**What are the Rural Scotland in Focus Reports?**

Every two years, SAC's Rural Policy Centre, by researching and publishing its *Rural Scotland in Focus Reports*, provides:

- a fast-track to evidence
- commentary on key themes
- an extensive compendium of resources.

**How has Rural Scotland Changed Since we Reported in 2010?**

- **Population trends:** There will be population growth in most of rural Scotland’s Local Authority areas in the next 20 years. Migration will play a major part and continue the rising trend of more cultural diversity.

- **Housing needs:** The growing populations will increase demand for housing, including provision for single-occupant households. This means more pressure for suitable land and mains services. In many rural areas nearly 50% of housing stock is second homes and vacant property.

- **Economic resilience:** The little evidence available so far suggests the growth in public sector employment from 2007-2010 seems unlikely to continue, offering the potential for increased vulnerability of those areas most dependent on public sector jobs. While economic activity in rural areas contracted in 2007-2010, they were slightly more resilient than urban areas, although the South of Scotland has suffered a greater impact.

- **Environment:** Opportunities offered by the Land Use Strategy should contribute to the integrated approach required to address Scotland’s competing demands of climate change, water quality and biodiversity. An ecosystem approach in assessing land use options is the best way to help identity and resolve conflicts, allowing for the full range of goods and services to be taken into account and trade-offs to be analysed.

**Drivers and Engines of Change:**

- **Towns in rural Scotland:** Many regeneration initiatives focus on towns the Scottish Government classifies as having populations between 3,000 and 10,000. While larger and smaller rural settlements also perform critical service functions, many remote small towns are more vulnerable than their rural hinterlands, especially in accessible rural areas.

- **The private sector:** The highest density of businesses, per head of population, is in rural areas. In remote areas microbusinesses (1-9 employees) provide 39% of jobs. Their closure can have a disproportional impact due to lack of alternatives. Businesses in accessible rural areas are more ambitious for growth although there is a perception public sector support is aimed at high-growth areas. Integrated, place-based policies are needed that bring in planning consent for business units, housing and broadband investment.

- **Third sector:** There are more charities per head in rural than urban Scotland. More rural people are likely to have formally volunteered than urban people. We need to know whether voluntary effort adds to existing activities or is filling gaps in service provision. Widely spread and sparse populations and services mean charities in rural areas face specific challenges. While many rural communities have a wide skills-base, linking to specialist skills in other locations is important.

**Infrastructure and Technology Developments**

- **Rural next generation broadband:** is integral to Scotland’s social and economic development and to the delivery of the Scottish Government’s National Outcomes. Demand is persistent and increasing. While urban Scotland’s connectivity gets faster much of rural Scotland remains in the “final third” with “not-spots” and “twilight zones” hampering inclusion and development. Even maintaining the existing divide will require significant infrastructural investment, including by communities themselves. Next generation broadband enables the realisation of commonly-accepted “rights” for Scotland’s citizens, irrespective of location. National investment remains essential to enable rural communities and businesses to live and work.

- **A low carbon rural Scotland:** Per capita domestic CO₂ emissions are higher in rural Local Authorities than urban. Rural domestic properties have worse energy efficiency ratings while rural transport emissions are greater, due to higher rates of car ownership and use. With more domestic and business properties ‘off grid’, rural areas have a greater potential for adopting renewables and addressing low carbon households and transport agendas. However, conversion costs must be recognised, together with infrastructural challenges such as connectivity to the grid. The rural land-use sector has the capacity to sequester CO₂, through good practice in soil management and afforestation. There are examples of established and novel approaches where rural areas are already helping lower carbon emissions.

**Policy: Where Next?**

- **The evidence unequivocally supports the claim that specific characteristics make rural Scotland different from urban Scotland. This does not argue for “privileging” rural over urban. Rather, to enhance growth or development, inclusion and life-chances, the design and deployment of policies must be “tailored” to rural Scotland.**

- **Other areas of national policy offer a precedent, where design and delivery differ according to client group and socio-economic circumstance or occupation. The National Performance Framework itself is tailored through devolved Single Outcome Agreements. Therefore tailoring of national policy already takes place and is increasingly appropriate due to the critical need to target resources and budget efficiently.**

- **Such tailoring needs to go further, making it “fit for purpose” in multiple rural settings. Scotland’s rural characteristics need to be deliberately built, repeatedly and systematically, into the very heart of strategic, national policies. In straightened times localising design and delivery can be seen as an expensive luxury, however not doing so risks inappropriate allocation of resources while challenges remain unaddressed. Hand in hand with a national policy architecture, increased tailoring will enhance outcomes.**

- **SAC’s *Rural Scotland in Focus* Reports aim to enhance understanding of what rural Scotland is like and what life there is like. Applying this enhanced understanding and deliberately integrating it into “fit for purpose” policies, will increase the scope for all players to contribute and thrive, irrespective of where they live and work in rural Scotland.**

For more information on *Rural Scotland in Focus 2012*, please see: www.sac.ac.uk/ruralpolicycentre