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Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

Report on Human rights, equalities and access to services in rural areas of Scotland



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Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

To consider and report on the following (and any additional matter added under Rule 6.1.5A)—

- a. matters relating to equal opportunities, and upon the observance of equal opportunities within the Parliament; and
- b. matters relating to human rights.
- c. matters relating to civil justice within the responsibility of the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and Home Affairs.

2. In these Rules

(a) “equal opportunities” includes the prevention, elimination or regulation of discrimination between persons on grounds of sex or marital status, on racial grounds or on grounds of disability, age, sexual orientation, language or social origin or of other personal attributes, including beliefs or opinions such as religious beliefs or political opinions; and

(b) “human rights” includes Convention rights (within the meaning of section 1 of the Human Rights Act 1998) and other human rights as for example contained in any international convention, treaty or other international instrument ratified by the United Kingdom.

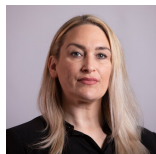


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Membership changes

The following changes to Committee membership took place during the inquiry:

- Paul O'Kane left the Committee on 2 September 2025 and was replaced by Rhoda Grant.
- Rhoda Grant left the Committee on 3 December 2025 and was replaced by Paul O'Kane.
- Paul O'Kane left the Committee on 21 January and was replaced by Rhoda Grant.

Introduction

1. A common theme running through much of the Committee's work over the session has been rurality, particularly the extent to which cross-cutting policy objectives consider equalities impacts in rural and island settings. For example, do people with protected characteristics living in remote or rural areas have the same access to support and services as may be the case in more urban settings? The Committee recognises that other committees have undertaken more detailed work on related policy issues within their own remits (for example on health and housing inequalities) throughout the current session. Whilst it has not been possible to give full scrutiny to all relevant areas in the time available for the inquiry, this report is intended to provide a high-level overview of the key issues as raised by stakeholders in evidence.
2. The Committee agreed at its meeting on 13 May 2025 to undertake an inquiry on human rights, equalities and access to services in rural areas of Scotland. It then considered more detailed proposals for what this could involve at its meeting on 9 September 2025 and agreed that it would take place in autumn 2025. It further agreed that the [Scottish Human Rights Commission's Report on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the Highlands and Islands](#) would form a key reference point for this work.
3. The SHRC's report, published in late 2024, details threats to economic, social, and cultural (ESC) rights in rural Scotland, particularly in the Highlands and Islands, where insufficient access to healthcare, housing, and food, along with fuel poverty and poor transport, hinders the realisation of rights.
4. The Committee took evidence at its meeting on 18 November 2025 from a range of stakeholders representing rural interests including several third sector organisations based in rural and/or island settings. It then took evidence from the Minister for Equalities and the Scottish Government's Deputy Director, Land Reform, Rural and Islands Policy, Anna Densham, at its meeting on 25 November 2025. The official reports of both meetings can be accessed on [the Committee's website](#).
5. To help inform its evidence taking, the Committee also held an informal engagement session in Blairgowrie on 10 November 2025 at which it met with local stakeholders to hear first-hand about the challenges they can face. An [unattributed note of the discussions](#) is available on the Committee's website.
6. The Committee also received four written submissions from academics, a councillor and Scottish Poverty Alliance which have been published online. All information relating to the inquiry can be accessed online at: [Rurality | Scottish Parliament Website](#). The Committee is grateful to all those who contributed to the inquiry.
7. In the time available for the inquiry it was not possible to cover all rights listed in the SHRC report. This report therefore considers the priorities raised by stakeholders in evidence and sets out the Committee's conclusions and recommendations under the following themes:
 - Overarching issues (including financial pressures, transport and the need for effective engagement with communities)

- Economic rights (including rights to work and to social security);
 - Social rights (including rights to housing and healthcare);
 - Access to justice.
8. It is worth noting that many of the rights considered in the SHRC report had been expected to be covered by a Scottish Human Rights Bill which the Scottish Government had previously committed to introducing in 2024. However, no Bill was introduced, and it was omitted from subsequent programmes for government. The Scottish Government confirmed that it remained committed to introducing such a Bill, but this would not happen in the current parliamentary session for a variety of reasons.

9. **The Committee reiterates its “sincere disappointment” that a Human Rights bill was not introduced during the session.¹ We note the Minister’s letter of 13 January 2026 which confirms that the Scottish Government remains “committed to introducing the Bill in the next Parliamentary session.” In order to facilitate thorough scrutiny, and bearing in mind the work that has already been done during the current session, the Committee would like to see such a bill laid at the earliest opportunity.**

Background: Scottish Human Rights Commission's Report on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the Highlands and Islands

10. The SHRC first reported on human rights concerns in rural areas in March 2023, in a [report to the UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights](#). It identified the following concerns:
 - Lack of affordable and quality housing;
 - Limited access to sufficient and nutritious food;
 - Inaccessible health care services;
 - Fuel poverty;
 - Access to technology or poor internet connectivity;
 - Poverty related attainment gap in education;
 - Transport connectivity to essential public services and supplies.
11. The SHRC then undertook further work focused on the Highland, Shetland, Orkney, Argyll and Bute, Moray, and Na h-Eileanan Siar local authority areas.
12. Its subsequent [report on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in the Highlands and Islands](#) found that there were “significant challenges in the current enjoyment of economic, social, and cultural rights for people in the Highlands and Islands.”
13. The report highlighted areas of concern including “the apparent failure to meet the most basic international obligations related to the right to food, the right to housing, the right to health, and the right to cultural life.” The report also expressed concern about “the apparent regression or deterioration of rights across the Highlands and Islands” which had been “exacerbated by decisions on budget reductions or indeed the complete elimination of previously existing services without sufficient mitigating measures.” The SHRC found that across all the rights examined, “there is not a single human right that meets all the conditions of adequacy under international law.” In the SHRC’s view, this suggests that “there are significant failures in how policies and services are being designed and/or delivered” meaning that “services across the Highlands and Islands are not fully accessible, affordable, available, acceptable, or of sufficient quality (among other conditions).”
14. The SHRC then made eight recommendations to duty bearers (including for example, Scottish Ministers, local authorities, NHS boards, Police Scotland, and education and social work services) in Scotland as follows:
 - Strengthen Human Rights Laws and Access to Justice;
 - Meet Minimum Core Obligations (particularly in respect of rooflessness, hunger

and access to sexual and reproductive health services);

- Improve Service Adequacy;
- Listen to Communities and Adopt a Human Rights-Based Approach;
- Flexible and Localised Policies;
- Assess Policy Impact on Highlands and Islands;
- Create Specific Targets for Human Rights; and
- Adopt Human Rights Budgeting.

15. In evidence to the Committee, the Minister for Equalities (“the Minister”) acknowledged the vital role rural communities play as part of Scotland’s social and economic fabric, particularly through the food, drink and tourism sectors and through renewable energy. Whilst such communities had shown themselves to be “dynamic and resilient” she acknowledged the unique challenges they face which impact on daily life and “can impact on how individuals can access and claim their human rights.”²
16. The Minister described the SHRC report as “an important intervention” and stated that the issues it highlights “go to the heart of decisions around public service delivery, quality and accessibility.” Whilst not a definitive assessment of rights realisation, in her view, the report provides “an important reflection of lived experience in those communities, and it shows that there is more to do to ensure better enjoyment of rights equally across Scotland.”²
17. The Minister confirmed that the Scottish Government had responded to the report in May 2025 outlining actions it intended to take in response, including through its rural development plan and national islands plan. She also urged those with responsibility for providing services in rural areas to use the report’s findings to drive improvement and confirmed that the Scottish Government remained committed to working with public sector partners and other stakeholders to assist them in doing so.
18. The Minister further confirmed that the intention of the current Scottish Government is to introduce a human rights bill in the next parliamentary session to improve outcomes and accountability and help to “bring economic, social and cultural rights closer to home so that communities, including rural communities, feel reflected in the decisions that duty bearers make.”²

Overarching issues and interconnectedness

19. It is clear that certain overarching issues apply to varying degrees to all or most rural communities. However, participants in the roundtable discussion also noted that each area has its own particular needs based on population, demographics, geography and other factors.
20. Community Land Scotland described the “interconnectedness” between all the issues and challenges in rural areas. For example, for many jobs, potential applicants would need housing and possibly childcare, along with access to good digital and transport connections.
21. When invited to explain how the Scottish Government approached issues around the realisation of human rights in rural areas, in light of their interconnectedness and the fact that they span multiple ministerial portfolios, the Minister explained that she promotes mainstreaming and provides support and challenge through ministerial meetings. Whilst she advised that her colleagues were already well aware of the cross-cutting nature of themes, she gave the example of the promotion and embedding of Equality Impact Assessments across different portfolios as helping ensure the consideration of relevant factors early in the policy development process.
22. The Minister went on to recognise the challenges faced by any large organisation in terms of working across interconnected but distinct portfolios whilst acknowledging that “one size cannot fit all.” She explained that “it takes time to produce systemic plans and to do that well and, over that time, other pressures emerge” but assured the Committee that this work was ongoing.²

23. The Committee welcomes the work being undertaken within the Scottish Government to ensure a more strategic approach to interconnected issues spanning multiple policy areas. However, the Committee is concerned that evidence from local stakeholders suggests that this work has yet to result in concrete improvements “on the ground”. It appears that siloed working within different Scottish Government departments remains an issue which prevents the full realisation of rights in many rural areas as considered later in this report.

24. The Committee notes that the Minister’s role in encouraging her colleagues to fully consider and mainstream issues relating to the realisation of human rights in rural areas appears to have largely been undertaken on an informal and ad hoc basis. We therefore recommend that the next administration puts in place more concrete arrangements to ensure that this is done on a strategic and structured basis in future.

Financial pressures: The “rural premium”

25. Participants in the informal engagement session described the additional financial pressures faced by rural residents. Whilst these may be similar to financial pressures faced by people across Scotland, they can be felt more keenly in rural areas. For example, the following issues were raised:
- Jobs can be seasonal and low-paid;
 - There is a lack of affordable and available childcare;
 - The cost of groceries can be higher in rural areas as there is often a reliance on smaller shops rather than major supermarkets;
 - There can be pockets of deprivation hidden in affluent areas and data challenges make it difficult to reach those who may be “hidden”.
26. Participants also referred to the increasing cost of living and the additional impact this has on rural communities. In addition to the bullets set out above, higher than average fuel costs, both for heating and transport increase the cost of living in rural areas further still.
27. Borders Community Action pointed out that the Borders region is one of the lowest wage economies in Scotland with workers earning on average, £50 less per week than the national average. Third Sector Dumfries and Galloway spoke of the high cost of living in rural areas, pointing towards surveys which found a 125 per cent difference between the cheapest basket of shopping in a town versus the cost in a rural store. For many, particularly those without cars, there is little option other than to pay higher prices locally. In a letter to the Committee, the Scottish Poverty Alliance highlighted many of the same barriers and described the unavoidable additional cost of living in rural and island communities as the “rural premium.”³
28. In the Scottish Poverty Alliance’s view:
- ” “If Scotland is serious about progressive realisation of human rights, action on the cost of living must be at the centre of our approach to rights realisation in rural and island areas. This means explicitly recognising and reducing the rural premium through targeted measures on energy costs, transport, housing, and service provision. It also means embedding a robust rural and island lens across policy-making, informed by lived experience.”
29. The Minister explained that the Scottish Government “absolutely recognised” the “additional and unique cost of living pressures” in rural areas and highlighted the allocation of £3 billion in the 2025-26 budget to tackle poverty. She also discussed a number of other initiatives under specific policy areas as considered further below.
30. **The Committee is acutely aware of the higher than average cost of living in rural communities or the “rural premium”. It also recognises the complex and interconnected nature of contributory factors and that it is unrealistic to expect them to be resolved overnight. However, we agree that more needs to be done and invite the Scottish Government to respond to**

suggestions from the Scottish Poverty Alliance that targeted measures on energy costs, transport, housing, and service provision are required.

Transport and access to services

31. During the Committee’s informal engagement session, a further common theme related to the lack of affordable and reliable transport services which can increase inequalities in accessing health, social care and other services. Witnesses also described how the centralisation of services can leave people with no option other than to travel long distances to access services, something that can be particularly difficult for older and/or disabled people.
32. Aberdeenshire Voluntary Action told the Committee that in its area, local public services including rural nurseries, schools, community hospitals and libraries “are being hollowed out”⁴ removing the choice of accessing local services for many and at times making it impossible to access services at all.
33. As noted above, Borders Community Action explained that most families need to own a car to live in rural areas which inevitably brings additional costs. Voluntary Action Shetland pointed out that fuel is more expensive in island communities, increasing the cost of travel still further thereby adding to the “rural premium”.
34. Aberdeenshire Voluntary Action explained that it costs more than £20 per day for a daily commute of thirty miles each way to Aberdeen by public transport whilst Uist Council of Voluntary Organisations spoke of community transport services in the Western Isles being “eroded” by “ever-decreasing” public funding for third sector providers. The topic of community transport services is considered further under the next sub-heading.⁴

35. The Committee recognises the challenges in providing public transport services, particularly for smaller, more isolated communities where revenue from fares is less likely to cover costs. This also applies to commercial operators who are unlikely to operate unprofitable routes without public subsidy.

36. However, the Committee is clear that adequate transport is essential to the full realisation of ESC rights in rural communities and strongly recommends that the Scottish Government sets out the actions it is currently taking to support the viability of such services and any additional steps it intends to take in the future.

37. A further initiative which appears to have been successful in some areas is community transport as considered further below.

Community-led solutions and the need for stable funding and effective consultation

38. Whilst there are examples of good provision, such as door-to-door community transport, the Committee heard that improved funding and infrastructure is vital to support such services. Community Land Scotland explained that in Applecross, “we have had to step in and provide a community transport service because there is no other functioning transport service”, something that had had a huge positive impact on younger people in particular in enabling them to access sporting, cultural and education events and activities. Highland TSI also highlighted the benefits such services bring but emphasised that this relied on the goodwill of volunteers and the provision of adequate funding. Uist Council of Voluntary Organisations spoke of community transport services in the Western Isles being “eroded” by “ever-decreasing” public funding for third sector providers. ⁴
39. Third Sector Dumfries and Galloway raised the question of whether public bodies should deliver certain services such as transport themselves, suggesting that attempts to redesign them over many years had not been fully successful. Instead, it highlighted the benefits of investing relatively small sums in communities and encouraging them to take ownership and come up with their own solutions. Borders Community Action described collaboration between the public and third sector as “a patchwork that makes the fabric of what communities are about” and called for “a serious conversation about redesign.” Borders Community Action agreed that some services are best delivered at a local level, with communities filling gaps where necessary, but was clear on the need for sufficient resource and for this to be reflected in decision making. Borders Community Action further explained that whilst community transport provided a good example of “hyper-local solutions” it was not a panacea and investment would still be required in public transport. It was also vital that effective use was made of existing resource, for example through community wealth building initiatives. Capacity building was also key along with an emphasis of involving third sector/community groups at the earliest stage of the decision-making process. ⁴
40. Voluntary Action Shetland agreed that the third sector could provide more services but only on a relatively small scale due to a lack of capacity. But in order to achieve this, stable, multiyear funding was needed. It urged decision makers to remember that the voluntary sector is not “free” and to provide full cost recovery for those who give up their own time to support their communities.
41. Third Sector Dumfries and Galloway highlighted what it described as confusion between public service and the public sector, suggesting that the focus was on funding the public sector and expecting that it would reach priority areas rather than funding communities themselves to take ownership. It also spoke of a focus on maintaining existing services rather than reimagining what was truly needed, stating that:
- ” “It is too late for reform, which we should have done 14 years ago, or even when we were coming out of the pandemic four or five years ago. We had a choice to renew and do something different, but instead we did recovery—we went back to where we were before, and it was not great before.”

42. Other participants agreed on the need for a radical rethink of how funding is distributed to third sector and community organisations. However, Community Land Scotland spoke of a broader issue of barriers that often prevent such groups from making a full contribution. In its view, it was unfair to expect volunteers to deliver public services without being adequately resourced to do so. It also spoke of the inefficiencies that centralisation can create in large regions such as the Highlands and suggested that budgets being allocated on a per capita basis fails to recognise the needs of sparsely populated localities. Highland TSI agreed that the vast Highland region is far from being homogenous with different communities having different and distinct traditions and even climates. In its view, with the right education and financial support, “those communities will often flourish and stop needing assistance.” The important thing was having an equal seat at the table and being provided with the right baseline support to enable them to succeed.⁴
43. Uist Council of Voluntary Organisations strongly supported calls for the third sector to be at the table as an equal partner when decisions are being made. Given the “huge reliance” on third sector services and their insight into grass roots community needs, it questioned “why should we not be there at the formation and planning levels, too?” In its view, “a multi-agency and multidisciplinary approach would benefit our population, so collaboration is required.”⁴
44. Participants in the informal engagement meeting were equally clear that the third sector was vital to the sustainability of rural communities. They also noted the widely acknowledged challenges in terms of securing multi-year funding and the need for partnership and meaningful participation alongside public bodies. There was also a broad consensus among participants in the roundtable evidence session with Scottish Rural Action, for example, stating that the right “approach should be about creating a positive platform for meaningful dialogue between communities and Government, based on a shared vision.” Highland TSI spoke of the importance of such discussions taking place “upstream” of decisions being made as opposed to “downstream, which is where things start to go wrong.” In its view, communities want to improve their areas and “they are the experts on those areas, so we need to use them.”⁴
45. Voluntary Action Shetland told the Committee that the third sector could deliver more services but has issues with scale. Funding is the biggest issue and the third sector needs secure, stable multi-year funding to facilitate longer term planning and reduce uncertainty. In Third Sector Dumfries and Galloway’s view, even three years’ worth of funding was insufficient given the importance of the services provided. It explained that “it is not acceptable to have annualised funding for services and a patchwork of funding—some for outreach, a little bit for doing housing support and a little bit for doing service provision.”⁴
46. Responding to these points, the Minister described third sector organisations as “essential” and agreed that meaningful engagement with rural stakeholders at an early stage of policy development was “absolutely vital”. She explained that she encourages such engagement across relevant portfolios to help understand the specific issues and needs that matter most to communities, with the intention of allowing a more flexible and localised approach to delivery. Tools such as the islands community impact assessment are intended to encourage this to be done in a systematic way.²

47. The Minister also acknowledged that the [third] “sector needs support, stability and the opportunity for longer-term planning.” Ms Densham described the rural and islands impact assessment toolkits as “a form of rural proofing” which would complement existing engagement mechanisms that many policy teams already have in place. She agreed on the importance of multiyear funding for third sector organisations and confirmed that the Scottish Government was piloting a fairer funding approach “which is intended to bring back more multiyear funding.” Over £130 million had been provided through the pilot in the current year although this required a “balancing act” given the wider fiscal situation. However, the Scottish Government hoped to roll the pilot out further across the third sector in the future. ²
48. The Minister went on to express frustration that the Scottish Government too, only receives single year budgets as a result of Westminster’s budgetary cycle, making it difficult to guarantee multi-year funding to third sector partners. However, she confirmed that in her view, the pilot constituted an “important first step to mainstreaming multiyear funding agreements across the third sector to balance our ambitions against challenging financial decisions and the landscape that we are working in.” ²
49. The Committee then asked the Minister what the path was for shifting from a pilot to a full roll out of the scheme. She responded in writing on 17 December ⁵ as follows:
- ” “At this stage, the Fairer Funding Pilot is ongoing. We aim to utilise the knowledge and understanding of the impact on the third sector organisations involved to embed fairer, longer-term funding models across the third sector while also remaining mindful of the challenging financial situation and external factors, particularly annual budget processes and inflationary pressures. Such factors mean that it is not currently possible to provide multi-year funding to all third sector organisations.”
50. Turning towards a different aspect of the delivery of local services, the Committee asked the Minister what steps needed to be taken to embed a local approach and help bring parity of esteem to third sector partners. She acknowledged that opportunities for collaboration were less embedded than they should be, but pointed out that as councils are autonomous bodies, the Scottish Government must collaborate with them rather than dictate how they should do things. She highlighted her work with councils on their responsibilities under the Public Sector Equality Duty as an example of how she sets expectations for how they fulfil their duties, including through effective consultation with third sector partners.
51. The Minister also drew attention to Scotland’s Public Service Reform Strategy (published in June 2025) and confirmed that a blueprint for community decision making would be published by the end of the current session which “should help to shape a different democratic future in which communities are further empowered to make more decisions for themselves.” In her view, these initiatives, and other legislative developments such as the Community Wealth Building (Scotland) Bill demonstrate how the Scottish Government is “providing leadership and leading by example.” ²
52. When invited to set out how best to measure the success of these initiatives in five years’ time, the Minister suggested that this should involve listening to those most impacted and ensuring that statistical data analysis is cross referenced with the

lived experience of communities. Ms Densham further explained that the Scottish Government was building up disaggregated data to provide quantitative information and complementing this through consultations and other forms of engagement. In her view, “ultimately, success is about how well services are being delivered. If those models are the right models, we would expect the bigger outcome measures to go up.”²

53. The Committee recognises the invaluable contribution that community-led organisations often make towards helping sustain rural communities and maintaining access to services through initiatives such as community transport. The Committee also notes that such services can be more cost-effective than public sector alternatives in some localities although they cannot replace them entirely. However, the Committee is clear that such initiatives cannot be sustained or upscaled without adequate, long-term and sustainable funding and support. It is not acceptable for essential services in rural areas to be dependent on the goodwill of volunteers alone.

54. The Committee strongly agrees that communities are best placed to identify local need, prioritise accordingly and come up with their own solutions. Such solutions should then be explored and put in place, wherever possible, through a coproduction approach with public sector partners. It is therefore essential that community-led organisations and other third sector groups have “a seat at the table” right from the start of the policy development process so that their voices can be heard and listened to.

55. The Committee is aware that the subject of multi-year funding for third sector organisations has been raised repeatedly by committees throughout this and previous sessions. The Committee therefore strongly welcomes the Fairer Funding pilot and agrees with the Minister that it is an “important first step”. We recommend that this pilot should be built upon and expanded as soon as possible.

56. Whilst the Committee recognises that it will not be possible to guarantee secure, multi-year funding for all third sector organisations under existing fiscal arrangements, it invites the Scottish Government to confirm the timescales under which the pilot is operating and to update the Committee on its impact and lessons learned at an appropriate point. The Scottish Government is therefore invited to confirm when such an analysis will be made available.

57. The Committee also welcomes the further initiatives listed by the Minister which it hopes will help further embed a local approach and bring parity of esteem to third sector partners. We recommend that our successor

committee continues to monitor progress towards this end in the next parliamentary session.

Economic Rights

58. The SHRC describes economic rights as being essential to ensuring people have the financial resources to access services, goods, and other basic needs, enabling them to live a dignified life. The SHRC report divides these rights into two main categories as set out below.

Right to work and fair treatment at work

59. The SHRC report explains that this right “protects everyone’s ability to freely choose their own work, and for working conditions that are good and dignified.” However, it notes that most protections of these rights are found in reserved UK employment legislation with “only a few exceptions [where] the Scottish Parliament has authority to legislate and intervene.”
60. The Committee explored barriers that may prevent people in rural areas from accessing employment itself, or support to help them develop skills to improve their employability. Borders Community Action spoke of “three grand challenges that rural communities face—transport, economic disadvantage, and the overall impact on people’s life chances.” Employment can be a way out of poverty, but many employers in rural areas are small businesses spread across a wide area. A key barrier, therefore, was access to transport, but inequalities linked to childcare and other caring responsibilities were also major issues given high costs and a shortage of local provision. Such barriers can deter women in particular from entering the labour market or from progressing in their careers or can push people already in employment to leave their jobs, thereby contributing to increased poverty levels.⁴
61. Uist Council of Voluntary Organisations strongly agreed with this point, explaining that “childcare is a massive issue and it has a direct impact on the economy, employability and on human rights.” It called for policies and frameworks “to have a rural and island lens to allow services to run in extremely rural settings” explaining that it “cannot be one framework fits all.” For example, it pointed out that Uist no longer has an independent childminder as demand was too low to be financially sustainable or to attract subsidies. However, initiatives such as a multi-agency Uist and Barra childcare forum were working in close partnership with local and national government to address the situation. In its view, similar models should be more widely adopted in other rural parts of Scotland.⁴
62. Another significant challenge relating to employment in many rural areas relates to demographic change and an older than average population. This situation is being exacerbated by younger people often relocating to urban areas where there are greater opportunities to access employment, further education and training. Borders Community Action spoke of the need for “hyper-local” initiatives for enterprise, employment and skills development as opposed to the current “piecemeal” approach as a way of addressing this.
63. Third Sector Dumfries and Galloway described the two main factors in relation to employment as being “the difficulty in accessing the work and jobs that are already available in rural communities and the need to create more opportunities.” In its view, an overly national or regional approach towards helping build the wider

economy led to underinvestment in building and sustaining local economies.⁴

64. A further key issue which impacts on employment opportunities in rural areas is digital connectivity, which is often less reliable than in urban areas. However, Third Sector Dumfries and Galloway told the Committee that local initiatives to improve connectivity in its region could not be delivered due to shrinking national investment in digital development.
65. Dr Yanes of the SHRC spoke of the importance of acknowledging variances across the country, noting that there are ample employment opportunities in Orkney, but it faced other barriers such as a lack of affordable housing as considered further below. However, some other rural parts of Scotland lacked sufficient employment opportunities which could be linked to poor digital connectivity. Like Third Sector Dumfries and Galloway, he referred to local initiatives such as attempts to create digital hubs which had failed to realise their potential due to a lack of resource.
66. A further issue raised by Dr Yanes was the centralisation of employment opportunities either in the central belt or in larger towns and cities in other areas. In his view, the Scottish Government and other public bodies such as Highland Council could help by leading by example and relocating departments dealing with rural affairs and islands to the communities they are intended to support.
67. In respect of childcare, the Minister spoke of major investments including almost £1 billion per year to fully fund 1,140 hours of childcare (which factors in the additional costs of provision in rural areas). She also highlighted the addressing depopulation fund which provide relatively small sums to communities to spend on their own priorities which could include investment in childcare. Other communities had chosen to invest in skills and training with the intention of helping retain younger people in their areas.
68. The Minister also spoke of work undertaken by regional enterprise agencies to address equality of opportunity, and regional growth deal projects intended to accelerate economic growth. She described this as a top priority for government and her letter of 17 December 2025 provided further information on these and other initiatives. In summary, she described the Scottish Government's approach as follows:
- ” “Collectively, with partners, our aim is to build an employability system that tackles labour market inequalities by being more responsive and joined up and by aligning with the needs of employers and service provision, and which also ensures that the work is fair and accessible.”
69. Turning to digital connectivity, the Minister told the Committee that initiatives including the R199 programme and the broadband voucher scheme coupled with commercial service providers should enable all homes and businesses in Scotland to access superfast broadband connections. She also assured the Committee that lessons would be learned where failings were identified as had recently been the case following storm damage in Tiree. Other initiatives included joint management of the UK-wide project gigabit with the UK Government and changes to building standards to require the installation of suitable digital infrastructure for new buildings.

70. **The Committee recognises the interconnected nature of multiple challenges in rural areas which can act as barriers to employment which, in turn, can lead to increased poverty levels, thus creating a “vicious circle”. Whilst they will vary depending on local circumstances, they may include access to adequate transport links, digital connections, childcare services, healthcare, housing, training and employment opportunities themselves.**

71. **Whilst the Committee also recognises that these challenges will not be resolved overnight, we heard examples of initiatives and proposals that appear to be working well or have the potential to do so, including:**

- **The multi-agency Uist and Barra childcare forum;**
- **Suggested “hyper-local” initiatives for enterprise, employment and skills development;**
- **The potential for investing in local digital hubs;**
- **Suggestions that local and national government departments dealing with rural and island issues should be located in the communities they support to a greater degree than is currently the case.**

72. **The Committee is clear that there is an urgent need for initiatives that have been proven to work well in communities to be learned from. We therefore invite the Scottish Government to reflect upon and respond to these suggestions and confirm whether they have the potential to be rolled out more broadly and under what timescales. We further invite the Scottish Government to provide detail of any other innovative approaches it may be considering that have been demonstrated to work for local communities.**

Right to social security

73. The SHRC report explains that “social security is a human right protected by a range of international human rights laws, which provide detailed standards and commentary on the State’s obligations to respect, protect, and fulfil this right.” Again, many areas of social security rights are reserved to Westminster although certain aspects are devolved to the Scottish Parliament. The SHRC notes that “Scotland’s new social security system recognises social security as a human right and aims to treat people with dignity and respect.”

74. A particular issue for Third Sector Dumfries and Galloway related to the availability and accessibility of independent advice services. It explained that many may be unaware that they are entitled to financial assistance and noted that advice services in its area resulted in around £9 million being brought into the local economy. However, such services were at risk of being “dismantled” due to budget cuts.

75. Aberdeenshire Voluntary Action agreed, describing the social security system as “bamboozling”. It explained that employers often do not understand how difficult the system can be for people to navigate, especially regarding the number of hours that can be worked before impacting on benefit entitlement. In its view, “the system does not need to be this complicated. The amount of resources that we are putting in to helping to people navigate the system is becoming unsustainable.”²
76. Responding to these points, the Minister noted that the Scottish Government has a statutory duty to promote the take-up of benefits across the social security system and highlighted linkages between digital connectivity and the uptake of benefits. The Scottish Government continued to fund a free and independent advocacy service to support disabled people in accessing benefits which has supported over 13,000 disabled people in navigating the system. She provided further detail in writing on actions the Scottish Government was taking to help people access social security and noted that all applications could now be made online. However, she was clear that the system was “not digital by design, but digital when appropriate,” thus ensuring equal access for those who prefer non-digital routes.²

77. The Committee recognises the complexity of the social security system. Ideally, the Committee would like the system to be made easier to navigate but we recognise that the Scottish Government only has responsibility for certain parts of it.

78. The Committee welcomes the continued Scottish Government funding for independent advocacy services to help people most in need to navigate the system. However, we note the comments of stakeholders which suggest that such services are at risk when provided locally due to budget cuts and invite the Scottish Government to respond to these concerns.

Social Rights

79. The SHRC report states that:

” “Social rights are those that society as a whole is concerned with ensuring for everyone. They are essential to guaranteeing that everyone feels like a full member of society. Social rights include the right to an adequate standard of living (covering food, housing, and clothing), the right to health, the right to social care, and the right to education.”

80. The SHRC report breaks the Social Rights heading down into several specific areas, two of which are considered below.

Right to housing

81. The SHRC report states that the human right to adequate housing “is crucial for the enjoyment of all economic, social, and cultural rights.” Whilst this right is protected under international law, “housing is not explicitly recognised as a human right in Scotland, though some legislation protects certain aspects of what the right entails.” This right, along with the right to health attracted perhaps the largest amount of commentary from stakeholders, something which is perhaps unsurprising given the ongoing housing emergency and the high profile, and impact on people’s lives, of both policy areas.

82. During its informal engagement session, the Committee heard about the lack of affordable housing in rural areas, which can deter people from taking up jobs in the area. The group also discussed fuel poverty which is assessed on factors including household income, energy prices, energy efficiency of homes and how energy is used in them. Again, this issue relates to the “rural premium” as described by the Scottish Poverty Alliance.

83. Rurality exacerbates fuel poverty as many homes are older properties for which retrofitting would be costly. Whilst some grants and loans are available, the Committee heard that affordability remains a major barrier. Participants explained that even new build homes can often fail on efficiency due to the fabric of the building and poor insulation. The group agreed on the need to build new homes which are properly insulated and require minimal heating to avoid creating multiple issues for future generations.

84. The shortage of affordable housing is a common issue across most rural areas. It contributes to depopulation, and witnesses spoke of the lack of infrastructure to support housing, barriers relating to planning hurdles and increased material and labour costs. For example, Voluntary Action Shetland described the lack of building contractors in Shetland coupled with the lack of accommodation to house them if brought to the island for construction work as “a real catch-22 situation.”⁴

85. Third Sector Dumfries and Galloway highlighted situations where young families were treated as a priority in terms of being housed by a council, but where little cognisance was given to their other needs. This means they could be housed in rural villages with limited facilities and services, making it difficult to access their other ESC rights. In his view, without repopulation of rural areas, “we will only ever

be managing decline on the basis of forecasting services and infrastructure for a declining population.”⁴

86. Third Sector Dumfries and Galloway further highlighted the importance of investment in smaller builders and social housing initiatives, explaining that “our area will never be attractive to big commercial house building” due to scale. Whilst infrastructure and other costs would be greater than in urban areas, this would provide for “a long-term investment in repopulation.” Given that rural areas will not achieve economies of scale in house building, Third Sector Dumfries and Galloway was clear on the need for investment in smaller developments and related infrastructure.⁴
87. Third Sector Dumfries and Galloway also referred to successful but small-scale third sector partnerships to assist residents in heating their homes more efficiently. Uist Council of Voluntary Organisations explained that the Western Isles have some of the highest levels of fuel poverty in Scotland and grant funding was needed to help increase efficiency and reduce costs. Voluntary Action Shetland spoke of similar issues and noted that people in employment but on lower incomes may be unaware that they may be entitled to receive financial support to improve energy efficiency in their homes. However, even where such funding was available, this was of limited value where it is difficult to source suitable contractors to undertake the work.
88. Community Land Scotland explained that in some areas, community landowners play a key role in providing land for house construction given that large developers had little incentive to do so. It therefore suggested that priorities should include greater emphasis on the availability of land for construction and the increasing concentration of land ownership in rural areas. In its view, there was a need for non-state actors including large-scale private landowners to “step up” to provide land for housebuilding to ensure the future viability of communities and help deliver public good. It also called for increased funding for community groups to support them in navigating complex planning processes. Voluntary Action Shetland agreed, explaining that the planning system could be “a nightmare” and describing it as “not fit for purpose”.⁴
89. Community Land Scotland also highlighted the impact of large numbers of short-term lets in rural communities, increasing the risk of depopulation as local people are increasingly being priced out of the market. In its view, this was about “the very viability of rural communities” given the connections between depopulation, an ageing population and the continued provision of public services. Voluntary Action Shetland spoke of similar issues in Shetland where tenants may be evicted during the tourist season to free up properties for highly profitable short-term lets to visitors. This, coupled with older people from other areas buying properties on the islands, contributed to a lack of affordable housing for younger people in particular. This has resulted in many younger people feeling they had no option other than to relocate to other places rather than remaining in the communities they grew up in.⁴
90. Highland TSI agreed that the lack of affordable housing could have a major impact on the sustainability of communities, for example through local schools finding it difficult to recruit teachers as they would have nowhere local to live. Similar challenges also existed for relatively low paid work including in the hospitality and social care sectors which had previously attracted large numbers of workers from

overseas. Given the high cost of living in rural areas, coupled with a lack of housing, infrastructure and services, it was becoming increasingly difficult to fill these roles. On a more positive note, she noted that lots of work was coming to the Highlands, particularly in engineering through the green free port and major pylon construction projects. However, she was concerned that this could lead to well-qualified and experienced workers struggling to secure work locally once these major projects had ended.

91. The Committee also heard that even when housing is being constructed in the Highlands and Islands, such developments tended to be on the outskirts of established population centres. Whilst Community Land Scotland supported the SHRC's recommendations, it suggested there was too much focus on existing Scottish Government action plans which "to be frank ... have not yet led to any significant change on the ground."⁴
92. However, Aberdeenshire Voluntary Action spoke of different challenges in its area, explaining that new housing developments were often situated away from town centres, services and transport links. Whilst such developments may be more affordable, they rely on car ownership creating an additional barrier for some. It therefore called for the adoption of a more creative approach with the voice of communities being at the heart of decision making.
93. The SHRC report states that "there isn't a rural housing crisis. There's a whole series of different crises." Given that the challenges in one rural part of Scotland will be different to those in others, Dr Yanes was clear that the policy and legislative response cannot be the same but must be flexible enough to respond to local circumstances. He therefore called for a "bolder approach that rethinks the way that we undertake construction and do our planning." He further suggested that existing legislation fails to recognise the differences between building in Barra compared to Edinburgh and called for planning and procurement legislation to be redesigned to enable greater flexibility.
94. The Minister recognised the challenges brought by the need to provide infrastructure to support house building, particularly in the context of limited transport links and increased labour and material costs. In respect of the shortage of qualified builders, she highlighted the benefits that local apprenticeship schemes bring, including by increasing the likelihood of younger people securing skills which enable them to work and live in their communities. Whilst the challenges in respect of affordable rural housing were "massive", the Minister stated that the Scottish Government was "building on the delivery of more than 12,000 affordable homes in rural and island communities between 2016 and March 2024" and aimed to deliver a further 11,000 by 2032. This was being supported through demand-led funds such as the £30 million rural and island housing fund, (recently extended to 2028), and the £25 million rural affordable homes for key workers fund.²
95. The Minister also described the planning system as "a critical enabler for building more quality homes" which was "about local solutions to local issues, bearing in mind the geography, the locations and the challenges." She explained that ministers wrote to planning authorities in September 2025 to make clear their expectation that an emergency-led focus should be applied to decision making in the context of the housing emergency. NPF4 also "gives explicit positive support for the delivery of more high-quality, affordable and sustainable rural homes." Other initiatives such as

the national planning hub were intended to help provide further capacity and expertise to planning authorities. Ms Densham confirmed that “in theory, flexibility exists” but more work was needed to make this a practical reality. Officials were working to implement the greater flexibility provided by NPF4 and the expectation was that the situation would improve over time. Separate work was ongoing through organisations such as Highlands and Islands Enterprise with a view to improving the overall environment for house builders by finding solutions which would reduce costs.²

96. The Committee is conscious that the national housing emergency has been a key priority for the Parliament throughout the current session and that other committees such as the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee have considered the subject in detail. Whilst we have been unable to consider challenges relating to the availability and affordability of housing in rural areas to the same extent in the time available for this inquiry, it is clear that this remains a significant challenge which impacts on several aspects of the sustainability of rural communities and requires urgent action.

97. We therefore invite the Scottish Government to provide an update on its current position and any next steps in respect of the following suggestions and challenges as raised by stakeholders:

- **The need for investment in small-scale builders, infrastructure and training to help make construction in rural communities more viable;**
- **What more can be done to encourage housing to be constructed in communities which are most in need and to ensure adequate transport and infrastructure links where necessary;**
- **The need to enable greater flexibility in the planning system;**
- **The need to encourage large landowners to make land available for house construction where alternative options are limited or do not exist;**
- **The impact of large numbers of short-term lets and people from elsewhere buying up properties in rural communities, particularly on Scotland’s islands.**

Right to health

98. The SHRC report describes health as “a fundamental human right, indispensable for the exercise of other human rights.” However, it notes that “the right to health is not a guarantee of being healthy, but rather the right to access all the conditions and services necessary to achieve the highest attainable standard of health.” This encompasses both physical and mental health and is realised not just through

access to health care services “but also by addressing a wide range of socio-economic factors that collectively create conditions for a healthy life.”

99. During the informal engagement session, participants described the barriers to health created by distance and travel costs, particularly where early appointment times may necessitate an overnight stay. Participants also discussed the additional challenges of providing home care services to people living in remote areas.
100. These issues were expanded on in formal evidence taking with Borders Community Action noting that many people in rural areas live in small settlements which often do not have public transport links, creating significant challenges in accessing their right to health for those who don't own cars. This is an issue that particularly impacts older people and people with disabilities.
101. In an island context, Uist Council of Voluntary Organisations explained that people often have to travel to Stornoway for healthcare appointments, usually by ferry or plane. Both services are infrequent, often running at inconvenient times and may be impacted by adverse weather, meaning that in its view the service was “not fit for purpose”, particularly for those already suffering from ill health. ⁴
102. Highland TSI spoke of the centralisation of health services in Inverness including maternity services which often involves long journeys or overnight stays bringing further costs. Third Sector Dumfries and Galloway explained how an appointment that may take a couple of hours in total in urban areas (including travel) can take up a full day for people in rural areas.
103. Voluntary Action Shetland raised similar issues to those raised by Uist Council of Voluntary Organisations with many health services being centralised in Lerwick or Aberdeen. However, it noted that many GP services are now provided by telephone consultations which can bring benefits. It also highlighted some positive pilot schemes including linking up with the NHS and Royal Voluntary Service to provide patient travel to appointments which had previously been done by taxi incurring “ridiculous” expenses. A further innovation was the creation of local “hubs” bringing different health services together which seem to be working well. ⁴
104. Dr Yanes emphasised the difference between services being “free” and being “affordable” to individuals. He explained how individuals may opt not to attend a “free” medical appointment due to prohibitive transport costs or losing a day's income through missing work. However, he also spoke of structural issues where services are not designed or delivered to fit in with the realities of rural life. In his view, this stemmed from a lack of participative engagement with rural communities along with, at times, rigid national policy with limited scope for flexibility.
105. In response to questions about the availability of GP services in rural areas, some witnesses described how the situation had deteriorated over the last decade. Borders Community Action stated that:
 - ” “...we have seen the local GPs—who were well-known and embedded in communities and neighbourhoods—disappearing. Some practices have closed, and some have combined with others. In essence, the local model is less and less available to people in communities.” ⁴
106. Given the demographics of the Borders with an older than average population,

Borders Community Action suggested that this posed “significant risks for those who are prone to need support” and results in the need for acute services in crises which could have been avoided through a strategic local preventative approach. In its view, the NHS should learn from good models provided by the third sector that can reduce the need for clinical interventions through prevention. The reduction in GP services could therefore provide an opportunity for innovation rather than retaining the current “firefighting” approach.⁴

107. Third Sector Dumfries and Galloway described GP services as “a patchwork”, with its representative explaining that he would be able to speak to his GP within a few hours and arrange an appointment within a day or two if necessary, something that was unlikely to be the case in urban areas. However, in its view there was a lack of consistency and equity across different parts of Scotland. It went on to describe “great examples” of a multidisciplinary approach including paramedics doing regular house calls to help reduce the pressures on GPs. Given the examples of things working well, Third Sector Dumfries and Galloway was disinclined to say that the solution was more GPs, suggesting instead that “sustainability is an issue caused by a traditional, linear system of how we access health care, which I do not think is what meets our needs now.” Scottish Rural Action agreed that there is a “need not necessarily for more GPs but for more generalism in health care services” to enable GPs and nurse practitioners to deliver a broad range of services within rural communities.⁴
108. Voluntary Action Shetland described a similar situation in its area but noted that some GP surgeries are now providing additional services such as physiotherapy and counselling locally. It explained that “not everything needs to be face to face” and spoke of the benefits that telephone consultations can bring to patients in some scenarios. A further issue for Shetland related to large numbers of oil workers and large numbers of tourists arriving on cruise ships which can also create challenges for health services which were not designed to cater for high volumes of non-residents. Dr Yanes agreed that rural health services often lacked the capacity to respond to major seasonal influxes.⁴
109. The Committee also explored the issue of waiting times for ambulances in rural areas with witnesses. Whilst Aberdeenshire Voluntary Action was unable to confirm whether the situation was getting better or worse, it was aware of “horror stories” in Aberdeenshire, particularly for communities such as Braemar which was described as “a community that is fending for itself in emergency times.” In its view, the closure of local minor injuries clinics had exacerbated the situation as people often had to travel long distances to hospitals for relatively minor injuries.⁴
110. Borders Community Action highlighted good models of collaboration between emergency services and voluntary organisations such as coastguards. It suggested that such collaboration could form part of the response to pressures, but this would require sufficient resource and support. It further noted the benefits of having trained first responders in isolated communities who could provide emergency treatment whilst waiting for an ambulance to arrive.
111. The Committee referred in evidence to a submission received from Councillor Geva Blackett of Aberdeenshire Council⁶ who noted that the Equality Act 2010 makes it unlawful to discriminate against someone because of protected characteristics

when providing a public service. In her view, the failure to provide equitable access to healthcare in rural areas suggested that this requirement was not being met in respect of protected characteristics including age, pregnancy and maternity. The Minister confirmed that she had discussed both protected characteristics with the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care. Whilst she recognised that intersectionality can add additional layers of inaccessibility, she agreed that these examples have “a disproportionate impact” and confirmed that both she and the Cabinet Secretary were mindful of this. She further confirmed that the Scottish Government collates data on all protected characteristics.⁴

112. When specifically asked about long waiting times for procedures such as cataract operations or hip and knee replacements, the Minister accepted that challenges existed but believed there had been significant improvements. Whilst any unsatisfactory individual experiences were regrettable, the Minister did not accept that this meant the Scottish Government was “failing across the board.”²
113. The Committee also invited the Minister to respond to suggestions that the 2018 GP contract was failing GPs in rural areas and leading to closures. She confirmed that she had not discussed this matter with the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care but was happy to do so. However, she also highlighted initiatives such as the “£10,000 golden hello scheme” and NHS rural fellowships which aimed to incentivise GPs to work in rural communities and help them develop the generalist skills required.
114. The Minister then pointed towards data from 2023-24 which found that 85% of islanders agreed they could easily access GP services. Ms Densham explained that “we see from the quantitative data that comes back that access to GPs, in terms of the number of patients per GP, is generally better in rural and island areas but that there are issues for people in getting to appointments.” However, it was noted that this data refers only to islands and therefore does not address satisfaction rates in mainland rural areas such as Aberdeenshire.²
115. The Committee also explored challenges faced by maternity services in areas such as Caithness. We heard that the downgrading of rural maternity services has led to families travelling significant distances to access maternity services and that rates of natural births are falling as expectant mothers choose to give birth in Inverness, often by caesarean section or through being induced. The Minister explained that the Scottish Government “expects all NHS boards to provide maternity services that are delivered as close to home as practical, balanced with the need to ensure the safety of mother and baby.” She further noted that the newly established Scottish maternity and neonatal taskforce was intended to help improve the delivery of maternity services in rural areas.²

116. The Committee recognises that it is unrealistic to expect all rural communities, particularly those in more isolated areas, to have immediate access to the full range of health services on their doorsteps. However, the Committee is concerned that some essential health services such as those relating to maternity appear to be being further centralised in regions such as the Highlands. This may lead to situations where expectant mothers are being compelled to undergo procedures which may not be clinically

necessary in order to “choose” where and when to give birth rather than having the choice of a natural birth closer to home. We are also concerned that mothers (and their babies) who opt not to travel to major population centres to access maternity services may be placed at greater risk in the event of complications arising in midwife-led maternity units such as in Caithness, and would urge the Scottish Government to provide innovative solutions whereby consultants can be called upon when this happens, rather than moving a woman in labour to another hospital. The Committee calls for urgent action to address this. Moreover, the Committee queries whether the Scottish Government’s expectation that such services “are delivered as close to home as possible” is being realised in practice although we recognise that decisions on the most appropriate place to treat patients should always be based on clinical evidence.

117. In respect of local GP services, the Committee notes that the situation appears to vary, with some rural stakeholders reporting that they have better access to GPs than may be the case in urban areas. Whilst it appears that the number of GP practices in rural communities is reducing, the Committee notes comments from stakeholders that this provides an opportunity for innovation. The Committee invites the Scottish Government to confirm what actions it is taking to encourage greater innovation in the delivery of frontline GP services in rural communities.

118. In respect of the need for a preventive approach to reduce the risk of costly acute interventions at a later date, the Committee is mindful that the Parliament and its committees have repeatedly called for such a decisive shift, dating back at least as far as the publication of the Christie Commission’s report on the delivery of essential services in 2011. The Committee recognises the challenges in moving towards such an approach, not least in terms of its costs and the need for disinvestment in other services, but is clear that such a shift would result in longer-term savings thereby freeing up resource for much needed investment in other priorities. We are disappointed that the pace of change has been slow and recommend that greater emphasis is placed on the urgent need for prevention.

119. In respect of long waiting times for procedures such as cataract operations or hip and knee replacements, the Committee agrees that it is not acceptable for patients in rural communities to have to wait longer than their urban counterparts and that any such variances should be addressed as a matter of urgency. We therefore invite the Scottish Government to provide statistical data on any disparities on waiting times between urban and rural health boards and to outline the immediate and longer-term actions it is taking to address them where necessary.

Access to justice

120. As noted in the SHRC report, access to justice relates not just to the formal justice system (i.e. the police, courts and prison service) but to the right to seek redress when treated unfairly by public bodies. The SHRC report notes a “consistent message” from people in the Highlands and Islands that they are not entitled to the same level of service as those in urban areas. This has led to a situation where people believe that “complaining is pointless” resulting in communities becoming self-reliant and creating their own solutions thereby adding to a sense of neglect. In the SHRC’s view, “one of the major barriers to accessing justice is the lack of domestic legal duties for Economic, Social and Cultural rights.”
121. Scottish Rural Action agreed with the SHRC’s conclusions on complaints and redress mechanisms describing the report as presenting a “damning picture of complaint systems being hard to access, resulting in the penalisation of the complainant rather than the service provider.” However, in its view, “even more damaging is the purposeful design of the complaints or redress systems so that they obscure the true nature and prevalence of issues.” It suggested that complaints about similar issues across rural communities are rarely aggregated but instead are “purposely kept atomised” resulting in issues of national significance being treated as “local problems raised by local people who are derogatorily labelled as people with too much time on their hands.” It concluded by explaining that “if we are masking the nature and prevalence of a national problem, we are also masking the solutions.”⁴
122. The Committee also explored the lack of access to civil legal aid and related barriers, particularly in the context of people who had experienced domestic abuse. During the Committee’s [inquiry on civil legal assistance](#) it heard of a woman in the Highlands who had contacted over one hundred legal aid lawyers for advice on her divorce case without success. Witnesses in that inquiry spoke of “legal aid deserts” covering certain geographical areas and areas of law where it can be very difficult to access advice. A further factor in small, remote communities is the fact that everyone knows one another leading to concerns around potential breaches of confidentiality.
123. Dr Yanes noted that research had shown that advice centres tend to be concentrated in the central belt with few or no advice centres in other parts of the country. In Sutherland, for example, there is a single advice centre in Kinlochbervie catering for an area covering over two thousand square miles. Scottish Rural Action pointed out that whilst Women’s Aid will often cater for smaller populations in rural areas, “their geographical coverage is vast.”⁴
124. Dr Yanes also agreed that the perceived “stigma” around domestic abuse coupled with concerns around confidentiality was likely to deter some from seeking the advice and support they need. Victims of sexual assaults may even have to undertake long journeys to urban centres in the clothes they were wearing for forensic tests to be completed thereby adding to their trauma. In his view, all of these factors constituted additional barriers which may help account for the underreporting of sexual offences in rural and isolated areas and a reluctance to “speak out”.

125. Dr Yanes also spoke of the work being undertaken by rape crisis groups across Scotland which pointed towards policy solutions. However, he also told the Committee that some community and women’s groups had expressed concern that they were not being listened to. In his view, a “deeper dive” was needed “in relation to Police Scotland and all the way through to wider reform of legal aid and our criminal justice system.”⁴
126. Third Sector Dumfries and Galloway spoke of similar challenges in its region for which the best solutions often came from local communities themselves. It also called for more proactive work to be undertaken in schools to help educate young people and reduce the risk of such behaviour presenting later in life. Again, it explained that, as with other services, multi-year investment was needed to ensure the provision of sustainable, long-term advice and support services. This was particularly important in this context given the need to build trust and relationships as such services “are not something that you can switch on and off overnight.” In its view, “we should already be committing to a decade-long investment in these necessary services to support women and girls, and in the proactive work that is needed for young people, too.”⁴
127. Both Third Sector Dumfries and Galloway and Scottish Rural Action also pointed out that the third sector is usually responsible for collating data on which policy is based, but this is not “paid for” and is often difficult to collate given ongoing frontline priorities. Scottish Rural Action further explained that data from rural areas is often absorbed into national data, meaning it frequently gets lost. It suggested that the Committee could hold an annual meeting with rural Women’s Aid, rural Rape Crisis and rural gender-based violence organisations to “listen to them [and] give them that time and platform their views.”⁴
128. In Borders Community Action’s view this topic provides a clear example of local organisations which are embedded in communities being best placed to deliver services. Whilst this would inevitably incur costs, they were “nothing” compared to the savings it would realise for public services by reducing the need for crisis interventions at a later date (i.e. through prevention). In its view, failure to invest in such services was a “false economy.”⁴
129. The Committee invited the Minister to respond to the multiple, interlinked factors that can make survivors of domestic and/or sexual abuse less likely to seek support, including a shortage of civil legal aid advice and other support services in rural areas. Whilst she recognised there were “some challenges in certain types of cases and locations” she suggested that the “civil legal aid system is generally effective in delivering help to those who need it.” The Minister confirmed that civil legal assistance schemes are flexible enough to enable solicitors to travel to rural and remote parts of the country to conduct work, where local advice was unavailable. She also highlighted the Regulation of Legal Services (Scotland) Act 2025 as a “significant step towards expanding access to justice” which would remove restrictions preventing third sector organisations from directly employing solicitors to provide advice to vulnerable groups. Other reforms set out in the Scottish Government’s [Legal aid reform: discussion paper](#) were intended to simplify the process, both for solicitors and for those seeking assistance, and include longer-term proposals for funding and improving the delivery of legal aid services.²
130. The Minister further highlighted the equally safe strategy, which recognises that

small rural and island communities face particular challenges and “is funded accordingly.” Whilst she recognised the challenges created by precarious funding and a lack of multi-year certainty, she noted that over £5.4 million in related funding had been allocated to third sector organisations in rural and island communities in partnership with COSLA.²

131. The Committee strongly values the services provided by third sector organisations in delivering advice and assistance to rural residents. This is particularly important for services supporting people when they are most vulnerable, including victims of domestic and/or sexual abuse.

132. The Committee recognises the essential contribution that such services make, not just through advice and counselling, but also in collating the data needed to inform policy decisions. The Committee is clear that third sector organisations cannot be expected to provide these essential services without stable, long-term and sufficient funding, particularly given the need to build trust with service users. We invite the Scottish Government to respond to the concerns raised by stakeholders in this context and strongly recommend that further investment is made available to support the continued provision of such services on a sustainable basis going forward.

133. The Committee also invites the Scottish Government to respond to conflicting concerns relating to the collation of localised data. The SHRC, for example, suggested that such data was “kept atomised” meaning national trends may not be identified. Conversely, Scottish Rural Action told us that data from rural areas is often absorbed into national data meaning it frequently “gets lost.”

134. In respect of civil legal aid, the Committee has considered this topic in detail through its inquiry on civil legal assistance. It notes the steps the Scottish Government has taken to widen access to legal aid more broadly, including through recent secondary legislation, but notes that these instruments did not give effect to the recommendations contained in the Committee’s recent report on civil legal assistance. We look forward to receiving an update on proposed next steps following an analysis of responses to the Scottish Government’s discussion paper.

135. However, the Committee is clear that it is not acceptable for residents of rural areas to face such limited options in accessing advice and assistance as is the case in the Highlands. Our recent Report on our inquiry into Civil Legal Assistance in Scotland found that “there is an urgent need for action to improve the delivery of the civil legal assistance and in turn improve access to justice.” We therefore disagree with the Minister’s suggestion

that the legal aid system is “generally effective in delivering help to those who need it”, particularly those living in remote and rural communities and reiterate our conclusions around the urgent need for reform as set out in our report.

Conclusion

136. This inquiry has highlighted the significant and often deep-rooted inequalities experienced by people living in rural and island communities across Scotland. Whilst rural areas contribute enormously to Scotland's social, cultural and economic life, it is clear that many residents do not currently enjoy the same level of access to services, infrastructure and opportunities that are more readily available elsewhere. The evidence received consistently pointed to a pattern of structural disadvantage spanning transport, digital connectivity, social security, employment, health, housing and access to justice, which undermines the full realisation of economic, social and cultural rights.

137. Stakeholders emphasised that rural communities often face persistent systemic challenges, some of which stem from national policy frameworks that do not fully account for rural realities. The "rural premium" provides a striking example of this disparity. Without targeted action, pressures will continue to fall most heavily on those already at risk of poverty or exclusion.

138. It is also clear that depopulation poses a significant threat to the sustainability of rural communities on multiple levels. For example, it can lead to closures of schools, medical facilities and other essential services where local demographics no longer provide sufficient demand for them. This in turn makes them less viable as a place to raise families thus contributing to a "vicious circle" of further depopulation.

139. The Committee welcomes the Scottish Government's acknowledgement of these issues and its commitment to improving rights realisation in rural areas. Initiatives such as the Fairer Funding pilot, investment in digital infrastructure, and targeted housing and employability schemes are welcome. However, the discrepancy between policy ambition and lived experience remains. Many rural residents continue to face barriers to essential services, including healthcare, childcare, specialist support, legal advice and public transport. The Committee is clear that progress to date has not sufficiently translated into meaningful and measurable improvements "on the ground."

140. Throughout the inquiry, stakeholders stressed the importance of genuine partnership working, early and sustained engagement, and long-term investment in community-led organisations. These groups are often best placed to understand local need and design effective solutions, yet their

work can be constrained by short-term or precarious funding. The Committee strongly believes that a shift toward multiyear, secure funding models is essential to unlocking the potential of these organisations and the communities they serve.

141. Rural housing shortages continue to undermine workforce recruitment, drive depopulation, and restrict the ability of younger generations to remain in their communities. Similarly, the increasing centralisation of healthcare services, long travel distances, and gaps in emergency and maternity provision mean that rural residents can face barriers in accessing timely and appropriate care.

142. Overall, the Committee considers that a more coherent, ambitious and flexible approach is needed to recognise the distinct needs of different rural and island areas, embed a rural and island lens across all stages of policymaking, and prioritise the realisation of human rights for all. We would expect a future Scottish Human Rights Bill to contribute to the realisation of this.

143. Rural communities deserve equitable access to services, opportunities and rights. Delivering this is not only a matter of fairness, but essential to the wellbeing, sustainability and long-term prosperity of rural Scotland.

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