

Talla na Mara arts and entertainment visitor centre in Harris is just one example of what can be achieved on community-owned estates



Photograph: MARGARET SORAYA

Chance to give fresh impetus to rural renewal



CALUM MACLEOD

With some innovative policy thinking, the Planning Bill currently making its way through the Scottish Parliament could help address the depopulation crisis facing the Highlands and Islands, says DR CALUM MACLEOD

Last week the James Hutton Institute published a report on demographic change in Scotland's Sparsely Populated Areas that makes for grim reading. The Scottish Government-commissioned research estimates that these areas — including great swathes of the Highlands and Islands and parts of the Southern Uplands — risk losing over a quarter of their population by 2046 if current demographic trends are left unchanged.

The core message from Dr Andrew Copus, the report's lead author, is stark. "Scotland's sparsely populated areas have a demographic legacy which, in the absence of intervention, will result in decades of population decline, and shrinkage of its working age population on a scale which implies serious challenges for economic development."

These findings will not be especially revelatory to readers of this newspaper, many of whom live in these very areas. They do, however, raise some fundamental policy questions about the future of rural Scotland, the place of people in the landscape, and ideas about what constitutes 'sustainable' development. They also imply an urgent need for a far more imaginative policy approach to reverse the flow of depopulation from sparsely-populated areas which together account for almost half (48.7 per cent) the area of Scotland but contain only 2.6 per cent of the country's population.

There's no quick or easy fix for a depopulation problem that has bedevilled parts of the Highlands and Islands for decades. There is, however, one immediate opportunity to inject fresh impetus into rural renewal in the form of the Planning (Scotland) Bill currently being considered by the Local Government and Communities Committee of the Scottish Parliament.

According to an accompanying policy memorandum, both the Bill and a wider planning policy review "aim to change planning's operation and its reputation from that of a regulator to a positive and active enabler of good quality development; a shift from reacting to development proposals to proactively supporting investment and quality placemaking".

On the face of it, the Planning Bill looks like unpromising fare to kick-start a long-term and sustainable upsurge in rural renewal. It focuses on highly-technical, process-orientated issues such as simplified development zones, development plans, and infrastructure levies. Yet, with some innovative policy thinking the final version of the legislation that will emerge in Parliament later this year could go a long

way towards addressing the demographic and development crisis forecast in the Hutton Institute report.

Community Land Scotland is already supplying some of that innovative thinking. In written evidence on the Planning Bill submitted to the Local Government and Communities Committee, CLS calls for a duty for Scottish Ministers to have regard for the desirability of repopulating rural Scotland and resettling previously populated land which is now largely or wholly de-populated when setting new planning policies. The organisation is also calling for Scottish Ministers to be granted powers to designate land for its resettlement, and for Scottish Ministers and local authorities to be given powers to purchase land for its resettlement, including compulsory purchase powers.

CLS advocates granting a community right to buy land for resettlement by community bodies nearest to such land. A further innovative policy proposal is for Scottish Ministers to produce a map of 'no longer existing communities' within five years of the Planning Bill being passed and for Ministers to have regard for that map when preparing future policies.

Community Land Scotland's proposals are not about pressing the reset button on the Highland Clearances, important though that legacy has been in shaping the evolution of the region. Neither are they about subtracting from the social and economic cohesion of existing communities in rural Scotland. Instead they recognise that repopulation and resettlement can reinforce that cohesion by stimulating economic activity based on information and telecommunications technology and place-based assets to create jobs that are less reliant on traditional land-based sectors of the rural economy.

As such, CLS's proposals are concerned with developing existing and new settlements with appropriate infrastructure and affordable housing to encourage in-migration of working-age people to counter the damaging effects of regional depopulation identified in the Hutton Institute's report.

SUCH AN APPROACH is not without historical precedent. In the 1890s, a Royal Commission was established to report on and map depopulated land in the Highlands and Islands that might be suitable for repopulation.

The commission's findings were influential in shaping subsequent legislation — particularly the Land Settlement (Scotland) Act 1919 — which returned significant amounts of depopulated land tocrofting occupation.

As CLS's Planning Bill evidence submission notes, many of today'scrofting communities

— on the west side of the Uists and Harris, in the north and west of Skye, in Raasay and elsewhere — owe their existence to the early twentieth-century governments which undertook these resettlement initiatives. It's worth noting too that in community-owned estates such as in West Harris, decades of depopulation have been reversed as a result of affordable housing developments and opportunities for new local businesses to be established.

MORE RECENTLY there has been discussion about resettlement initiatives within an urban context, primarily informed by the need to address a shortage in affordable housing in Scotland.

In 2014 the Royal Institute for Chartered Surveyors called for the Scottish Government to create six to eight major new communities in the form of new towns, "strategic regeneration" within existing towns or as extensions to existing communities. That proposal to create a generation of new towns was echoed by Ruth Davidson, leader of the Scottish Conservatives, in a speech to the Institute of Public Policy Research last year, in which she also called for powers to be given to local authorities over the development of new towns if necessary.

So, if it is legitimate to consider resettlement within an urban context, then it is surely equally legitimate to do so within the context of rural Scotland.

That, in turn, raises a wider question about the legitimate place of people in the landscape. The next stage of the James Hutton Institute's research on which its report on demographic change is based will apparently include examining "the potential of sparsely populated areas as an environmental resource to support the wellbeing of urban Scotland".

That strand of forthcoming research rather depressingly sums up how chronically out of touch the view of rural Scotland is from an urban vantage point. One in which extensive areas of the Highlands and Islands are portrayed as a wild idyll, uncontaminated by human hands and pristine in their rugged majesty.

Beguiling though it seems, that portrayal masks an inconvenient truth; the Highlands and Islands were never 'wild'. Instead these are socially-constructed imaginings of the Highland landscape, reinforced by an externally-imposed policy narrative of 'wild land'. The application of this narrative to these areas effectively appropriates the meanings attached to landscapes and determines dominant ideas of 'stewardship' and 'sustainability'. In turn, these ideas, transformed into policy, shape how landscapes are experienced and consumed via a succession of statutory and non-statutory designations.

The most obvious example of this

phenomenon relates to designated 'wild land' maps (of which there are 42 in Scotland totalling 3,798,817 acres). Although not statutory designations, planning policy states that consideration should be given to these maps, alongside other factors, in making planning decisions. Many of the qualities ascribed to 'wild land' by Scottish Natural Heritage in developing these maps are highly subjective with — according to research being conducted on behalf of CLS — apparently little or no community engagement in the process.

The critical broader point — which CLS's proposed 'map of no longer existing communities' seeks to amplify — is that it is unacceptable to attempt to airbrush generations of human intervention from the mosaic of characteristics that comprise landscapes. Moreover, it is legitimate for people to be involved in defining and characterising the landscapes they inhabit, as a matter of justice. Consequently, the key challenge from a rural renewal standpoint is how to rebalance the process of characterising landscapes in ways that empower existing and new rural communities to use environmental assets for their sustainable economic development.

THERE IS much to play for in terms of finding ways to repopulate and renew rural Scotland and, as the Hutton Institute's report indicates, the stakes could scarcely be higher. In important respects, community ownership continues to act as a trailblazer in that regard.

The Scottish Government recently approved the North West Mull Community Woodland Company's application to exercise a community right to buy the Isle of Ulva together with an award of £4.4 million from the Scottish Land Fund to finance the purchase. These developments confirm the Scottish Government's continuing ambition for community land ownership as a means for rural repopulation and renewal, given that the North West Mull company has made substantially increasing the island's resident population of six people a key objective of the proposed buyout.

However, that ambition must not halt on the shoreline of Ulva. A wider mix of imaginative policy interventions is required if policymakers are genuinely serious about renewing rural Scotland. Delivering a Planning Bill that incorporates repopulation and resettlement provisions for sustainable rural development would be a good start.

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