

Cross-Party Group on Rural Policy

What are the biggest threats to rural Scotland for the next parliament to consider?

9 March 2026, 17:00 to 18:30

Minutes (Approved)

Present

MSPs attending

- Edward Mountain MSP
- Emma Harper MSP

Speakers

- Edward Mountain MSP
- Professor Davy McCracken, SRUC "The land management conundrum"
- Chiara Fingland, Board Member Scottish Rural Action

Attendance pre-registrations

<i>Last Name</i>	<i>First Name</i>	<i>Organisation (if relevant)</i>
Adamson	Jayne	Tyne & Esk Community Led Local Development
Arai	Kanako	The University of Edinburgh
Atterton	Jane	SRUC
Beale	Kate	University of Edinburgh
Beingessner	Naomi	
Bex	Jess	
Burgess MSP	Ariane	
Cairns	John	
Cameron	David	
Campbell	Jennifer	RICS in Scotland & DM Hall
Carlow	Rob	
Champion	Rosemary	
Coulthard	Suzanne	
Crabtree	Daniel	Aberdeen City Council
Davidson	Craig	SRUC
Densham	Anna	Scottish Government

Dimitrova	Martina	The University of Edinburgh
Donald	Harriet	Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park Authority
Douglas	Jaci	Care and Learning Alliance (CALA)
Doyle	Carey	SRUC
Dykes	Hannah	
Eagle MSP	Tim	Scottish Parliament
Fielding	Owen	Third Sector Dumfries & Galloway
Fleck	Jody	Scottish Government
Fletcher	Alasdair	Scottish Rural Party
Foster	Gail	
Gillespie	Cara	The Southern Uplands Partnership
Green	Stan	Horticultural Trades Association
Halhead	Vanessa	Scottish Rural Action
Hartley	Ralph	The Poverty Alliance
Hastings	Richard	Scottish Government
Heald	Andrew	
Hill	Nicola	Dumfries & Galloway Council
Hill	Inge	Inge Hill
Holmes	Sandra	
Hunter	Richard	Confor
Idle	Catharine	Fife Council rural CLLD
Johnstone	Alexandra	University of Aberdeen
Kelly	Barbara	Firm of K.A. Kelly
Kermode	Neil	Orkney Renewable Energy Forum
Ketteridge	Anne- Michelle	Forth Valley and Lomond CLLD
Lawson	Elizabeth	Newcastle University
Lyster	Wesley	University of the West of Scotland
MacKessack-Leitch	James	Scottish Land Commission
MacLeod Rivett	Mary	Historic Environment Scotland
MacPhail	Eilidh	UHI NWH
MacVicar	Jemma	Galson Estate Trust
Mandal	Paromita	University of Glasgow
Marshall	David	University of Edinburgh
McCall	Ian	Walking Scotland
McLuckie	Kirsty	
McWilliams	Michelle	The Rowett Institute, University of Aberdeen
Michie	Rona	European Policies Research Centre
Mitchell	Alison	Duneaton Community Council
Montgomerie	Penny	SAYFC
Morrice	Beatrice	NFU Scotland
Morrison	Theona	SRA and CoDeL
Najm	Noura	
Nascimento	Joana	University of Cambridge
Nicoll	Pam	NES, National Centre for remote and Rural Health and Care
Oakman	Hannah	
Palmer	Kate	Confederation of Forest Industries (Confor)
Pana	Artemis	Scottish Rural Action

Park	Alice	
Pate	Lorna	SRUC
Paterson	Andy	Social Enterprise Scotland
Perier	Claire	University of Edinburgh
Petrie	Scott	Angus Rural Partnership
Philip	Lorna	University of Aberdeen
Platt	Chris	Angus Rural Partnerships
Radojkov	Boris	Your Party Scotland
Radojkov	Jelena	
Rice-Jones	Sharon	Perth & Kinross Council
Rohmer	Lydia	UHI North, West and Hebrides
Rostan	Julie	
Scott	Karen	Rowett Institute, University of Aberdeen
Scott	Douglas	
Shaw	Christopher	
Shucksmith	Mark	Newcastle University
Sidauruk	Diana Laurencia	
Simpson MBE MSC FRSA	Margaret	Scottish Borders Social Enterprise Chamber CIC
Sinaga	Martha	
Skene	David	UHI NWH
Stanley	Rachel	Consumer Scotland
Stobart	Alex	
Suzuki-Oita	Azusa	Leibniz Centre for Agricultural Landscape Research (ZALF)/National Agriculture and Food Research Organization (NARO)
Taylor	James	Improvement Service
Taylor	Sophie	
Tennant	Rachel	Scotland's Landscape Alliance
Thompson	Louise	Quality Meat Scotland
van Gaalen	Augustijn	SURF - Scotland's Regeneration Forum
Vergunst	Jo	University of Aberdeen
Vironen	Heidi	European Policies Research Centre (EPRC), University of Strathclyde
Walton	Carrie	NHS Education for Scotland
Watts	David	University of Aberdeen
Wilson	Gordon	
Winship	Ana	SRUC
Wood	Lindsay	A Heart for Duns

Apologies

Steven Thomson, SRUC

Ann Packard

Jim Hume Change Mental Health

Agenda item 1

Welcome, introduction and apologies

Edward Mountain MSP welcomed everyone to the meeting. He explained that there were 110 people who had signed up for the meeting online and in person.

Agenda item 2

Approval of minutes and recap of action items

October minutes approved in person by Martina Dimitrova and Kanako Arai.

December AGM minutes approved online by Emma Harper and Barbara Kelly.

Agenda item 3

Presentations

Edward Mountain MSP (EM) opened the session by outlining the biggest threats he believes rural Scotland faces in the next Scottish Parliamentary session. His presentation centred on four key threats, each illustrated with personal experience and examples from his time in Parliament and as a land manager.

1. Growing Influence of the “Urban Elite”
He argued that the political balance in Holyrood—where urban constituencies dominate—allows MSPs representing large metropolitan areas such as Edinburgh and Glasgow to shape rural policy without necessarily fully understanding rural life. He highlighted instances where, in his view, MSPs responded to urban voter sentiment rather than rural evidence. He argued that this democratic imbalance was a fundamental and increasing threat.
2. Uninformed Decision-Makers
He expressed concern about MSPs lacking practical experience in countryside matters while creating legislation that affects rural communities. Examples of wildlife management were given (deer, badger, ptarmigan). He particularly highlighted overly simplistic approaches and discussions, arguing that well-intentioned ecology projects often ignore the practical consequences for farming landscapes.
3. Intensive Lobbying by Interest Groups
He argued that the Scottish Parliament is increasingly swayed by powerful lobbying organisations whose campaigns do not always align with rural needs, citing wildlife introduction campaigns as an example. He argued that lobbyists tend to receive disproportionate influence because government lacks its own clear direction, creating a vacuum for external pressure to be applied.
4. Weak Government and Policy Uncertainty
Finally, he criticised a heavy reliance on “framework bills,” which lay out broad principles but leave crucial detail to later subordinate legislation. He cited the new Agriculture Bill as an example. He argued that, without clarity, farmers cannot modernise or invest confidently.

Edward Mountain MSP predicted that the next session would see more new MSPs—many of

whom will again lack rural understanding—and a continuation of parliamentary distraction through lobbying and repeated cycles of framework legislation without solving underlying issues. He warned that the absence of strategic leadership will exacerbate rural challenges in agriculture, biodiversity and community resilience.

He concluded by calling for clear, decisive leadership, cautioning against an overly “green agenda” that neglects food production. Rural Scotland, he argued, needs policies rooted in practical knowledge and a government willing to support farmers with long-term stability rather than short-term political gestures.

The second speaker was **Professor Davy McCracken (DM)** from SRUC. Davy McCracken focused his presentation on the environmental and land-use challenges facing rural Scotland, emphasising the urgency of coordinated action in the face of accelerating climate change. He noted that nothing suggested that warming trends would ease, making adaptation and mitigation central to Scotland’s future land-management strategy.

Davy McCracken stressed that agriculture alone cannot deliver Scotland’s net-zero goals by 2045, nor can environmental actions such as peatland restoration or woodland creation operate in isolation - integrated cross cutting action is needed on agriculture and land management. If, as announced in 2021, Scotland wants to be a global leader in sustainable and regenerative agriculture, there is a big role for the next Parliament to deliver that. As 70% of Scotland’s land is farmed, farmers and crofters must be central to the transition, and they require clarity on future steps.

While there is a role for farmers and crofters to be doing more for the environment to make themselves more sustainable in the face of climate change going forward, there is a big question about how to facilitate and fund those actions on the ground. And so Davy McCracken suggested that the next Parliament needs to indicate the direction of travel more forcefully with regard to how agricultural support will be funded going forward.

He argued that current funding structures will not deliver the scale of change needed. The Scottish Government’s proposed 70/30 split - with 70% for baseline and enhanced agricultural support and 30% for environmental and advisory measures - is insufficient. In particular, Tier 2 options need to shift from planning exercises to action-focused interventions that deliver measurable environmental benefits. Without this, policy will fail to translate into on-the-ground improvements for biodiversity, water quality, and climate resilience.

A major theme of Davy McCracken’s presentation was the fragmented nature of current policy, with agriculture, environment, climate, and rural development strategies developed separately and inconsistently. He called on the next Parliament to break down these silos, deliver mainstreamed biodiversity considerations, and integrate policies across departments rather than relying on any single bill to drive progress. He noted with regard to climate change, that there has been a big focus on mitigation, but there is a need to move even quicker to support land managers across Scotland to adapt to climate conditions.

Davy McCracken also emphasised that land-use reform is inseparable from wider rural socio-economic issues - including housing shortages, weak transport links, childcare gaps, and rural poverty.

From his involvement with regional land use partnerships, Davy McCracken noted that any such regional structure will need funding in addition to ‘good’ governance.

He highlighted that a key question for the next Parliament is, how do we ensure that land use is linked to and informed by wider societal needs? This will need MSPs to be more informed about rural and land use issues, and will need greater collaboration and integration of policies and funding streams. He noted the important strategic leadership role of the Deputy First Minister to consider rural areas holistically.

He noted that there is a need to change attitudes and perceptions as much as land management practices, noting that there is too much “path dependency”. He highlighted that land managers can be considered less willing to change, but in his experience civil servants are just as reluctant to actually change.

He concluded urging the next parliament to act quickly, by advocating for adaptive management - taking action now, learning from experience, and refining approaches over time, rather than waiting for perfect certainty.

The final speaker was **Chiara Fingland (CF)** representing Scottish Rural Action in her capacity as a volunteer Director, representing one of many rural voices across Scotland. Chiara Fingland focused her presentation on the profound challenges facing rural communities and the urgent need for Parliament to reshape how it listens to, supports, and works with rural Scotland. Drawing on both national survey findings and her own hands-on work with communities. She argued that Scotland stands at a critical crossroads: decisions made in the next Parliament will determine whether rural areas thrive or continue to decline.

She highlighted findings from the 2023 Scotland’s Rural Voice survey (Diffley Partnership), which captured the experiences of over 2,000 rural residents. Two defining crises emerged: depopulation and an ageing demographic, both of which drive and deepen other structural issues such as limited housing, unreliable transport, declining public services, and weakened community infrastructure. These pressures, she argued, are quietly hollowing out rural places that were once vibrant, well-connected, and socially rich.

Chiara Fingland illustrated this through a recent example from rural Renfrewshire, where long-term residents could no longer downsize locally due to limited housing, and even a simple physiotherapy appointment could take a full day because of poor public transport connectivity. Such stories, she stressed, reflect how the erosion of services leads directly to an erosion of trust. While 81% of Scots trusted the Scottish Government in 1999, that figure stands at only 47% today, worsened by the repeated failure to deliver a Rural Delivery Plan.

She called for any future Parliament to rebuild trust with rural communities - genuinely not just rhetorically - as a priority. And that means rural voices being properly recognised in policy and in frameworks that shape their lives.

She noted government successes such as the Community Empowerment Act, Community land ownership and the National Islands Plan, and called for attendees to imagine what rural areas would be like in the future, for example in 2031, after the next parliament.

Chiara Fingland set out her vision for the future, by writing an imagined postcard to herself from 2031:

“The Parliament has sat.

Decisions have been made, things have changed.

What does rural Scotland look like?

What do you see when you walk into a village that's thriving? What do you hear? What do you smell like on a summer morning when that community is alive?

Here's my postcard:

Wish you were here. Just back from my morning cycle to Achree Farm where I collected my veg for the week and caught up with a family who had just moved to the area in one of the new community-led homes. My neighbouring old school campus is now where my studio is. It's great to be able to live and work amongst rural enterprises.

We also started a community construction company in which the youth project has apprenticeships and they're repairing the storm damage to a neighbouring church. It's so great to have practical jobs available and support local.

And everything is just greener. It's wilder, yet feels more looked after. We have a library of things which covers our secondary school catchment. Life is thriving and so is our local economy. But it's a different economy, where care is at the heart.

So much is happening, but hey, that's me off to Edinburgh to go and visit a pal. Sunny wishes.

So how are we going to get there? What does your future look like?"

Chiara Fingland emphasised that rural communities themselves are already generating these solutions. She pointed to the [Community-Led Housing Alliance's community housing Census](#) which found that 1700 projects are sitting in the pipeline over the next five years of support. She noted the success of Youth Local Action Groups, and the growing movement for Community Wealth Building as evidence that rural Scotland is ready to lead change—if Parliament enables it.

She reflected on the Autumn 2025 European Rural Parliament, which asked: What does a rural area need to thrive? The central conclusion was powerful and simple. Rural communities must be recognised as the custodians of critical national assets and key actors in resilience, crisis response and transition, not as recipients of policy, but partners in shaping it.

She concluded with three clear asks to the next Parliament:

1. Reinststate a Rural Delivery Plan backed by genuine cross-portfolio commitment.
2. Introduce formal rural proofing for all legislation and policy.
3. Provide stable, long-term revenue funding for community development and enabler organisations.

The question, she said, is not whether rural people are ready for change—they are—but whether Parliament will meet them where they are.

Agenda item 4

Key Issues raised in Discussion

- Question in the room (no name identified). Is the priority for the government to focus on these things as a government concern, given the role of private interests?

- DM: Emphasised that there is a role for parliament to support land managers. There may be ongoing annual payments to private landowners, or one-off funding.
- CF: Cross sector relationship and dialogue is needed, including private landowners. Private landownership can be more difficult to engage with.
- EM: There are limited public funds, so private investment is needed.
- Comment by Christopher Shaw: In the past, a lot of farming has been dictated by government policy. In WW2, farming hedges were replaced to grow food. We now have a situation where the energy secretary is not listening to rural communities about the damage done to rural communities. The government needs to listen to people.
- Comment from Alexandra Johnstone: Welcomes the Community Wealth Building Bill to support local food production. This is very much needed to support rural and island areas. Remote and rural communities are experiencing food insecurity, noting a recent report from her work at the Rowett Institute, University of Aberdeen. She noted that the costs of food and fertiliser are going to go up due to the political crisis in the middle east.
- Question from Vanessa Halhead: argued that Scotland repeatedly fails to address the deep structural issues that limit rural development, especially the lack of genuine local democracy and empowered community councils. Drawing comparisons with Norway, and highlighting how Norwegian municipalities have far greater powers, local taxation rights, control over income streams, and accessible land tenure, enabling small communities to thrive. She urged Scotland to learn from these international examples and stop allowing an urban-driven political mindset to block meaningful rural reform.
 - EM response: Understand the frustration about community councils. Limited numbers of volunteers and training, no funding.
 - CF: I have the joy of working with amazing community leaders, but community councils are frequently in difficult circumstances. There should be more enabling infrastructures, and we can learn from emerging good practice.
 - DM: We've had a land use strategy in Scotland since 2011, but we're still not clear on how those will work in practice.
 - EM: Climate change plan includes a reference to community benefit funding, but no guidance on how that will be implemented. Need to think about offshore wind. Who is going to get the community benefit from offshore wind? There may be a perception in the industry that community benefit is not relevant to offshore wind, but if onshore has to pay it, offshore should also.
- Question from Andrew Patterson, Social Enterprise Scotland policy officer. Noted the large number of social enterprises across rural areas. He raised one of their member's questions: digital connectivity in rural areas remains challenging - he noted that cloud digital infrastructure is replacing connected digital infrastructure, which can present challenges in rural areas.
 - CF: Agreed and noted that she was cut off for seven days during Storm Arwen, and local people had formed a community resilience group. She stressed that we need to take that seriously, particularly in light of the changing climate. There are a range of knock-on effects, such as to health care provision.
 - Examples provided in the online chat of connectivity challenges, such as smart meters in areas without telephone signal, and masts going down in storms.

- Question from Inge Hill: Rural small businesses - non land based small businesses in particular - have an enormous enabling role in rural communities, this has not been discussed yet. Micro businesses with less than 5 employees are critically important. How can we change the attitude in government?
 - o CF: Agreed that it is a critical challenge. A different way of looking at growth and scale is needed. Need to expand female leadership and care models. Not always about just the big businesses. Aggregated smaller entities can be powerful. Locally bringing together 10 development trusts. Also aggregating small businesses reduces risks.
 - o DM: It's not always bleak, everywhere. In South of Scotland, small business support is provided. The question for the new parliament is how local authorities and enterprise agencies can best provide expertise.
 - o Inge Hill noted that current criteria for business support from Scottish Enterprise requires businesses bigger than two employees, does not account for rural circumstances. Others noted that Scottish Enterprise does not have a rural or community development function, whereas Highlands and Islands Enterprise and South of Scotland Enterprise do.
- Comment from Barbara Kelly. Remarked on the strength of contributions to this session. She noted that rural social deprivation is not being properly recognised.
 - o EM: agreed that poverty in rural areas is not being appreciated in full detail. Challenges can be extreme. People expected to walk 40 minutes for a bus, potentially with few services. No price fix for heating oil.
 - o Noted that the poverty that is faced is equally unacceptable in urban areas as rural areas, but sometimes in rural areas people are prepared to accept greater challenges because of their rurality and that may not be right.
 - o DM: important to highlight to future parliamentarians that a one size fits all approach does not address poverty.
 - o CF: metrics and frameworks are generally geared towards urban areas. We need to think about how we measure things.
- Emma Harper MSP:
 - o Thanked EM for being a co-convenor of this CPG.
 - o Member of the health and rural committee over the last 10 years. There has been some good work going on, looking at housing, repopulation. Community benefit changes, such as East Ayrshire's nine community council model.
 - o Also supporting Land Use Partnerships, and rural skills and jobs, apprenticeships.
 - o Supporting work on rural poverty. Rural leadership programme in Thornhill and Sanquhar is notable.
 - o Legacy paper for the rural committee will focus on many of the issues brought up today.
- Comment in chat from Craig Davidson: highlighted the need for better education about the wide range of careers in the countryside, noting that rural areas involve much more than food production. He argued that more should be done to teach people about land-based work, management roles, and future rural opportunities
- Comment from Nicki Brown from Scottish Rural Action, need to advocate for local enterprise support for micro enterprises. Gave an example of how her business secured LEADER funding and built a commercial kitchen and butchery on her farm, and that there is limited support for private rural enterprises like this. She noted that community benefit funds may be appropriate for this kind of grant.

- Claire Perier, asked about Good Food Nation policy coordination and joining up— noting that this is the core of the Good Food Nation Act, but that it is not that easy to do in practice. How do we join up across these values and perspectives?
 - o DM: Need for leadership, and for parliament to be stepping forward.
 - Rural issues are different
 - Need leadership to recognise issues but also make things happen.
 - o CF: imagination, take people outside of firefighting. Make headspace outwith formal environments to do the leadership work needed. Can pay huge dividends.
- Suggestion in the meeting chat that parliament sits outside of Edinburgh, EM supports this. Emma Harper noted that committees and cabinets do travel around Scotland.
- Question from Catharine Idle. The LEADER programme – in Fife known as the Fife Rural Development Fund - used to get a lot of funding from Europe. It is now solely funded by Scottish Government on a year to year basis, with associated challenges of short term funding and projects having to claim money back. So when trying to do large scale community led projects, it is not possible to do them to the same level and same scale as when the UK was part of Europe. This money may appear small but makes a big difference for communities and businesses. Examples were given, including the Wigton Book Festival and the Pittenweem tidal pool. Do we fully recognise the benefits of this fund in Scottish Government?
 - o CF: Completely agrees with Katherine, funding time cycles are very difficult. Forth Valley Youth Impact Fund has funded 13 projects across the region, designed and funded by a diverse mix of young people. With a shoestring budget, these projects have produced outsized positive impacts. The new parliament should have appreciation and understanding of the work of local action groups and the youth parliament. Similar impacts were shared across the community sector in the recent Community Alliance event.
 - o DM: Agree with Katherine and Chiara, lack of multi-year funding resonates across many topics being discussed tonight.
- Question from Kanako Arai. Studying regenerative agriculture at University of Edinburgh. In her opinion there are threats to regenerative agriculture including: 1. lack of people’s awareness of how important farming is; 2. difficult to produce a profit. What action is there in Scotland for this?
 - o EM: my biggest fear is that farmers are not being suitably rewarded for their work. People need to get used to start paying real prices for food. Farmers need to be paid for what they actually produce. Also there are difficulties encouraging young people into the industry.
 - o DM: Implication that that food production is the only service that farmers provide. In fact, farmers provide a range of things that we call ecosystem services - biodiversity, water quality, food, etc, but they are not recognised nor rewarded properly. Currently funding is provided for only one part of the ecosystem services farmers provide. If we were to reward all of farmers’ benefits in a properly significant way, with the combination of income from the product and an ecosystem service payments, that would help to make these farming systems much more viable going forward
- Question from Craig Davidson: If agriculture education is a national security issue, why can we not provide an incentive for schools to provide this education?
 - o CF: giving people the exposure and opportunities to this is critical. Example of growing social enterprise, school education. People have lack of both understanding and access.

Agenda item 5

AOB

None raised

Agenda item 6

Edward Mountain MSP thanked the speakers and the attendees.

He then noted that this is the last meeting of this group.

This Cross-Party Group may be re-formed after the election. Edward Mountain MSP also thanked his co-convenor Emma Harper MSP and the Secretariat since 2011, the Rural Policy Centre at SRUC. Thanks to all the speakers over the period, and to the Group's attendees all of whom have helped to ensure meetings have always been interesting and useful.

Post meeting note: Minutes approved by Davey McCracken and Edward Mountain by email, 7/4/2026