ensure they are working *with* communities all the more vital.

Scenery and tourism

Much of the local area is designated as national scenic areas: Coigach and Assynt, North West Sutherland and Kyle of Tongue. These are places of *outstanding scenic value in a national context* ¹²⁰. Analysis informing our 2021 community vision suggests that the area is home to 13% of Scotland's National Scenic Areas and 0.06% of the population ¹²¹.

¹¹⁸ P23: [BiGGAR Economics \(2025\) - NW2045: Opportunities and Potential Development Models](#)

¹¹⁹ Statistics gathered from a variety of sources, primarily [Highland Council's Wind Turbine Map](#) and individual web pages for associated community benefit funds

¹²⁰ [Scottish Government – National Scenic Areas Map](#)

¹²¹ NW2045 internal analysis

Our landscapes are iconic and interwoven with Scotland's national identity – at home and in terms of how we are perceived abroad. A critical aspect of this is tourism. VisitScotland research has consistently shown that Scotland's traditionally recognised attributes – scenery and landscapes, and history and culture – are the strongest motivations for choosing to visit ¹²², while Nature Scot finds that Nature-based tourism is estimated to account for nearly 40% of all tourism expenditure ¹²³.

Tourism is absolutely key to our local economy. Employment in accommodation and food services has grown by 43.4% in the Local Area since 2011, a significantly greater increase than in Highland and Scotland as a whole, with the accommodation and food services sector now accounting for around 24% of local jobs ¹²⁴.

We are part of the Highland tourism success story, which has seen visitor numbers increase by 64.7%, from 5.1 million in 2012 to 8.4 million in 2023. In 2023 Highland was the third most visited region in Scotland by both international and domestic overnight visitors ¹²⁵.

Coigach and North West Sutherland undoubtedly play a key role.

- To the north, the area is home to part of the UNESCO Flow Country - [*one of the last true wilderness areas in Europe*](#).
- The area almost aligns with the North West Highland Geopark - [*home to the earliest evidence of life to be found anywhere in Europe*](#).
- Our entire coastline is part of the North Coast 500. [*One of the top 5 Coastal Routes in the World as described by Now Travel Magazine*](#).

Tourism brings with it incredible opportunity, but also challenges for local communities, particularly in terms of infrastructure, and recruiting and retaining staff to service visitor needs (as described in an earlier section). This has become especially true in recent years.

As research by the John Muir Trust found, *The North Highlands has become one of the most iconic destinations in Scotland after the introduction of the North Coast 500 route in 2015* ¹²⁶.

While economic activity from tourism has grown, 97% of respondents to the survey informing the John Muir Trust report felt that visitor numbers had increased over the past five years and increased pressures on infrastructure ¹²⁷. Indeed due to those pressures on infrastructure, the NC500 was placed on Fodors no travel list for 2025 ¹²⁸.

Up to date information on the impact of the NC500 – in terms of the local economy, infrastructure and communities is lacking, with the most recent analysis having been

¹²² [Scottish Government \(2023\) - Scottish Connections Framework](#)

¹²³ [NatureScot \(2023\) - Social and Economic Benefits of Nature](#)

¹²⁴ [P9: BiGGAR Economics \(2025\) - NW2045: Socio-Economic Profile](#)

¹²⁵ [Highland Council \(2024\) - Sustainable Tourism Strategy 2024-2030](#)

¹²⁶ [John Muir Trust \(2021\) Frontline realities: Rural Communities and Visitor Pressures](#)

¹²⁷ [John Muir Trust \(2021\) Frontline realities: Rural Communities and Visitor Pressures](#)

¹²⁸ [Fodors \(2025\) - Fodors' No List for 2025](#)

undertaken in 2019 – prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the explosion in the route’s popularity.

New analysis in this area would undoubtedly produce greater insight. But irrespectively, in response to both opportunities and challenges, local communities have developed a range of inventive solutions:

Loch Clash Stopover: Kinlochbervie Community Company have developed a disused pier in the village as a motorhome stopover, providing waste disposal, fresh water, and electricity for visiting motorhomes.

Kinlochbervie Harbour Building Restoration: Kinlochbervie Community Company have submitted plans to transform a derelict harbour building into a visitor centre showcasing the village’s maritime history.

Cludgie Project (motorhome facilities): Assynt Development Trust have developed much-needed facilities for motorhomes and campervans in the car park area at Assynt Leisure Centre, in the harbour area of Lochinver. Facilities include chemical toilet waste disposal, grey-water disposal and freshwater top-up.

Strathnaver Museum: A community owned museum situated on the north coast of Scotland. It is based in the former Parish Church of Columba in Bettyhill and opened as a museum in 1976. Its main theme is the tragic story of the Highland Clearances, it has a room dedicated to the Clan Mackay and also tells the story of crofting life. The ancient Pictish Farr Stone is situated nearby.

Slow Tourism: In recent years, a number of local organisations have launched initiatives designed to promote and encourage slow tourism in the area, including: [Northwest Highland Geopark](#), [The Flow Country](#), [Heart of Sutherland Tourism \(HOST\)](#)/ [Kyle of Sutherland Development Trust](#) and the [Association of Northern Trails of Scotland](#).

Science

The North West Highland Geopark, situated within the local area holds UNESCO Global Geopark status. It is home to Lewisian Gneiss, the oldest rocks to be found anywhere in Europe at 3 billion years old. The Geopark also contains the earliest evidence of life to be found anywhere in Europe. These simple-celled algal life forms (stromatolites) occur in Torridian Sandstone rock strata dated at 1.2 billion years old ¹²⁹.

As a Nature Scot assessor wrote when identifying the Special Qualities of the Coigach and Assynt national scenic area:

Assynt - Coigach can reasonably lay claim to being the Mecca for earth scientists and geologists on mainland Britain. The area presents some of the most complex, varied and dramatic geological surface features in the UK, features which are fundamental to the landscape’s form, vegetation cover, water bodies and land use. It has been the focus for some

¹²⁹ [North West Highland Geopark – Our Landscape](#)

of the most influential scientific study and advancement of geology as a discipline, and consequently enjoys a status within the geological world far exceeding that of the general awareness of wider population ¹³⁰.

History

The geological history of Coigach and northwest Sutherland is not the only significant aspect of the area; our human history is rich, complex, and multi-dimensional. As highlighted in Alexander Mackay's *The History of the Province of Cat* (Caithness and Sutherland), this history spans from early Pictish and Norse settlements, to the medieval power struggles between clan chieftains and the Scottish Crown. It also includes the religious upheavals of the Reformation, the Jacobite Rebellion, and the economic and social turmoil that culminated in the brutal Highland Clearances ¹³¹.

Calum Maclean, in his 1955 visit to Sutherland just before his trip to Coigach, noted, *"The Highlander will discover that, no matter how it starts, the conversation will sooner or later veer round to the Clearances, and he will learn that in Sutherlandshire the Clearances will neither be forgotten nor forgiven"* ¹³².

The clearances in Sutherland are a brutal and devastating story, interwoven through the area's oral and written history. Donald Macleod, born in the village of Rosal at the end of the 18th century, witnessed the eviction of himself and his neighbours, capturing the experience in a series of letters to the Edinburgh Chronicle, which were later published as a book - *Gloomy Memories in the Highlands of Scotland*.

Of the day of the clearance he wrote:

"The day on which this deplorable catastrophe took place was one of the most beautiful that summer had produced. The sky was serene, and the sun shone with unwonted brightness on the glassy sea that lay spread out before the little bay of Strathnaver. But never will it be forgotten by those who witnessed the awful scene. The inhabitants, men, women, and children, were driven from their homes, and the dwellings which had sheltered them were burnt before their eyes. Old men, who were unable to move, were placed upon hurdles and conveyed to the shore, where they were left helpless and destitute. Many of them died before they could reach a place of shelter, and their corpses lay festering in the sun" ¹³³

Notably, Coigach is one of the few parts of the country to have successfully resisted efforts to clear its native population, a subject of national significance at the time, as seen in the following press notice from the Glasgow Herald in 1853:

Disturbances in Ross-Shire

¹³⁰ [Scottish Natural Heritage \(2007\) - Identifying the Special Qualities of Scotland's National Scenic Areas](#)

¹³¹ Rev. Angus Mackay (1914) - *The History of the Province of Cat*

¹³² Calum MacLean (1959) - *The Highlands*

¹³³ Donald MacLeod (1857) *Gloomy Memories in the Highlands of Scotland*

A series of deforcements of officers of the law have lately taken place in one of the districts of the county of Ross. The first was in the case of distraining for poor rates. The officers despatched for the purpose were resisted by the people of the village of Ullapool, and forced to retreat. Subsequently officers were sent to apprehend the parties concerned in the deforcements, but they were also driven off and compelled to relinquish their duty. In the parish of Lochbroom similar scenes occurred on the occasion of executing some warrants for the removal on the estate of the Marquis and Marchioness of Stafford. The noble proprietors, desiring to make some new arrangement of the farms, wish to locate the people on some other part of the estate, but not to put them off the property. The people, however, resist all interference, and have twice this season deforced the officer, who went to deliver the notices of removal. On Thursday last the Sheriff-Substitute accompanied the officer with the summonses, but they were met by a body of about 100 people, who seized the officer, and his summonses being taken from him, were burned by the women present. The number of persons sought to be removed consists of sixteen families ¹³⁴.

Language and cultural heritage

Coigach and North West Sutherland were once a Gaelic speaking area. But the language has almost disappeared. The most recent census found 205 people with an amount of ability to speak, read or write in Gaelic, with a further 98 able to understand but not speak read or write. Taken together, this represents 9% of the area's total population ¹³⁵. Without a single Gaelic medium facility in the local area, this number stands only to continue to decline.

Just as in the rest of the Highlands, or indeed Scotland more widely, the story of Gaelic in the local area is not one story. The former cultural richness of the language and its infinite variety is captured in archives, from the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh, to local heritage groups and museums.

One local archive is the Strathnaver museum, who provide the following introduction to the local Gaelic

Although historically various peoples have helped shape the identity of the people of Dùthaich Mhic Aoidh (Mackay Country); with varying levels of settlement and assimilation of Norse-speaking Scandinavians, Lowlanders and Borderers bringing Broad Scots and the English of more recent incomers, there is no doubt that this area was, and to an extent remains, defined by the Gaelic of the people of Dùthaich Mhic Aoidh.

Gaels from other parts of the Scotland often initially struggle to understand speakers of Dùthaich Mhic Aoidh Gaelic; a dialect quite distinct and different to that spoken even by the nearby Gaels of Caithness, of East Sutherland (Cataibh) and the Gaels of Assynt. It is thought that the Caoidhich (Mackays) who settled in the North Highlands originally came from Moray and were driven out for a variety of reasons including their exploits in 'togail nam bò' (cattle

¹³⁴ [Glasgow Herald \(1853\) - Disturbances in Ross-Shire](#)

¹³⁵ Scotland's Census (2022) - Table UV208a

raiding). Although they resettled in territory, they retained their familiar Gaelic, now Gàidhlig Dhùthaich 'ic Aoidh¹³⁶.

The language goes beyond the functional, in music, poetry and song it gives us insight into the inner lives of our forebears, the emotions of this human history. All of this can be found in the writing of Ewan Robertson, a fisherman from Tong who was known as 'The Bard of the Clearances'. He lived between 1842 and 1895 and a memorial cairn was built in his memory near the Kyles of Tong, where he had died.

A number of his songs have survived in tradition, and are performed to this day. Perhaps the most notable being Dùthaich MhicAoidh, or Mackay Country:

Mo mhallachd aig na caoraich mhòr!
Càit' bheil clann nan daoine còir?
Dhealaich rium nuair bha mi òg,
Mus robh Dùthaich 'ic Aoidh na fàsach

My curse upon the great sheep!
Where now are the children of the kindly folk?
Who parted from me when I was young,
Before Sutherland became a desert?

Tha trì fichead bliadhn' is trì,
O' dh'fhàg mi Dùthaich MhicAoidh.
Càit bheil gilleann òg mo chrìdh',
'S na nighneagan cho bòidheach?

It has been sixty-three years,
Since I left Sutherland.
Where are all my beloved young men,
And all the girls that were so pretty?

Loch mo chridhe fhuair thu bàs,
Ma fhuair thu ceartas fhuair thu blàths;
Gun caill an Donas an làmh cheàrr,
Mur bi e càirdeil còir riut

Loch of my love, you were destroyed,
If you received justice, you received warmth.
That the devil will lose the wrong hand,
If he won't be friendly and decent to you

Andersonaich a bh' air an ceann,
On thog an t-seilcheag suas a cheann.
An t-àit' as mios', on chaidh thu ann,
Cha d' fhuair e ceàrd cho mòr riut

The Andersons were in charge,
Since the snail lifted his head.
The worst place, since you went there,
It didn't get a crook as big as you

Shellair, tha thu nis' nad uaigh,
Gaoir nam bantrach na do chluais.
Am milleadh rinn thu air an t-sluagh
An-uiridh, nach d' fhuair thu d' leòr dheth?

Sellar, you are now in your grave,
The wailing of your widows in your ear.
The destruction you wrought upon the people
Up until last year, have you had your fill of it?

Ciad Diùc Cataibh le chuid foill,
'S le chuid càirdeis do na Goill.
Gum b' ann an lutharn bha do thoill,
'S gum b' fheàrr leam lùdas làmh rium

First Duke of Sutherland, with your deceit,
And your consorting with the Lowlanders.
You deserve to be in Hell,
I'd rather consort with Judas.

Bhain-Diùc Chataibh, bheil thu 'ad dhìth?
Càite bheil do ghùintean sìod'?
An do chùm iad thu bhon fhoillt 's bhon t-srìth
Tha 'n-diugh a-measg nan clàraibh?

Duchess of Sutherland, where are you now?
Where are your silk gowns?
Did they save you from the hatred and fury,
Which today permeates the press?

¹³⁶ [Strathnaver Museum - The Gaels of Dùthaich Mhic Aoidh](#)

Further notable exponents of the Gaelic language were the Summer Walkers, the name crofters of north west Highlands gave to the Travelling People.

Each year, during the summer months, from April to September, these indigenous Gaelic-speaking Travelling People would take to the roads, visiting remote communities across Sutherland and Ross-shire. They were known to be skilled tinsmiths, horse-dealers and seasonal labourers, and were welcomed by the crofting communities. Year upon year, they would follow the same routes, travelling on foot, with horse and cart, spending the nights in tents or round the campfire, singing, entertaining and telling stories ¹³⁸.

Among the last people to have taken part in this tradition is Essie Stewart, grand-daughter of Ailidh Dall Stewart (1882-1968), one of the greatest Gaelic storytellers. In an interview at the Ullapool Book Festival in 2008, she spoke about returning to the roads in later life to make the BBC Documentary Samhradh 's na Srathan:

But fifty years, you know, since, since I've been on the road. And last year I was very privileged to be able to do the trip with the horse and cart and follow the routes that we used to travel. Time dictated that we couldn't do all of it, but we did Sutherland, or part of Sutherland, as much as we could in the month that we had. And that was absolutely wonderful for me to be able to do; it was very emotional. Emotional, in as much as, although I had a team of wonderful people with me, I was doing it on my own, because there was no one of my own left to do it with me ¹³⁹.

In recent years, the area has served as inspiration for countless artists, across all art forms, and is home to a thriving arts scene locally.

Fèis air an Oir: For the past 24 years, the local Feisean has provided weekly music tuition as well as a week-long summer festival, endeavouring to make traditional music accessible to all despite our geographic barriers. The project was voted *Community Project of the Year* at the 2024 Scots Trad Music Awards.

We're reminded of this walking past the Scottish Parliament on the Royal Mile, where the immortal words from Norman McCaig's A Man in Assynt are inscribed:

Who possesses this landscape? The man who bought it or I who am possessed by it?

Policy context

Preceding sections have outlined the broad range of inventive actions being undertaken locally to address population issues in our area. As applicable, these have been placed alongside evidence on the nature and scale of the specific challenges they seek to address, in order to

¹³⁷ Translation taken from [sleeve notes to Joy Dunlop's 2023 Album Caoir](#)

¹³⁸ [Chloë Bryce \(2022\) - The Summer Walkers](#)

¹³⁹ [Am Balie \(2008\) - Essie Stewart returns to her travelling roots](#)

provide context on the status of existing efforts, and bolster our argument that a new approach and action is required at a national level.

Many of these local and regional actions outlined are already being undertaken with involvement or support from Local and National Government, landowners, renewables developers, public bodies, eNGOs and such like. In short, there is no shortage of will to tackle the issues driving depopulation. But by and large, these are individual efforts seeking to tackle systemic problems.

We are not the only part of the country grappling with the wide-ranging issues associated with population change. Within our Local Authority area, overall trends have been moving in a different direction - between 2001 and 2023, the population of Highland has increased by 13.1%¹⁴⁰, with urban centres such as Inverness seeing much more rapid levels of growth still (23% over the same period)¹⁴¹.

Delivering for rapid population growth and future population decline of course brings huge challenges, some similar and some entirely different to those being faced by our area, and others in similar circumstances.

Scotland's first National Population Strategy was published in 2021 and shows the breadth of the challenge at a national level, with a headline projection that Scotland will be the only part of the UK that sees its overall population beginning to decline from 2033¹⁴².

This renewed focus on population at both national and local authority level, has in turn resulted in greater recognition and understanding of the fact that Scotland has a number of rural areas like Coigach and North West Sutherland, where the degenerative cycle of population decline has reached a critical level.

The establishment of the Convention on the Highlands and Islands (COHI) in 2016, to enable the exchange of ideas on strategic issues affecting the people of the Highlands and Islands¹⁴³, led to the emergence of the concept of *repopulation zones* as a response to the issue of (rural) population retention¹⁴⁴.

Subsequent Scottish Government policy in the form of an Addressing Depopulation Action Plan¹⁴⁵ has recognised Coigach and North West Sutherland – the NorthWest 2045 area - as a repopulation zone, along with Uist, Arran and Cumbrae, Tiree & Coll, Kintyre (Tarbet to Southend), Rothesay and the Rosneath peninsula¹⁴⁶.

¹⁴⁰ [National Records of Scotland \(2024\) - Highland Council Area Profile](#)

¹⁴¹ [NHS Highland \(2022\) - Inverness Partnership Profile Demography and Deprivation](#)

¹⁴² [Scottish Government \(2024\) - Supporting and enabling sustainable communities: action plan to address depopulation](#)

¹⁴³ [Scottish Government - Convention of the Highlands and Islands](#)

¹⁴⁴ [Scottish Government \(2022\) - Place-based policy approaches to population challenges: Lessons for Scotland](#)

¹⁴⁵ [Scottish Government \(2024\) - Supporting and enabling sustainable communities: action plan to address depopulation](#)

¹⁴⁶ [Scottish Government \(2021\) - A Scotland for the future: opportunities and challenges of Scotland's changing population](#)

The action plan builds upon the More Balanced’ strand of the Population Strategy, setting out the Government’s ambition to achieve “*sustainable distribution of our population in a way that works with the characteristics of our places and local ambitions for change*” ¹⁴⁷.

We would wholeheartedly agree with Scottish Government’s ambition. As we would the position set out in a recent Highland Council Report, *Assessing Future Population Related Challenges in the Highland Council Area*:

The Scottish Government’s draft Addressing Depopulation Action Plan (ADAP) sets out what is being done across government departments and elsewhere to address a range of factors that have an impact on population issues. It shows that there is a significant amount of historic and current activity, and it demonstrates that the Scottish Government acknowledges the depopulation crisis facing rural Scotland.

*However, **the latest census figures suggest that, taken together, it is having little effect in terms of altering the current trajectory and doing more of the same is therefore unlikely to deliver a different outcome.** Issues around access to housing, transport, quality employment and the availability of skilled workers are all interconnected. Consequently, a whole system approach is needed if the compound impact in rural areas of historic underfunding, combined with the high cost of service delivery and widespread market failure is to be reversed* ¹⁴⁸.

National action

At various points, this paper has mentioned the requirement for a systemic view and national action. We take heart in Highland Council’s acknowledgement and agreement that this is what is required.

What follows is an outline in terms of our view on what first steps in this direction could and should look like. This is not an exhaustive or technical list of policy recommendations, rather an opener, in terms of the change in thinking and approach we need to see from National (and in some instances Local) Government towards addressing rural depopulation.

In time to come, NW2045 will seek to continue engaging at this level. We have the potential to provide community voice and local expertise in the development of national solutions to these profoundly challenging issues.

Policy design

A whole system approach as endorsed by Highland Councillors requires consistency. At both national and regional levels, rapid work is needed to join the dots between childcare, education, health and social care, transport, housing, economic development, poverty – especially fuel poverty and population. Net outflows of people mean challenges in relation to

¹⁴⁷ [Scottish Government \(2024\) - Supporting and enabling sustainable communities: action plan to address depopulation](#)

¹⁴⁸ P4: [Highland Council \(2023\) - Assessing Future Population Related Challenges in the Highland Council Area](#)

all of the above continue to only increase for remaining residents, in turn driving further depopulation and styming efforts to attract inward migration. Working in a concerted way on one of these areas alone would not be sufficient; change from the top down, which places the unique needs places experiencing chronic depopulation at the heart of policy and spending decisions, is the only route to systemic change.

In terms of current national structures, the Minister for Equalities is responsible for Migration and Population, including rural depopulation, within the Scottish Government. A Ministerial Population Taskforce was formed in 2019 and continues to meet quarterly to consider a range of population challenges and the delivery of Scotland's 2021 Population Strategy ¹⁴⁹.

To some extent, the requirement for public authorities to carry out an Island Communities Impact Assessment, in order to evaluate how a proposed policy, strategy, or service might significantly affect an island community differently compared to other communities – to consider the unique challenges and needs of island life when making decisions - could provide a useful example. At a regional level, Highland Council's Integrated Impact Assessment now includes a Island and Mainland Rural Communities Impact Assessment ¹⁵⁰.

The question as to whether creating a greater, perhaps statutory, requirement for public authorities to consider the unique challenges and needs of rural areas experiencing chronic depopulation, would lead to greater levels of joined up thinking and more appropriate policy, strategy and service design, is certainly worthy of consideration.

While the recent review of the Islands Act produced mixed findings in relation to public views on the National Islands Plan, a number of respondents did note that the plan had *led to a greater focus on the significant challenges facing Scotland's islands, (ii) provided a framework for policy development and infrastructure improvements in island communities, (iii) informed the creation of local island plans in some areas, and (iv) provided funding for a range of activities and initiatives* ¹⁵¹.

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, a limitation of the current lens of looking at population, is a disconnection in thinking between the issue of falling population numbers, and the effect of that falling population on the broad range of policy areas and public service provision that impact on people still living in the area.

We need to move to a position where *every policy, strategy and service* affecting rural areas experiencing chronic depopulation considers this. I.e.:

- How the effect of past and ongoing depopulation is influencing policy decisions now – a position of managed decline,
- How making decisions and designing approaches based on dwindling numbers reinforces this degenerative cycle of decline,

¹⁴⁹ [Scottish Government - Population Taskforce \(ministerial\)](#)

¹⁵⁰ [Highland Council – Integrated Impact Assessment](#)

¹⁵¹ [Scottish Government \(2024\) - National Islands Plan review: consultation analysis](#)

- How different, aspirational, decisions can be made, promoting security and resilience in services, improving circumstances for residents now, and creating the foundation for sustainable population growth in future,
- In effect, that **every policy, strategy and service which has a bearing on day to day life in our area now, is also designed with arresting and reversing ongoing depopulation in mind.**

Public spending

Across a number of areas, there is a strong argument that public policy in relation to spending is driving, rather than combatting depopulation. Take Education, Early Learning and Childcare as an example. As outlined earlier, facilities in our local area are operating far below their capacity due to depopulation that has already occurred, many early years settings have faced threat of closure and mothballing in recent years, and any further closures of any primary schools would result in gaps in provision in our local area.

We need schools in order to continue to provide for our existing population, as well as to support the shared ambition of sustainable population growth in the future. If a community loses its school, families with children can't live there, now or in future. Schools and early years settings are primarily funded on a per-head basis, which as rolls decline creates increasing challenges in service provision, estate maintenance and staff recruitment and retention. As rolls decline, these issues continue to compound.

In terms of achieving a more positive future, we've all got to ask ourselves what is going to come first. The appearance of greater numbers of children and young people, which will then deliver increased funding to schools and early years settings, addressing those issues of service provision, estate maintenance and staff recruitment and retention? Or is it going to be sustainable, resilient, adequately resourced education and childcare provision that enables existing residents to stay in the area and attracts inward migrants?

Asking similar questions in terms of health and social care provision, transport, infrastructure, and other vital public services produces the same answer. The fact is that **sustainable and resilient public services are a condition of arresting population decline, and a foundation for future growth.** Creating the conditions for this will, at some point, require a radical rethink of how spending decisions are made.

Following this logic, it's clear that the current Grant Aided Expenditure (GAE) methodology used to allocate revenue funding to local authorities is not fit for purpose in terms of meeting the needs of very remote rural areas experiencing chronic depopulation. This is made all the more clear by the existence of the Special Islands Needs Allowance (SINA) and similar statutory mechanisms.

The SNIA and similar policies provide statutory recognition of the increased cost of delivering services to island communities ¹⁵². What this means in practice - the cumulative impact of the SNIA and similar policies can be seen in the distribution of total GAE as outlined below ¹⁵³.

Area	GAE per head 24-25 (£s)	Area	GAE per head 24-25 (£s)
Shetland Islands	5271	Scotland	2802
Orkney Islands	4764	Scottish Borders	2788
Na h-Eileanan Siar	4666	North Lanarkshire	2767
Argyll & Bute	3320	Angus	2760
West Dunbartonshire	3128	Fife	2748
North Ayrshire	3072	West Lothian	2743
Inverclyde	3060	Falkirk	2725
Dumfries & Galloway	2990	Perth & Kinross	2725
Glasgow City	2958	Moray	2704
East Renfrewshire	2952	Midlothian	2702
Highland	2930	Renfrewshire	2696
East Ayrshire	2925	South Lanarkshire	2695
Dundee City	2918	Aberdeenshire	2625
South Ayrshire	2894	East Lothian	2580
Stirling	2822	Aberdeen City	2483
Clackmannanshire	2820	City of Edinburgh	2410
East Dunbartonshire	2804		

Here, the top three Local Authorities in terms of per head receipts of GAE are located entirely on Islands, and this methodology sees a greater quantum of funding delivered in order to meet the associated needs and challenges of this context.

It is notable that geographically, the mainland council areas in receipt of higher GAE than Highland: Argyll & Bute, West Dunbartonshire, North Ayrshire, Inverclyde, Dumfries & Galloway, Glasgow City and East Renfrewshire, would fit in to the land area of Highland Council nearly twice over.

Although GAE is ostensibly a needs based methodology, it is clearly not enabling our Local Authority to provide public services that meet the needs of Coigach and North West Sutherland, now or in future. Treating our very remote rural context with a similar regard to the challenges of distance faced by Island communities and plotting a path to a GAE mid point, would catalyse meaningful change across the range of public service areas highlighted in this report as contributing to ongoing depopulation.

Better spending decisions should be seen as an investment in the areas' future, as well as a response to an urgent need to better meet the needs of our population here and now.

¹⁵² [Scottish Government \(2014\) - Empowering Scotland's Island Communities](#)

¹⁵³ [Scottish Government \(2024\) - Scottish Local Government Finance - Green Book: 2024-2025](#)

Economic growth

The availability of people, infrastructure, housing and connectivity have been cited as factors constraining the local economy. This is despite the presence of enormous wealth, particularly in the form of natural capital and investment in and generation of renewable energy (see pages 30-33); opportunities for local level economic activity, particularly in relation to servicing ever-growing tourism numbers; national and international opportunities for remote work; and a desperate need for additional health, social care staff, and education staff.

Despite this, the local economy is moving at a rate significantly lower than Highland and Scottish averages. Between 2017-2022 (date of latest available data), the total GVA of the 6 datazones in the local area grew by 2.7%, while by this measure the Highland and Scottish economies grew by 15.5% and 17.9% respectively ¹⁵⁴.

The recent failure of the Sutherland Spaceport Scheme is a significant blow. The way in which events unfolded could not have provided a clearer demonstration of the limitations of relying upon investment decisions by private enterprise as a “silver bullet” in terms of not only stimulating economic growth, but addressing the myriad interlinked issues, causes and effects described in this paper. There are significant questions to answer about the ultimate effectiveness and community benefit of the huge public investment made in the project; as well as significant lessons to learn from so much control – in terms of the project’s stated objectives for the community and wider area in which it was to be situated – resting with a private operator.

Of course, there are a number of more positive examples of commercial and private wealth playing a positive role within our area. The work of the NW2045 Regional Land Use Partnership is developing greater collaboration between landowners, crofters and communities towards shared priorities; The North Coast Health and Social Care Hub being developed in partnership between Highland Council, NHS Highland and Wildland Limited; the regeneration of Tanera Mor by Summer Isles Enterprise limited; and continuing strengthening of community benefit delivered by renewables developments are all notable examples.

But as the events surrounding the Sutherland Spaceport must remind us, ultimately, the involvement of private or commercial finance means that to a large extent, control, power and accountability is not held by communities. There isn’t a universal obligation for commercial or private wealth to address these issues, nor are sources of this sort of investment situated equitably across the region.

Once again, problems and solutions are interlinked. As well as public services, evidence presented earlier makes clear that, a decline in working age people and a lack of suitable, affordable housing are fundamental barriers to filling existing vacancies, or promoting further economic growth. As in previous paragraphs in relation to education spending, a similar question must be asked – will an influx of working age people returning to the area, or moving here for the first time, who are able to fill existing vacancies, or create new enterprise and

¹⁵⁴ [NOMIS - UK small area gross value added \(GVA\) estimates](#)

opportunity, also have the ability to buy or build housing within the constraints outlined previously? Or is housing a foundational condition for the above?

Once again, we would take the latter view. Indeed, this fact is well and widely understood locally, given aforementioned the priority that communities and partners have given to developing affordable housing in recent years.

However, we would once again return to and align with Community Land Scotland's view *The housing crisis is not something they [local communities] can solve on their own'*¹⁵⁵. While existing housebuilding efforts may go a considerable way to meeting some of the most acute and immediate need at a local level, progress to an extent that may enable greater economic growth will require considerably greater action.

Housebuilding itself as a driver of economic growth is well understood. The new UK Government were elected on a platform which included the building of 1.5mil homes as the foundation of their plans to stimulate greater growth at a national level¹⁵⁶. Scottish Government's Housing to 2040 strategy sets an ambition to *deliver 100,000 affordable homes by 2031/2, while acknowledging that housing creates and supports jobs and drives inclusive economic growth and social benefits*¹⁵⁷.

The Scottish strategy also highlights the *potential for housing to make a contribution to stemming depopulation and work should be done to tackle the challenges faced by those communities facing depopulation, particularly our rural and island communities, in securing affordable housing*¹⁵⁸.

Scottish Government cites the Affordable Housing Supply Programme as the mechanism through which this support is delivered. And while this may be true to the limited extent outlined above in terms of acute and immediate need, visionary thinking could deliver transformational results. A thousand houses built in and around Inverness would increase the available housing stock by 4.2%¹⁵⁹. But 1,000 homes built across the 100 or so townships of the Northwest would be utterly transformational to the future of the rural North Highlands and Scotland.

This is the sort of thinking that could transform our local economy, bring our second and vacant home rates in line with regional and national averages, and alleviate one of *the* fundamental barriers to future economic and population growth.

Whether housebuilding alone, or in conjunction with additional investment objectives, this is the level of transformational thinking and action that our area needs. We believe this is

¹⁵⁵ [Community Land Scotland - Young people should have the right to live in the Community where they grew up](#)

¹⁵⁶ [Labour Manifesto](#)

¹⁵⁷ [Scottish Government \(2021\) - Housing to 2040](#)

¹⁵⁸ [Scottish Government \(2021\) - Housing to 2040](#)

¹⁵⁹ Scotland's Census (2022) Table UV402, there are 23,808 occupied households in Inverness (Census Locality geography)

possible. The limiting or enabling factor being the will of elected representatives and policymakers.

Connectivity and collaboration with, capacity and resilience within rural communities

A primary ambition for this paper is that it can demonstrate beyond doubt that when thinking about depopulation, its associated causes and effects, and how to tackle it, that local knowledge is key. Local intelligence is lived experience, and also expertise.

The National Addressing Depopulation Action Plan's stated ambition is that repopulation zones can enable locally driven solutions ¹⁶⁰. This is 50% positive, in that it is an acknowledgement of the above, that solutions driven by local knowledge and experience are key. The negative 50% is the ambition that solutions be locally *driven*. This is a failure in understanding that this paper seeks also to address - **our local area alone cannot deliver solutions to the systemic challenges we face.**

This means two things. The first is around the capacity and resilience within rural areas experiencing chronic depopulation. As has been covered in extensive detail, efforts to drive economic development and housing, fill gaps in essential services delivery, and work towards a more positive future at a local level are largely driven by the third sector. This work is characterised by short term resource and planning, often delivered through voluntary efforts, or project funding and short term contracts – in essence successive cliff edges. Depopulation in rural Scotland is long-term. Delivering solutions that are locally rooted can only be achieved if a similar view, in terms of building capacity and resilience is taken.

What this also means, is that a greater degree of connectivity and collaboration is required, between local communities, and the public authorities with whom decisions and planning regarding our area's future rests. Our local area alone cannot deliver comprehensive solutions to the systemic challenges we face, but nor can Regional or National Government. Achieving meaningful progress will require a previously unseen level of collaboration.

The NW2045 was formed out of a local desire for greater cross sectoral collaboration to work towards a more sustainable future. It continues in this vein to this day and is the product of all of those working towards a better future for our area, in a multitude of different ways.

In looking toward how we might begin to get a handle on the systemic drivers of our population issues, collaboration needs to extend outward and upward. This is an effort to which we are wholeheartedly committed.

¹⁶⁰ [Scottish Government Agriculture and Rural Economy Directorate \(2024\) - Supporting and enabling sustainable communities: action plan to address depopulation](#)