

SRA



Scottish Rural Action

Action Plan 2017-2019

Progress report and next steps April 2018



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Introduction

We published our second Action Plan in 2017, following the Scottish Rural Parliament at the end of 2016. It was an ambitious plan, aiming to achieve a lot across a number of policy areas, whilst also strengthening Scottish Rural Action as an organisation, and all with very limited resources.

I am very pleased to report that less than a year after its publication, and still several months away from the Scottish Rural Parliament in 2018, we have made excellent progress across all areas. Within this report you will see both small and big steps taken towards reaching our goals and I am thankful to our team – staff, directors and volunteers – for their concerted efforts.

As with any plan, we need to take stock and evaluate progress at regular

intervals, reviewing our objectives for the next few months in the context of our ever-changing world. This report details the next steps we will be taking on the prioritised areas of our manifesto, as well as ensuring we don't neglect emerging issues of importance.

This report details our planned activities between now and March 2019, when we will be publishing our new Action Plan, following on from the 2018 Scottish Rural Parliament.

We are looking forward to hearing from members and other stakeholders on the ways we can work together on furthering our mutual objectives.

Amanda Burgauer, Chair

A powerful voice for the people of rural Scotland.

POLICY AREAS

Scottish Rural Action has a focus on five key policy areas as voted for at the Scottish Rural Parliament in 2016:

- Transport
- Business, Employment and Enterprise
- Land
- Democracy
- Digital Connectivity

We agreed to undertake a set of actions related to each of these key policy areas as well as addressing core organizational challenges in 2017-19. We have outlined our next steps for 2018-19 as well as progress made against our original objectives for each of these policy areas.

A. Transport

NEXT STEPS 2018-19

- ❖ Hold a rural transport conference on the 11th & 12th September 2018 in partnership with the Scottish Rural Network and feeding directly into the National Transport Strategy 2. Our conference will look at business, logistics and tourism on the 11th and communities and personal travel on the 12th. [Click here to register](#).
- ❖ Continue to input into the development of the National Transport Strategy through the Partnership Working Group and the Enabling Economic Growth sub-

group in 2018-19.

- ❖ Publish the full report on #FareEnough? to gain additional support and traction with this campaign by May 2018.
- ❖ Publish a wider report on rural transport issues and needs following our rural transport conference by December 2018.

PROGRESS REPORT 2017-18

Action Plan 2017 – 19 objectives:

1. Input into the Scottish Government's National Transport Strategy throughout 2017- 2019 from a rural perspective to ensure that it explicitly considers and addresses the needs of rural communities, as distinct from those of urban communities.
2. Proactively encourage high levels of rural community engagement into the public National Transport Strategy consultations in 2017-18 by working with others to provide information about rural transport issues and raise awareness of the consultation.
3. A report into rural transport needs, concerns and solutions, from the perspective of members of rural communities, for feeding into the development of policy and practice across Scotland.
4. Input into the Scottish Rural Infrastructure Plan 2017 to ensure that the views and needs of rural communities are understood.

So far...

- ✓ Scottish Rural Action, represented by Emma Cooper, have a seat on the National Transport Strategy 2 (NTS2) Partnership Working Group, a stakeholder group overseeing the development of NTS2, and on the Enabling Economic Growth sub-group, focusing on the economic impact of transport.
- ✓ We presented to the Enabling Economic Growth sub-group on rural transport issues and the impact of those issues on economic growth ([click here](#)). We are currently preparing a series of policy recommendations for consideration by the sub-group focused on the needs of rural communities.
- ✓ We encouraged input from rural communities to the call for evidence issued by the NTS2 team and the consultation received an exceptionally high number of rural responses, meaning that the rural voice was heard better than ever before in transport policy – thank you to all of our members who responded and circulated the request. The outputs from this consultation have been presented to the NTS2 and are informing the policy recommendations.
- ✓ Advocated for the inclusion of door-to-door journey times to be one of the National Indicators which identify progress towards Scotland's National Outcomes, as an appropriate measure of rural transport effectiveness.
- ✓ Our #FareEnough? campaign has highlighted the issues young people face in accessing education and employment due to the cost and poor provision on services in rural areas. Questions relating to the campaign have been asked in the Scottish Parliament and Humza Yousaf, Transport Minister, announced that

the Scottish Government is intending to introduce free bus travel for young modern apprentices and for young carers in receipt of the planned young carer grant, and three months of free bus travel for recipients of the proposed job grant who are aged between 16 and 24, once those benefits come into force.

What changes have been made to the Action Plan objectives for 2017-19 and why?

- The Scottish Rural Infrastructure Plan 2017 has been removed from our planned activities, as the Scottish Government is no longer planning to conduct this piece of work. We have questioned the Scottish Government on this issue and will continue to do so, as we believe that it is important to set long-term objectives for rural infrastructure.
- A rural transport conference and the #FareEnough? campaign have been added to our plans. These activities both complement the existing work plan, providing us with opportunities to achieve our key strategic objectives, including ensuring that our activities are relevant to and inclusive of young people.

B. Business, Employment and Enterprise

NEXT STEPS 2018-19

- ❖ We will continue to input in the National Council of Rural Advisors on rural economic policy post-Brexit until their work concludes in April 2018.
- ❖ Work with partners across the UK on developing responses on rural economic development post-Brexit, including providing space for discussion on this at the Scottish Rural Parliament in 2018.
- ❖ Research and raise concerns about the gender pay gap in rural Scotland and examine how the raised cost of living in rural areas is intensifying the impact of this by February 2019.
- ❖ Continue to input into the development of the South of Scotland Economic Partnership, ensuring that the views of rural communities are embedded in its development.
- ❖ Publish a report into the potential for reinvigorating empty retail and commercial property in rural areas by November 2018.
- ❖ Publish a paper on the impact of the last bank in a community closing and advocate on behalf of rural communities for banks to undertake consultation and provide additional support measures when they are considering closing a community's last bank by May 2018.

- ❖ Examine the needs of micro-businesses in rural Scotland and the barriers and enablers to growth they face.

PROGRESS REPORT

Action Plan 2017 – 19 objectives:

1. Investigate the potential for reinvigorating empty retail and commercial property in rural areas using similar principles to the Empty Homes Scheme.
2. Share information and best practice in the implementation of community benefit clauses and Fair Work principles as in the Scottish Government procurement guidelines to encourage greater take-up.
3. Collate background information and case studies on the impact of Universal Credit on micro and small rural business to inform the future roll-out of support.
4. Examine issues of pay and workplace conditions, including access to training and career progression, in the part-time, insecure and seasonal labour markets in the rural workplace.

So far...

- ✓ Brexit has dominated the activities of this working group, with SRA seeking opportunities to influence future Scottish Government rural economic and enterprise policy through the newly formed National Council of Rural Advisors. The NCRA will 'provide advice on the potential implications of Scotland leaving the EU as part of the UK, and make recommendations on future policy and support, with the aim of ensuring a vibrant, sustainable and productive rural economy'. We have provided two submissions to date and our recommendations are reflected in their first publication ([click here](#)).

- ✓ We designed our conference in 2017 to examine future rural policy options and issues around Brexit. We published our findings and used this as the basis for our submission to the NCRA.
- ✓ Rural businesses raised serious concerns about the Royal Bank of Scotland closures and more widely the issues of bank closures in rural communities. We circulated a survey on the issue and spoke at the Scottish Affairs Select Committee in January 2018. We have been advocating for decisions on bank closures to be revoked, and 10 of the scheduled closures are being reviewed.
- ✓ We are conducting an ongoing investigation into the potential for reinvigorating rural commercial property through renovation and re-purposing.
- ✓ We were pleased to welcome the Scottish Government response to calls from the first Scottish Rural Parliament for an economic agency for the south of Scotland with a wider remit than Scottish Enterprise currently holds. The membership of the South of Scotland Economic Partnership (SoSEP) was announced in January 2018 and Scottish Rural Action has a seat on the Partnership which is held by our Chair, Amanda Burgauer. SoSEP will develop a new approach to economic development in the south of Scotland and has an initial budget for 2018 of £10million.
- ✓ We supported a wider call for vital research into the rural economy to identify its key sectors and their contribution to GVA to inform wider policy development. This was responded to and published by Scottish Government in March 2018. [Click here](#) for the research and our response.
- ✓ Our #FareEnough? campaign has highlighted the issues young people face in accessing education and employment due to the cost and poor provision on services in rural areas. Questions relating to the campaign have been asked in the Scottish Parliament and Humza Yousaf, Transport Minister, announced that the Scottish Government is intending to introduce free bus travel for young

modern apprentices and for young carers in receipt of the planned young carer grant, and three months of free bus travel for recipients of the proposed job grant who are aged between 16 and 24, once those benefits come into force.

What changes have been made to the Action Plan objectives for 2017-19 and why?

- Our priorities have changed considerably in response to wider opportunities and new issues. We will be continuing to work with the National Council of Rural Advisors and others on rural economic policy post-Brexit, highlighting bank closure concerns, contributing to the development of the South of Scotland Economic Partnership, and, as per the transport working group report, pushing for fair transport fares for young people and effective freight and business transport policy.
- Other organisations are examining the implementation of community benefit clauses, Fair Work principles and the impact of Universal Credit. As other matters have increased in priority for rural communities and our resources are limited, we will not be conducting focused work on these matters in 2018. We will review progress in early 2019.

C. Land

NEXT STEPS 2018-19

- ❖ Work with Rural Housing Scotland to highlight rural homelessness, it's causes and solutions throughout winter 2018-19.
- ❖ Promote the Guidance on Engaging Communities in Decisions Relating to Land, once published, with partners to ensure communities and land owners are aware of the Guidance.
- ❖ Continue to highlight land reform issues, progress and developments through our website, newsletter and social media and keep members up-to-date as policy and guidance develops.
- ❖ Identify opportunities for investigating the role of community land ownership in reinvigorating local democracy.
- ❖ Identify and promote a series of case studies on alternative models of access to land to encourage debate and replication, leading to policy recommendations.

PROGRESS REPORT

Action Plan 2017 – 19 objectives:

1. Engage rural communities in the developing land agenda, to enable information dissemination and input from the rural community perspective as policy and guidance develops.

2. Encourage and support the active engagement of communities in the development of regional land use frameworks.
3. Highlight rural housing need and homelessness as relating to land access.
4. Identify and promote a series of case studies on alternative models of access to land to encourage debate and replication, leading to policy recommendations.
5. Promote understanding of the rights and responsibilities afforded to communities, public, private and third sector bodies in relation to land ownership, management and use.

So far...

- ✓ We broadened the remit of this policy area in response to wider opportunities to include land use, reform, housing and climate change.
- ✓ Highlighted land reform issues, progress and developments through our website, newsletter and social media and kept members up-to-date as policy and guidance on the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 and Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016 develops.
- ✓ Conducted an ongoing investigation into the potential for reinvigorating rural commercial property through renovation and re-purposing.
- ✓ Engaged members in and responded to consultations on the Climate Change Bill, Fuel Poverty, Guidance in Engaging Communities in Decisions Relating to Land, Scottish Energy Strategy and Scottish Energy Efficiency Programme.
- ✓ Spoke at the Common Weal Housing Convention as a first step towards highlighting the rural housing crisis.
- ✓ Celebrated much-needed changes to planning laws which will enable communities to be better heard during the decision-making process.

What changes have been made to the Action Plan objectives for 2017-19 and why?

- The development of regional land use frameworks has not been as rapid as we had anticipated, and we will therefore keep a watching brief on the Land Use Strategy as it is implemented and policy in this area develops. Recommendations on regional land use frameworks are expected towards the end of 2018.

D. Democracy & Governance

NEXT STEPS 2018-19

- a. Complete our research on rural democracy and governance.
- b. Engage rural communities in the Local Governance Review (summer 2018) and development of the Local Democracy Bill (winter 2018 onwards).
- c. Examine participation requests for ease and efficacy.

Action Plan 2017 – 19 objectives:

1. Produce a report that clearly outlines the problems facing rural communities in Scotland in relation to local democracy, including some real examples of how the current system does not work, and highlight possible preferred options or make recommendations as to the way forward towards better democracy for the people of rural Scotland.
2. Raise awareness of opportunities to participate in democracy, including reminders to register to vote.
3. Engage rural communities in the development of the forthcoming Local Democracy Bill.

So far...

- ✓ We have been waiting to hear about the process for the development of the Local Democracy Bill and are now planning our research report and campaign on this subject during 2018.
- ✓ Generated discussion and debate online about local democracy to highlight issues, progress and developments through our website, newsletter and social media and keep members up-to-date as policy on this issue develops.

- ✓ Provided input to Audit Scotland's developing approach to auditing the implementation of community empowerment legislation at local authority level.
- ✓ Held a public rural husting on the General Election 2017 on Twitter and reminded people to register and vote.

What changes have been made to the Action Plan objectives for 2017-19 and why?

We have not made any changes to the Action Plan objectives for 2017-19 but we will continue to monitor progress and identify any new opportunities relating to this policy area.

E. Digital Connectivity

NEXT STEPS 2018-19

- ❖ Raise awareness of consumer choice limitations in rural Scotland regarding broadband providers, and how this contributes to the increased cost of living in rural Scotland.
- ❖ Advocate for the interests of rural communities in Scotland regarding the 5G sell-off, ensuring that mobile phone coverage for rural communities is improved.
- ❖ Share progress on broadband with rural communities, once information is available on the next steps towards 100% superfast broadband provision in Scotland.

PROGRESS REPORT

Action Plan 2017 – 19 objectives:

1. Continued engagement with Scottish Government to ensure the recommendations from our 2016 Broadband Report, agreed with the Digital Policy Team, are enacted, including participation in a National Broadband Conference.
2. Monitoring and sharing of information on the progress made towards broadband rollout across rural Scotland.
3. Run an awareness-raising campaign for members and the public explaining the role of an Internet Service Provider and how to switch for the best deal.

4. Investigate mobile connectivity in rural Scotland and engage with mobile suppliers to gather information that will be relayed to the SRA membership and the public.
5. Address the 5G sell-off and examine other aspects of 5G including potential reserving of the 700MHz spectrum and other options, and the new 5G Technology Centre.
6. Run an open Digital Connectivity forum with free registration on the new SRA website to engage the public and other stakeholders in discussions related to all aspects of Digital Connectivity.

So far...

- ✓ The Scottish Government has moved on from the unpopular Community Broadband Scotland approach to superfast broadband coverage, as recommended in our 2016 broadband report, to ensure that quicker progress is made.
- ✓ Following this, ensured that the Scottish Government makes progress towards the commitment to 100% of premises having access to superfast broadband, known as R100, as advocated for since 2014 by SRA.
- ✓ Represented rural communities on the Digital Scotland Expert Panel which is overseeing the procurement process for the R100 superfast broadband programme.
- ✓ Advocated for the inclusion of superfast broadband uptake to be one of the National Indicators, which identify progress towards Scotland's National Outcomes.

- ✓ Represented rural views and evidence collated by SRA on broadband and mobile phone signal at the Scottish Affairs Select Committee in February 2018.
- ✓ Highlighted the importance of mobile phone coverage in Scotland, and welcomed news of funding and actions from the Scottish Government to address 4G not-spots in March 2018, including £25million of funding.
- ✓ Created a free online digital connectivity discussion forum for members on the SRA website, www.sra.scot.

What changes have been made to the Action Plan objectives for 2017-19 and why?

We have not made any changes to the Action Plan objectives for 2017-19 but we will continue to monitor progress and identify any new opportunities relating to this policy area.

OTHER ACTIVITIES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

MEMBERSHIP

- ✓ The website now includes an online platform where communities can discuss matters of importance, share ideas and knowledge and connect with one another, SRA and decision-makers. This is exclusively available to members.
- ✓ Members and our wider network receive a monthly newsletter with the latest news from SRA, which now includes a focus on news and relevant policy developments including quick briefing papers on key issues.
- ✓ Our membership has grown to over 450 individuals and organisations.
- ✓ Our Member's Day conference in September 2017 was attended by over 100 people from rural Scotland, examining what a vision for rural Scotland might look like. The event was enthusiastically received by rural communities as an opportunity to share knowledge, learn new skills, exchange ideas and identify solutions to the challenges facing rural communities.

PROFILE

- ✓ We completed our rebranding from Scottish Rural Parliament to Scottish Rural Action. This enables us to differentiate between the Rural Parliament, held every two years, and our other actions and activities.
- ✓ Our new website www.sra.scot reflects our increased focus on advocating for rural communities on a wide range of issues, whilst still maintaining a focus on those issues prioritised by rural communities at the Rural Parliament.
- ✓ A focus on raising our profile has seen a significant increase in press coverage for SRA; although we have not yet achieved our ambition of being the 'go-to' organisation on rural matters, we have made important progress, allowing us to better advocate for rural communities.

- ✓ We have developed relationships with a growing number of cross-party politicians in the Scottish and UK Parliaments and we will continue to build on this.

OUR TEAM

- ✓ We restructured our staff team to reflect our changed priorities. We now employ a Chief Executive Officer (full-time), Volunteer and Campaigns Coordinator (0.6FTE), Policy and Communications Officer (0.5FTE) and Finance and Administration Officer (0.2FTE), a total of 2.3 FTE posts working across an incredible range of activities and policy areas.
- ✓ Our board of director's access regular training and support, in bite-sized sessions, and dedicate time at every board meeting to their learning and development.
- ✓ We have made ourselves more accountable to members through the publication of this report and other updates on our objectives throughout 2017-18 and will be publishing our first annual report this year.
- ✓ We recruited and trained volunteers to collect evidence and campaign on issues affecting rural communities. We now have 50 registered volunteers who undertake a wide range of activities for us, from helping to shape policy and influence decision-making, to promoting our activities in their local community.

EUROPEAN RURAL PARLIAMENT

- ✓ We continue to maintain relationships with our peers across Europe, both within and outside of the European Union, through the European Rural Parliament to share knowledge and learn from other countries.
- ✓ Inputted into the Rural Services and Infrastructure work stream arising from the 2015 European Rural Parliament.

- ✓ Sent a volunteer delegation to the 2017 European Rural Parliament to build networks and develop new ideas, as well as seeking to influence policy and decision-making at the European level.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

- ✓ We achieved charitable status in early 2018.
- ✓ We ran a campaign on rural loneliness and isolation called #BeKindDecember, encouraging people to do one kind thing for someone else during December.
- ✓ We are an active member of the Rural Mental Health Forum, which seeks to improve the wellbeing of people in rural communities. We are looking forward to engaging more deeply with the Forum as it develops.
- ✓ We coordinated responses from members on NHS 24 service provision in rural areas, specifically focusing on mental wellbeing.
- ✓ Responded to concerns about the new GP contract and the impact this will have on rural health service provision.
- ✓ Achieved a number of smaller and larger asks from the Scottish Rural Parliament in 2014 in addition to those mentioned elsewhere, including a Rural Energy Challenge Fund and the extension of the Rural Leaders programme.
- ✓ Joined the Fair Delivery campaign to improve delivery services and costs for rural communities.