Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba

Scottish Rural Communities Policy Review - Stage 1. Theories of Change

AGRICULTURE, ENVIRONMENT AND MARINE

social research

Scottish Rural Communities Policy Review

Stage 1. Theories of Change

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RESAS

Rural & Environment Science and Analytical Services

Ipsos

SRUC

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List of acronyms

CLLD	Community Led Local Development
LAG	Local Action Group
RESAS	Rural and Environment Science and Analytical Services
SG	Scottish Government
SRA	Scottish Rural Action
SRCPR	Scottish Rural Communities Policy Review
SRN	Scottish Rural Network
SRUC	Scotland's Rural College
TOC	Theory of Change

This report is an interim output of the Scottish Rural Communities Policy Review, and sets out the interim Theories of Change at the end of Stage 1. This first stage of the project was led by Ipsos. Further information can be found on the project webpage: Scottish Rural Communities Policy Review.

The researchers would like to thank all of the Theory of Change workshop participants for their time and for sharing their views.

The views expressed in this report do not necessarily represent those of the Scottish Government or Scottish Ministers.

Introduction

The Scottish Government has commissioned Scotland's Rural College (SRUC), Ipsos, the University of the Highlands and Islands (Perth), and other partners to carry out a Scottish Rural Communities Policy Review in 2025-26. The review focuses on three key elements of rural community funding and support: Community Led Local Development, Scottish Rural Action and the Scottish Rural Network. The review is ongoing and will be completed by Spring 2026.

The first stage of the project (led by Ipsos) is to develop four theory of change models: one for each element and an overarching theory of change. The other stages of the review will involve an evidence review, fieldwork, and reporting.[1]

A Theory of Change provides a structured narrative explaining how a programme, initiative or intervention is expected to achieve its intended outcomes. It logically maps the elements of a programme, outlining the activities undertaken, the outputs and outcomes anticipated, and the underlying assumptions connecting them.

A draft Theory of Change for each programme was developed by Ipsos, based on existing documentation and information available online. These draft Theories of Change were reviewed initially by Scottish Government. They were then reviewed by key stakeholders involved in the design or delivery of Community Led Local Development, Scottish Rural Action or the Scottish Rural Network, or who had a wider interest in rural policy.

Three online workshops were then undertaken with key stakeholders, one each for Community Led Local Development, Scottish Rural Action and the Scottish Rural Network. The workshops took place in March and April 2025 and lasted around two hours. During the workshops, stakeholders were presented with the draft Theories of Change and asked to provide their feedback on every element. Additional one-to-one or mini group discussions were held with stakeholders who were unable to attend the main workshops.

This document sets out the interim Theories of Change at the end of Stage 1 of the review. It contains contextual information relevant to each initiative as well as key feedback from stakeholders who took part in workshops or interviews to inform their development. As with any Theory of Change, the content provides an overview rather than a comprehensive account of each initiative. It should be read alongside the Scottish Rural Communities Policy Review: Policy and Delivery Context document, which provides important background information.

The Theories of Change set out in this document will act as a research tool to inform the fieldwork stage of the Scottish Rural Communities Policy Review, which is ongoing. They are 'living' documents that will in turn be informed by findings that emerge from fieldwork planned over Summer 2025. The Theories of Change will be further reviewed and revised as part of the final analysis and reporting stages.

[1] Further information can be found on the project webpage: Scottish Rural Communities Policy Review

Community Led Local Development

This chapter provides context for the Community Led Local Development (CLLD) theory of change (see Figure 1.1) and key feedback from stakeholders involved in design or delivery.

Background

In 2021-22 the Scottish Government commenced its Community Led Local Development (CLLD) programme to replace LEADER in Scotland, which had operated for almost 30 years. The funding available through this CLLD programme is managed by 21 Local Action Groups (LAGs) across Scotland. More detail is available in the 'Stage 2. Review of Policy and Delivery Context' published alongside this report.

Vision and aims

The wording for the vision and aims for Community Led Local Development is based on existing documentation (including information available online). It was reviewed by Scottish Government and refined based on stakeholder feedback.

There was a broad consensus among stakeholders on the importance of the programme empowering local people to identify and address their own needs and aspirations. It was noted that these priorities are often to deliver on needs that some stakeholders felt are not met by local or national government.

It was also strongly felt that cultural heritage should be recognised and supported as having intrinsic value to communities, rather than something to be 'performed' for tourists.

Activities

Stakeholder feedback on the activities of the Community Led Local Development (CLLD) programme revealed a strong desire to move beyond a narrow view of Local Action Groups (LAGs) as simply managing project funding. While acknowledging this as a vital function, participants stressed the much broader role the groups play in fostering community cohesion and empowering communities to drive their own development. This included supporting innovation and projects that might be considered more of a risk. This more strategic role in relation to funding was seen as particularly important against a background of reducing public funding with Local Action Groups (LAGs) able to reduce duplication and inefficiencies.

There was clear concern about the sustainability of relying heavily on volunteers in programme delivery, with calls for multi-year funding, greater flexibility, and exploration of opportunities to transition some volunteer roles into paid positions to avoid burnout and retain valuable expertise.

Short-medium term outcomes

Discussion of short-medium term outcomes focused on the concept of community wealth building, a people-centred approach to local economic development, which redirects wealth back into the local economy.[2] Stakeholders emphasised that rural and island communities have championed community wealth building principles for many years. While recognising the importance of local ownership, stakeholders highlighted the need for realistic expectations, pointing out that communities often lack the capacity and resources to manage assets, especially those requiring significant upkeep or facing regulatory hurdles.

Additionally, stakeholders emphasised a need to improve collaborative links between rural and island communities, recognising that communities have different strengths which can be transferred through sharing knowledge and sharing/expanding resources.

Long-term impacts

There was a strong desire to move away from deficit-based narratives that frame rural communities as lacking. While acknowledging the very real challenges these communities face, stakeholders emphasised the need to recognise and leverage existing strengths and assets.

In relation to business sustainability, it was noted that this should not focus solely on growth.

In relation to empowerment, it was noted that there should be a focus on supporting communities to benefit from funding that is perceived to have prioritised urban areas. Community control of green space and vacant buildings were given as examples of ownership and control of local assets to benefit the community.

The power of peer learning and knowledge exchange, both within Scotland and internationally, was seen as a crucial element for amplifying successful community-led initiatives, with stakeholders highlighting the inspiring and empowering effect of seeing other communities succeed.

Assumptions and risks

Annual funding and budget cuts were highlighted as significant risks, and this was also discussed in the Scottish Rural Network workshop. In particular, the uncertainty created by the funding model was linked to the potential of losing experienced staff. A key assumption underpinning the work of Community Led Local Development is that Local Action Groups (LAGs) have sufficient funding, capacity and energy to keep going. Stakeholders highlighted the importance of a commitment from local authorities and supporting bodies to support these groups in the absence of long-term funding.

[2] See this report for further information: Community Wealth Building in Scotland: The Evolution of Policy and Practice. Policy Spotlight (Scotland's Rural College, 2024)

However, concerns were raised about some local authorities not recognising the capability of communities to manage budgets and deliver projects effectively. This was also linked to a sense of distrust amongst some Scottish Government policy officials who are perceived to not be engaging closely with community stakeholders. Stakeholders therefore highlighted the risk of Community Led Local Development (CLLD) funding not being properly ringfenced due to a lack of recognition and understanding of the capabilities and impact of the Local Action Groups.

Figure 1.1 Community Led Local Development (CLLD) theory of change

VISION: Community Led Local Development (CLLD) empowers local communities to build on their own strengths and tackle their local challenges. By taking a strengths-based approach, building knowledge and skills, supporting new ideas and encouraging cooperation, CLLD helps to create viable and resilient communities which are catalysts for wider systems change and more participatory democracy.

AIMS: build co-operation with similar groups in Scotland, UK and Europe; drive community action on climate change; empower communities to be independent led and realise their potential to build opportunities for all; encourage innovation and community wealth building at micro level; enhance rural services and facilities, including transport/food initiatives; enhance tourism and leisure; facilitate the exchange of learning and knowledge sharing; normalise natural/cultural heritage and language to protect social cohesion, nurture identity and ensure strong communities.

INPUTS →

Funding:
- Core Community Led Local Development funding (Scottish Government)
- Match funding (local and specialist funds)
- Other Scottish Govt funding (e.g. Investing in Communities Fund, Aspiring Communities Fund, Communities Mental Health & Wellbeing Fund for Adults)
- UK Government funding (e.g. UKSPF)
- Remaining EU funds

People and skills:
- Paid Community Led Local Development staff
- Volunteers
- Local Action Groups (LAG) (public, private, third sector etc based partnerships) and Accountable Bodies
- Scottish Government
- Scottish Rural Network
- Rural and island communities

Policy and legislative framework:
- Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024
- Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015
- Local Place Plans (Planning (Scotland) Act 2019)
- National Performance Framework
- The National Islands Plan
- Scottish Rural Development Programme
- EU policy (to be adapted)
- Rural Support Plan (emerging)
- Rural Delivery Plan (emerging)

Wider policy and legislation:
- E.g. Community-led climate action, Community Wealth Building (Scotland) Bill, Just Transition Plan, Land Reform (Scotland) Bill, Scotland National Strategy for Economic Transformation

Research:
- **Academic and applied research** about what works for rural development

ACTIVITIES →

Local Action Group activities:
- Enable communities to identify needs and aspirations, and support in the development of ideas and solutions.
- Stimulating and supporting innovation and investment in local priorities through businesses, social enterprises, charities and grass roots initiatives.
- Community wealth building development support
- Taking a strategic approach to the targeting of funding/investment.

Capacity building:
- Training for community leaders, entrepreneurs, and volunteers
- Recruiting more Local Action Group members, including young people, developing next generation of leaders
- Support for organisational development for community groups

Network and communications:
- Reports, case studies, publications & presentations
- Local, regional, national & international networking/peer learning events (e.g. workshops, conferences, exchanges)
- Online platforms and forums
- Engagement with similar groups (e.g. Scottish Rural Network and Scottish Rural Action)
- Engagement with policy
- Influence policy development and implementation

Scottish Government activities:
- Internal advocacy
- Engagement with other policy teams
- Providing guidance
- Partnering with researchers to decide budget allocations

Monitoring and evaluation:
- Data collection
- Capacity building for evaluation

OUTPUTS →

Local Action Group projects funded and delivered:
- Projects addressing rural inequality (e.g. community transport)
- Projects creating/safeguarding jobs
- Agricultural support
- Projects benefitting young people
- Projects contributing to a low carbon economy, climate adaptation/resilience
- Community facilities created/improved
- Projects supporting communities to use assets or services.
- Projects supporting health and wellbeing
- Arts and cultural heritage activities
- Community wealth building development
- Projects supporting businesses (e.g. SMEs – Small and Medium-sized Enterprises)

Capacity:
- Community members trained
- Community groups receiving organisational support

Network and communications:
- Number and reach of events/networking opportunities
- Number and reach of publications or resources produced
- Engagement with policy teams

Monitoring and evaluation:
- Monitoring and evaluation outputs

SHORT/MEDIUM TERM OUTCOMES →

Resilience:
- Improved health and wellbeing
- Increased local food security
- Increased community engagement in climate and nature focused projects.
- Natural/cultural heritage and language normalised (for communities not tourists).

Sustainability and innovation:
- Improved business viability
- More effective and sustainable community-led projects

Infrastructure and resources:
- Enhanced community infrastructure and services
- Enhanced community wealth building activities
- Reduced barriers to accessing skills and jobs
- Increased availability of affordable housing

Capacity:
- Increased community leadership
- Increased community skills and capacity (incl. to bid for funding)
- Increased community control over / use of assets

Network and communications:
- Effective knowledge at local, regional, national and international levels
- Improved community engagement and participation (including among young people)

Systems:
- Increased influence on policy development
- Increased understanding of impact of Community Led Local Development supported projects, including increased capability of Local Action Groups to deliver social value.

LONG TERM IMPACTS

Resilience:
- Strengthened and more resilient communities
- Natural/cultural heritage and language help sustain communities
- Improved quality of life and wellbeing
- Increased climate change mitigation and adaptation

Business sustainability and innovation:
- Sustainable businesses and social enterprises that are regenerative, scalable and transferable to other areas.

Empowerment:
- Enhanced community confidence and empowerment
- Increased community ownership and leadership of local development initiatives
- Rural communities have increased access to, and control over, the resources they need

Prosperity
- Reduced rural poverty and inequality
- Stable or growing populations
- Enhanced community benefits

Systems:
- More integrated and holistic approaches to rural development
- Increased collaboration and partnership working

ASSUMPTIONS
- Local Action Groups have sufficient capacity and skills to manage funding.
- Local Action Groups have sufficient funding to leverage skills.
- Local Action Groups are willing to keep going.
- Continued political support for Community Led Local Development following 2026 Scottish Parliament election.
- Councils and supporting bodies commit to supporting Local Action Groups in the long-term (in the absence of long-term funding).

RISKS
- Challenges associated with annual funding.
- Loss of experienced staff due to uncertainty around funding.
- Community capacity to support projects and volunteer fatigue.
- Perception of Community Led Local Development programme as purely a "challenge fund" and lack of understanding around strategic purpose.
- Lack of understanding / recognition of impact and capabilities of Local Action Groups .
- Diversity of projects / approaches across Local Action Groups and variation in experience, willingness and ability.
- Perceived duplication of effort with other rural organisations / programmes resulting in missed opportunities.
- Lack of clarity (e.g. from Local Authorities) around what the fund is for.

Scottish Rural Action

This chapter provides context for the Scottish Rural Action (SRA) theory of change (Figure 1.2) and key feedback from stakeholders involved in the design or delivery of this initiative.

Background

Scottish Rural Action (SRA) is a membership organisation established in 2013. It has an elected Board of Directors and staff team. More detail is available in the 'Stage 2. Review of Policy and Delivery Context' published alongside this report.

Vision and aims

The vision for Scottish Rural Action is as shown on their website. The aims are as shown in their latest Accounts. The timescale for Scottish Rural Actions vision is 50 years. Stakeholders emphasised the importance of capacity building and enabling rural and island communities to have control over their future in shaping the work of Scottish Rural Action. There was a strong call to move beyond a narrative of "doing for" rural communities and instead focusing on empowering them to set and lead on their own priorities.

Inputs

Stakeholders stressed that the most valuable input to Scottish Rural Action's work comes from the rural and island communities themselves, highlighting their role in shaping the organisation's priorities and holding it to account. Scottish Rural Action staff, its board and membership are all part of these rural and island communities. Scottish Rural Action draws heavily on expertise residing within these communities and on community-led research and grey literature (such as academic articles). It was also noted that there is a strong volunteer presence in rural and island communities which should be recognised.

Stakeholders also emphasised the importance of collaboration with other organisations in relation to Scottish Rural Action's activities, reach and amplifying its impact.

The main source of income for Scottish Rural Action is Scottish Government funding. However, the organisation has sought to diversify its income, including through donations or sponsorship, and paid-for services (for example, secretariat services or delivering workshops).

Activities

Building capacity for community activism was highlighted as a key activity which reflects Scottish Rural Action's role in empowering communities to advocate for their own needs and aspirations. There is a particular focus on mobilising younger generations.

The activities in the Theory of Change are interconnected. For example, “platform building” was noted as being central to Scottish Rural Action's activities. These platforms often serve multiple purposes and cut across the categories outlined in the Theory of Change.

There was emphasis on the cross-sectoral and cross-geographic nature of Scottish Rural Action activity, and the ability to connect individuals and communities with shared interests. This includes connecting with groups that are not seen as traditionally represented, such as small local food producers.

It was also highlighted that Scottish Rural Action intends for activities to be accessible and co-designed with experts by experience.

Outputs

The outputs in the Theory of Change reflect what is produced as a result of the activities. These are often quantifiable, but stakeholders also highlighted the importance of capturing qualitative information (for example, not just how many events are run but how engaged members are). Further work would be needed to refine the outputs if these are to be used for evaluation purposes, perhaps including key performance indicators.

Short-medium term outcomes

As context for the short to-medium term outcomes, stakeholders emphasised that significant work is already being done by rural and island communities (notably by volunteers), particularly in areas such as climate change adaptation.

Long-term impacts

Scottish Rural Action typically see their long-term impacts as working on a 20-to-25-year timescale (towards the 50-year vision). The following were highlighted as key long-term impacts: evidence-based policy making that addresses structural barriers to rural and island development, and that rural and island Scotland is recognised, valued and resourced appropriately.

Stakeholders emphasised that rural and island Scotland is diverse, and that there will be different priorities and need across communities.

Figure 1.2 Scottish Rural Action (SRA) theory of change

VISION: vibrant and connected rural and island communities which have control over their future, and which contribute to building a society that is inclusive, just and sustainable.

AIMS: build a grassroots-led rural movement in Scotland for the purpose of sharing learning & shaping policy; build the capacity of sectoral and geographic networks, upskilling organisations and individuals; collaborate with seldom-heard groups; collectively develop a cross-sectoral, place based & asset-based understanding of rural Scotland's economy, society & culture that shapes local practice & national policy; connect Scotland's rural movement with UK, EU and international partners; provide secretariat for platforms of the rural movement (e.g. Scottish Rural & Islands Parliament).

INPUTS →	ACTIVITIES →	OUTPUTS →	SHORT/MEDIUM TERM OUTCOMES →	LONG TERM IMPACTS
Funding: • Scottish Government • Donations/sponsorship from private sector/charitable organisations • Paid for services	**Advocacy:** Advocate for a rural lens in policy making; facilitate connections between communities and policymakers.	Connections with policymakers.	Enhanced communication channels between rural and island communities and policymakers.	Rural movement is strengthened.
People and skills: • Scottish Rural Action staff team • Scottish Rural Action members • Scottish Rural Action Board • Volunteers committed to supporting Scottish Rural Action activities • Partner organisations with particular expertise • Rural and island communities	**Capacity Building:** Training and workshops e.g. on advocacy, community engagement, and policy engagement.	Individuals and organisations trained/upskilled.	Enhanced capacity of rural and island organisations and individuals to engage in policy processes and advocate for their needs.	The rural movement is recognised by decision-makers and the grassroots as an integral vehicle for community mobilisation and policy development.
Policy & Legislative Framework: • Programme for Government	**Collaboration:** Facilitate connections with UK, EU and international partners.	Connections with UK, EU and international partners.	Stronger connections with UK, EU and international partners.	There is trust between Scottish Government, COSLA and rural and island communities
Academic and applied research/knowledge about rural needs and assets.	**Communications:** Develop and disseminate information via newsletters, reports, and other communication and campaign materials; maintain an active online presence.	Publications or resources produced and reach.	Increased awareness and understanding of rural issues among policymakers and the public.	Increased ability for rural and island communities to shape their own future
	Knowledge sharing: Organise conferences, workshops, and online forums for sharing best practice.	Events and meetings held and reach.	Rural and island voices are amplified.	Rural and island Scotland is recognised, valued and resourced appropriately.
	Mobilise rural and island communities: Build a platform for members and partners to come together to agree collective action; amplify community priorities; amplify voices of seldom heard groups; establish and support cross-sectoral and cross-geographic networks.	Platforms supporting a rural movement.	Increased connections and collaboration between rural and island organisations and initiatives.	Evidence-based policymaking that addresses structural barriers to rural and island development.
		Monitoring and evaluation outputs	Rural and island stakeholders recognise and understand the term Scottish rural movement.	Enhanced cooperation on rural development.
	Monitoring and evaluation		Understanding of what is working well/less well in Scottish Rural Action and wider policy delivery.	Improved quality of life in rural and island communities.

ASSUMPTIONS

- Rural movement is driven by grassroots but requires participation from civil society and government
- Scottish Rural Action remains part of a wider European movements despite UK no longer being an EU member

RISKS

- Community capacity to engage in rural movement / issues
- Dependency on Scottish Government funding and challenges associated with annual funding.
- Staff / Board capacity to deliver against all ambitions
- Duplication of effort with other rural organisations / programmes
- Too much focus on policy rather than on capacity building and creating connections across rural and island communities.
- Lack of awareness/reach of SRA in rural and island communities
- There is no continued political support for SRA following 2026 Scottish Parliament election.
- Lack of connections across government departments
- Scottish Rural Action over promise and under deliver for communities

Scottish Rural Network

This chapter provides context for the Scottish Rural Network (SRN) theory of change (see Figure 1.3) and key feedback from stakeholders with strategic insight of this initiative or similar networks.

Background

The Scottish Rural Network was established in 2007 to support the delivery of the Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP). It has evolved over time and is currently managed through the Network Support Unit within Scottish Government. More detail is available in the 'Stage 2. Review of Policy and Delivery Context' published alongside this report.

Vision and aims

The wording of the vision for the Scottish Rural Network is based on existing documentation (including information available online). It was reviewed by Scottish Government and refined based on stakeholder feedback. A number of stakeholders expressed a desire for the vision to be bold and ambitious.

The aims of the Scottish Rural Network are as shown on their website. However, there were a number of comments from stakeholders which could be considered for any future revisions of the aims. These included: a desire to see more emphasis on the importance of collaboration and partnership working; a suggestion to use stronger language, for example "*engaging* farmers, rural businesses and communities about wider policy and funding…" rather than "informing"; and a suggestion for there to be a subset of objectives for each aim.

In practice, stakeholders felt that the Scottish Rural Network has focused more on community development than agricultural support in recent years.

Inputs

The resources captured under the policy and legislative framework reflect the evolving policy landscape in which the Scottish Rural Network is operating. This recognises the legacy of European Union (EU) regulations whilst acknowledging the emergence of new frameworks such as the Scottish Government's forthcoming Rural Support Plan and Rural Delivery Plan.

Stakeholders highlighted the importance of applied research as an input, particularly existing knowledge on good practice. Partnerships were also highlighted as a significant input, particularly in helping the Scottish Rural Network extend its reach.

Activities

Stakeholders acknowledged that many Scottish Rural Network activities stem from its historical role within the EU framework. However, activity will continue to evolve post-EU exit. This is reflected in the language used in the fifth aim, which notes the Scottish Rural Network's role in promoting the Scottish Rural Development Programme (under the EU Common Agricultural Policy, or 'CAP'), but also other wider initiatives relevant to rural and island communities.

Collaboration with wider rural networks across the UK and beyond was noted as an activity that had decreased since EU exit, but there was a desire to rekindle knowledge exchange in this area.

Outputs

As with the Scottish Rural Action Theory of Change, the outputs reflect what is produced as a result of the activities. These are often quantifiable, but stakeholders also highlighted the importance of capturing qualitative information. Further work would be needed to refine the outputs if these are to be used for evaluation purposes, perhaps including key performance indicators.

The Scottish Rural Network website, and written and video case studies, were highlighted as important tools for information sharing and engagement. One stakeholder noted the particular success of the Welsh Rural Network's 'user-friendly' platform, which could be investigated by the Scottish Rural Network team.

Short-medium term outcomes

Again, stakeholders emphasised that improved collaboration, networking and information sharing are key outcomes for the Scottish Rural Network.

Stakeholders also stressed the importance of clearly defining and communicating the Scottish Rural Network's role within the broader rural and island development landscape and beyond, particularly given overlapping interests with different policy areas within Scottish Government.

In relation to 'increased awareness and uptake of funding opportunities that add value to communities', it was noted that this could include job creation, improved wellbeing and more climate friendly practices in the longer term.

Long-term impacts

Enhanced resilience and sustainability of rural and island communities was identified as the key long-term impact, which the other long-term impacts support.

Assumptions and risks

Annual funding and budget cuts were highlighted as significant risks. Under EU frameworks, the Scottish Rural Network operated on a five-year funding cycle. Stakeholders noted that the change to annual funding impacts on long-term planning and delivery of outcomes.

The small size of the Scottish Rural Network team within Scottish Government was also identified as a key risk. This impacted on the team's capacity to deliver Scottish Rural Network activity against a background of increased demand and budget cuts.

It was also suggested that it can be challenging to measure and demonstrate the impact of a network which means there could be limited awareness of the contribution of the network among stakeholders.

In relation to the assumption that the Scottish Rural Network remains part of a wider European movement, it was noted that there is a principle that rural policy in Scotland aligns with EU policy (unless there is reason to diverge).

Figure 1.3 Scottish Rural Network (SRN) theory of change

VISION: A thriving rural and island Scotland, where communities, businesses, and individuals actively shape their future. SRN is a driving force in fuelling innovation, collaboration, and in developing and delivering policies and programmes that support sustainable and resilient communities.

AIMS: support and facilitate people from rural and island communities, businesses and the wider public to take part in policy developments that affect them; help improve the development and delivery of the Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP) and wider agriculture and forestry schemes including; inform farmers, rural businesses and communities about wider policy and funding opportunities relevant to rural and island communities; encourage innovation in agriculture, food production, forestry and rural areas and communities.

INPUTS →	ACTIVITIES →	OUTPUTS →	SHORT/MEDIUM TERM OUTCOMES →	LONG TERM IMPACTS
Funding: • Scottish Government.	Engage with rural organisations, communities and businesses on rural policy and funding opportunities e.g. through Rural Funding portal, Scottish Rural Network newsletter.	Promotional materials produced e.g., newsletter and website.	Increased understanding of relevant policies amongst target audiences.	Improved implementation and delivery of the Scottish Rural Development Programme and broader rural programmes.
People and skills • Network Support Unit • Partners.	Collaborate with wider National Rural Networks across the UK and in the EU and beyond, including hosting visits from people interested in rural development from across Europe.	Case studies produced – written and videos.	Increased awareness/uptake of funding opportunities among target audiences that add value to communities.	Wider policies are more responsive to the needs of rural and island communities.
Policy & Legislative Framework • EU regulations that require Scottish Rural Network funding • Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Act 2024 • Scottish Rural Development Programme • Rural Support Plan (emerging) • Rural Delivery Plan (emerging) • National Islands Plan.	Deliver capacity building grants for third sector organisations.	Events supported.	Enhanced capacity of rural and island organisations and individuals to engage in policy processes and advocate for their needs.	There is co-creation of policy with rural and island communities.
Academic and applied research about what works for rural development.	Share findings of monitoring and evaluation of Scottish Rural Development Programme & wider Scottish Rural Network activities.	Engagement with rural organisations, communities and businesses	Increased involvement of stakeholders impacted by the implementation of rural and island policy.	Collaboration and information sharing is the norm among rural and island stakeholders.
	Promote the Scottish Rural Development Programme and wider policy/programmes/initiatives relevant to rural and island communities.	Engagement with other Scottish Government policy areas.	Improved collaboration and networking among stakeholders.	Enhanced resilience and sustainability of rural and island communities.
	Support effective implementation of the Rural Development Programme • Presentations at local and national events • Online communications • Foster innovation in agriculture, food production, forestry and other rural areas (e.g. through videos).	Engagement with rural organisations and communities and businesses.	Increased awareness of Scottish Rural Network and its role among stakeholders.	
	Engage with other Scottish Government policy areas on relevant issues (e.g. support with communications, community engagement, promotion) and advocate for rural and island communities.	Engagement with UK and international partners.	Increased awareness and understanding of rural and island issues among policymakers.	
	Work with partners to support events.	Monitoring and evaluation outputs	Increased best practice information sharing amongst rural and island communities.	
		Grants delivered.	Increased adoption of innovative technologies and practices.	

ASSUMPTIONS
- Scottish Rural Network remains part of a wider European movement despite UK no longer being an EU member.

RISKS
- Budget cuts and increased demands impact delivery capacity of small staff team
- Community fatigue
- Challenges associated with annual funding
- Perceived duplication of effort with other rural organisations / programmes
- Limited awareness of the contribution of the Scottish Rural Network among stakeholders leads to funding cuts
- There is not continued political or funding support for Scottish Rural Network following 2026 Scottish Parliament election.

Overarching theory of change

Once a Theory of Change was developed for each element, Ipsos created an overarching Theory of Change (see figure 1.4) as a synthesis of the three elements. This chapter highlights the relationship between Community Led Local Development, Scottish Rural Action and the Scottish Rural Network, including areas of common purpose and also distinctions.

Vision and aims

While distinct in their approaches, areas of common purpose across Community Led Local Development, Scottish Rural Action and the Scottish Rural Network include an emphasis on the role of communities in shaping their own futures through a bottom-up, participatory approach. They all highlight sustainability and resilience, with the aim of ensuring the economic, social, and environmental wellbeing of rural and island communities. All three recognise the value of collaboration and networking, both within Scotland and beyond, to share knowledge and best practice.

The relative focus of each element could be summarised as follows:

- Community Led Local Development (CLLD) focuses on local empowerment, and enabling local communities to address their unique challenges and build on their strengths.
- Scottish Rural Action (SRA) focuses on building a rural movement for policy change, mobilising a collective voice for rural Scotland to influence policy and advocate for rural needs.
- The Scottish Rural Network (SRN) focuses on supporting communities through innovation and policy implementation, facilitating community participation in policy processes to improve delivery.

Inputs

Community Led Local Development, Scottish Rural Action and the Scottish Rural Network all operate within a shared policy framework. They are all informed by academic and applied research, and they all rely on Scottish Government funding as a primary input. The involvement of people with diverse skills and experience is also a common thread across each element.

Some key distinctions include:

- Community Led Local Development (CLLD), and its network of Local Action Groups (LAGs), sometimes draws on a more diverse range of funding (for example, match funding, other Scottish Government funding such as the Investing in Communities Fund, UK Government funding such as the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, and remaining EU funds like RURACTIVE).

- Scottish Rural Action (SRA) receives donations and sponsorships from private sector and charitable organisations, and also generates income through paid-for services (for example, secretariat roles).

- The Scottish Rural Network (SRN), which is part of a wider group of National Networks across the UK and EU, operates within a specific legislative framework related to agricultural and rural policy for funding.

Activities

Common activities across the three elements include capacity building activities, networking and communication, and policy engagement. The key distinctions are:

- Community Led Local Development (CLLD)'s focus on direct action at the local level through Local Action Group (LAG) activities, which enable communities to identify their own needs and aspirations, support innovation and investment, and take a strategic approach to funding decisions.

- Scottish Rural Action (SRA)'s focus on building a grassroots rural movement and advocating for rural needs. SRA emphasises building a platform for collective action and amplifying the voices of seldom-heard groups (including, but not only, through the Scottish Rural and Islands Parliament events).

- The Scottish Rural Network (SRN)'s focus on facilitating participation in policy development and improving the delivery of rural development programmes. SRN collaborates with partners to support activities and engages with other Scottish Government policy areas.

Outputs and outcomes

Community Led Local Development, Scottish Rural Action and the Scottish Rural Network all produce outputs related to networking and communication, such as events and meetings, publications and resources, and online engagement. This highlights a shared emphasis on improving connections between stakeholders, sharing information, and fostering collaboration.

Key variations across other outputs and outcomes include:

- Community Led Local Development (CLLD)'s outputs being more project-focused, reflecting the diversity of local initiatives it supports. Its outcomes are centred around tangible local improvements.

- Scottish Rural Action (SRA)'s outputs being geared towards platform building and influencing policy. Its outcomes are centred around strengthening the rural movement.

- The Scottish Rural Network (SRN)'s outputs being focused on effective networking with rural communities and businesses. Its outcomes are centred around improving the development and implementation of rural development programmes and policies.

Longer term impacts

Community Led Local Development, Scottish Rural Action and the Scottish Rural Network all aim to improve the overall quality of life and wellbeing of Scotland's rural and island communities. This includes enhancing economic, social, and environmental sustainability. They all seek to enhance community resilience, confidence, and collaboration.

Their intended impacts are distinct in the following ways:

- Community Led Local Development focuses on longer-term impacts related to resilience, business viability, and systems change. These include increased community leadership of local development initiatives, enhanced community confidence and empowerment, improved access to and control over resources, stable or growing populations, reduced rural poverty and inequality, and enhanced community benefits.
- Scottish Rural Action focuses on longer-term impacts related to strengthening the rural movement. These include evidence-based policymaking that addresses structural barriers to rural and island development, trust between stakeholders, and recognition of the value of rural and island Scotland.
- The Scottish Rural Network focuses on longer-term impacts related to policy responsiveness and programme effectiveness. These include funding being used to add value to rural and island communities, wider policies being more responsive to the needs of rural and island communities, and improved implementation and delivery of the Scottish Rural Development Programme.

Assumptions and risks

Community Led Local Development, Scottish Rural Action and the Scottish Rural Network all rely on external factors, including political support, funding availability and the ongoing commitment of stakeholders. They are also dependent on the capacity and capabilities of staff, volunteers and communities. In particular:

- Community Led Local Development's assumptions focus on the capacity of Local Action Groups and the long-term commitment of local partners.
- Scottish Rural Action's assumptions focus on the dynamics of the rural movement and its relationship with government and civil society.
- The Scottish Rural Network's assumptions focus on its continued connection with European networks.

Funding challenges and community capacity are key risks to all elements, as well as the perception of duplicated effort which could lead to missed opportunities.

Figure 1.4 Overarching Theory of Change

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