

Executive Summary

Review and Update on NW2045 Vision: Call to Action 2025

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This document summarises the full report - *Review and Update on NW2045 Vision: call to action 2025*, created with support from Scottish Government's Addressing Depopulation Fund and the Community Regeneration Fund.

The need for this research was first conceived to articulate the next steps required in order to translate the NorthWest 2045 (NW2045) [Community Vision](#), published in 2021, into action.

The NW2045 project and Community Vision were formed and created both in recognition of the huge challenges facing communities in Coigach and North West Sutherland, and to articulate a positive vision for future change ¹:

- 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 prospects*

The introduction to the vision also outlines the context in which it was conceived:

Our communities face challenges of extreme population sparsity and chronic depopulation. Houses are unaffordable to most local people; school rolls are falling and jobs are scarce.

This undoubtedly remains the case. Analysis commissioned from BiGGAR Economics to inform this research found:

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.²

In seeking to articulate next steps from the current position towards the more positive future outlined in the vision, we began by constructing the most detailed ever analysis of the area, in terms of:

- Population levels (p8-10)
- Young people, education and childcare (p11-15)
- Health and wellbeing (p16-17)
- Social care, (p18)
- Transport (p19-20)
- Housing and land (p21-26)
- The local economy (p27-24)
- Poverty and the cost of living (p35-38)

The findings of this exercise were stark. Despite an abundance of will, energy, expertise and effort at local and regional levels, across the above areas of policy and delivery, Coigach and North West Sutherland is experiencing huge challenge, in most cases greater than regional and national comparators. Detailed evidence in relation to each of these can be found in the full report.

¹ P3: [NorthWest 2045 \(2021\) - Community Vision](#)

² P1: [BiGGAR Economics \(2025\) - NW2045: Opportunities and Potential Development Models](#)

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. It has also made clear that all of these wider challenges – economic, social and cultural - are intrinsically linked to falling population levels.

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.

Further analysis by BiGGAR found 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.***³

The report goes on to outline those strengths and advantages, across a range of areas:

- The environment (p40)
- Biodiversity (p41)
- Carbon sequestration (p41)
- Renewable energy (p42)
- Community benefit from renewables development (p43)
- Scenery and tourism (p45)
- Science (p47)
- History (p48)
- Language and cultural heritage (p49)

For each of these topic areas, our analysis provides information on how the local area punches above its weight – in terms of contributing to national life and Scotland’s shared future. We believe that transformational change is possible, and have sought to provide evidence as to why this is something we should be pushing towards.

Ultimately this research is 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.

For our part, 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

³ P1: [BiGGAR Economics \(2025\) - NW2045: Opportunities and Potential Development Models](#)

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 research also provides the foundation for this work.

As part of that foundation, the report provides an overview of the current policy context in relation to rural depopulation. There's no doubt that the issue is receiving greater attention than ever before. But also no doubt that the existing policy scheme is failing to address the chronic depopulation our area is experiencing, as well as its interlinked social, cultural and economic drivers and consequences.

This is a position understood by Highland Council, as outlined in a recent report, *Assessing Future Population Related Challenges in the Highland Council Area*:⁴

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 .*

The paper concludes with an outline in terms of a NW2045 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.

This includes:

- Policy design (p51)

The urgent need to move to a position 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 (p53)

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.

⁴ P4: [Highland Council \(2023\) - Assessing Future Population Related Challenges in the Highland Council Area](#)

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.

- Economic growth (p55)

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, 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.⁵

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. This poses a vital question – 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 opportunity, also have the ability to buy or build housing within the constraints outlined previously? Or is housing a foundational condition for the above?

Housebuilding itself as a driver of economic growth is well understood. Visionary thinking, whether in terms of housebuilding alone, or in conjunction with additional investment objectives, could deliver transformational results.

- Connectivity and collaboration with, capacity and resilience within rural communities (p57)

A primary ambition for this research 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 solutions⁶. 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.***

⁵ [NOMIS - UK small area gross value added \(GVA\) estimates](#)

⁶ [Scottish Government Agriculture and Rural Economy Directorate \(2024\) - Supporting and enabling sustainable communities: action plan to address depopulation](#)

