

# **PROPOSED REMOTE RURAL COMMUNITIES (SCOTLAND) BILL – GAIL ROSS MSP**

## **SUMMARY OF CONSULTATION RESPONSES**

This document summarises and analyses the responses to a consultation exercise carried out on the above proposal.

The background to the proposal is set out in section 1, while section 2 gives an overview of the results. A detailed analysis of the responses to the consultation questions is given in section 3. These three sections have been prepared by the Scottish Parliament's Non-Government Bills Unit (NGBU). Section 4 has been prepared by Gail Ross MSP and includes her commentary on the results of the consultation.

Where respondents have requested that certain information be treated as “not for publication”, or that the response remain anonymous, these requests have been respected in this summary.

In some places, the summary includes quantitative data about responses, including numbers and proportions of respondents who have indicated support for, or opposition to, the proposal (or particular aspects of it). In interpreting this data, it should be borne in mind that respondents are self-selecting and it should not be assumed that their individual or collective views are representative of wider stakeholder or public opinion. The principal aim of the document is to identify the main points made by respondents, giving weight in particular to those supported by arguments and evidence and those from respondents with relevant experience and expertise. A consultation is not an opinion poll, and the best arguments may not be those that obtain majority support.

Copies of the individual responses are available on the following website:

<https://GailRossRemoteRuralCommunities.wordpress.com/>

Responses have been numbered for ease of reference.

A list of respondents is set out in the Annexe.

## **SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

Gail Ross MSP's draft proposal lodged on 25 October 2019 is for a Bill to:

**enhance the consideration given to remote rural mainland communities by public bodies in Scotland.**

The proposal was accompanied by a consultation document, prepared with the assistance of NGBU. This document was published on the Parliament's website, from where it remains accessible:

<https://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/Bills/12419.aspx>

The consultation period ran from 26 October 2019 to 31 January 2020.

The following 41 organisations were sent copies of the consultation document or links to it. The organisations included local authorities, plus third sector organisations, public sector organisations, representative organisations, local groups, and commercial organisations:

### Local authorities

Angus Council  
Clackmannanshire Council  
Dumfries and Galloway Council  
East Dunbartonshire Council  
East Lothian Council  
Falkirk Council  
Fife Council  
Highland Council  
Midlothian Council  
North Ayrshire Council  
Perth & Kinross Council  
Renfrewshire Council  
Scottish Borders Council  
Stirling Council

### Other organisations

COSLA  
Caithness Chamber of Commerce  
Community Land Scotland  
Dounreay  
Energy Action Scotland  
Engender  
Equality and Human Rights Commission in Scotland  
Highlands and Islands Enterprise  
Improvement Service  
Marine Conservation Society  
National Farmers Union, Scotland  
National Rural Mental Health Forum  
National Trust for Scotland  
NatureScot

Nourish Scotland  
Poverty Alliance  
Royal Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland  
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds  
Scotland's Rural College  
Scottish Crofting Federation  
Scottish Enterprise  
Scottish Farming and Wildlife Advisers' Group  
Scottish Government  
Scottish Human Rights Commission  
Scottish Land & Estates  
Scottish Refugee Council  
Scottish Tenant Farmers Association  
Scottish Wildlife Trust  
Shelter Scotland  
Trussell Trust  
Women In Agriculture Scotland

As well as sending out invitations to complete the consultation, people were encouraged to complete the consultation via social media posts and through local news media.

A public meeting was held on Monday 28 October 2019 at the main chamber of Wick Town Hall which was attended by local councillors, business leaders, and other interested parties. The following day (Tuesday 29 October 2019) a consultation launch event was held at the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh which was attended by MSPs, Scottish Government representatives, and other stakeholders.

Circulating the consultation was also discussed at the Cross Party Group for Rural Policy on 10 December 2019.

The consultation exercise was run by Gail Ross MSP's parliamentary office.

The consultation process is part of the procedure that MSPs must follow in order to obtain the right to introduce a Member's Bill. Further information about the procedure can be found in the Parliament's standing orders (see Rule 9.14) and in the *Guidance on Public Bills*, both of which are available on the Parliament's website:

- Standing orders (Chapter 9):  
<https://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/26514.aspx>
- Guidance (Part 3):  
<http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/25690.aspx>

## **SECTION 2: OVERVIEW OF RESPONSES**

In total, 173 responses were received.

The responses can be categorized as follows:

- 117 (68%) from private individuals (members of the public)
- Two (1%) from individual politicians (one councillor and one MSP)
- 30 (17%) from third sector organisations
- Nine (5%) from public sector organisations
- Seven (4%) from representative organisations
- Two (1%) from commercial organisations
- Six (3%) from other organisations.

Of those submissions:

- 49 (28%) submissions were anonymous
- 18 (10%) submissions were “not for publication”.

The vast majority of respondents (95%) were supportive of the proposal’s aim of enhancing the consideration given to remote rural mainland communities by public bodies in Scotland. This was reflected in responses from both individuals and organisations. A significant majority of respondents were in favour of remote rural proofing and of requiring the Scottish Government to produce a national remote rural plan. There was more of a mixed view on the question of whether exceptions should be made to allow the size of constituencies and wards in remote rural areas to differ from the criteria set out by the boundary commission, with around three-quarters of respondents considering that exceptions should be made.

Many respondents highlighted the issues facing remote rural communities such as a lack of sufficient service provision, a higher cost of living and depopulation. It was hoped that the Bill could address these problems by ensuring that the specific needs of remote rural communities are always considered when policy was being developed and funds allocated.

## SECTION 3: RESPONSES TO CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

This section sets out an overview of responses to each question in the consultation document.

### **General aim of proposed Bill**

The consultation document outlined the aim of the proposed Bill and what it would involve. Respondents were asked:

**Question 1: Which of the following best expresses your view of legislating to enhance the consideration given to remote rural mainland communities by public bodies in Scotland? (Fully supportive / Partially supportive / etc.)? Please explain the reasons for your response.**

All 173 respondents answered this question. Of those respondents:

- 147 (84%) were ‘fully supportive’, whilst 19 (11%) were ‘partially supportive’;
- one (<1%) was ‘neutral (neither supportive or opposed);
- one (<1%) was partially opposed;
- four (2%) were unsure;
- one (<1%) did not explicitly choose one of the options provided in the survey.

### **Reasons for supporting the proposal**

Many of the responses to this question detailed some of the challenges facing remote rural communities in Scotland, with hope expressed that the proposed Bill could go some way towards addressing the issues highlighted.

It was suggested that people living in remote rural communities often feel ignored by the UK and Scottish Governments, particularly when it comes to the formulation of policies and the distribution of funding. Some respondents made reference to the decline in population in remote rural areas, stating that a lack of adequate service provision is a contributing factor to this. An individual respondent, Sarah Cardno, stated:

“Rural areas of Scotland see continual centralisation of services, legislation that does not work or actively hinders rural life. Just as the UK Government thinks only of London and the south, so the Scottish Government only thinks of Glasgow, Edinburgh and the central belt. Rural people in the Highlands often have their views “listened to” but ignored as funding continually gets spent on urban areas such as Inverness, If the continued urban centralisation and domination in policy and legislation continue, there will be no rural population left, simply holiday homes in empty villages and towns as people move to where their voices and opinions may actually be heard”. (Response no, 77, ID 129937360, Sarah Cardno)

One anonymous respondent emphasised the lack of funding in remote rural communities as a considerable problem which needs to be addressed:

“Remote rural communities are hugely underfunded – funding seems to be based on population, which is fine in one sense, but costs are much higher in remote areas (even with subsidy on petrol, prices are around 10p a litre cheaper in towns than here). Ambulances need to travel 100+ miles to get patients to hospital, roads are poorly maintained.... budget cuts mean gritting is not done in advance of children travelling 40 miles to high school.” (Response no 38, ID: 134873595, Anonymous)

Others highlighted the issue of isolation, as people are forced to travel long distances for employment or move away from the area altogether, often leaving behind an older population which may struggle to access health services or other support. (Response no 89, ID: 130538679, Killin and District Volunteer Car Scheme)

Reference was also made to the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 (“the Islands Act”) which includes measures intended to support the needs of Scotland’s islands. Gail Ross’ proposed Bill will include similar measures intended to benefit remote rural communities. Several respondents welcomed this and hoped that the Bill could have a similar impact to that of the Islands Act.

Others, whilst supportive of the proposal, felt that the powers included should be extended to cover all of rural Scotland, rather than being limited to areas considered to be remote. The National Rural Mental Health Forum stated that:

“We are supportive of this Bill but consider that the powers should extend to all of rural Scotland and not just the remote rural areas. That is accessible rural also. The current definitions do not take into account the mobility or lack of mobility some may have in remote rural areas and accessible rural areas. The definition of remote rural is of someone living more than half an hour’s drive from a town, but if you live, for example, 20 minutes’ drive from a town and don’t have a car, you will be more disadvantaged than someone that may be 40 minutes from a town who has car access.” (Response no 122, ID:133575050)

<b>Question 2: What do you think would be the main practical advantages and disadvantages of the proposed Bill?</b>
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One hundred and fifty-eight respondents (91% of the total) answered this question.

### **Advantages**

A number of respondents were hopeful that the proposed Bill could lead to a de-centralisation of decision-making. This would allow remote rural communities to have more say on matters that affected them, and for the

needs of different communities to be taken into account. The Caithness Chamber of Commerce stated:

“The obvious practical advantage would be to reduce the impact of centralised decision-making on remote rural communities. This might mean, for example, that levies intended to address issues in dense urban communities (such as the Workplace Parking Levy) would have to contain considerations as to their potential impact on remote rural communities. We might also reasonably expect to see the Bill resulting in a greater devolution of decision-making to local areas themselves and allow greater leeway for local partnerships to develop solutions which work for their own community.” (Non-SS response no 1)

Similarly, it was considered that the Bill would give recognition to the challenges facing remote rural communities. The Development Trusts Association Scotland noted this in its response:

“The main advantage of the Bill would be to raise awareness about the particular challenges which remote rural communities face, and ensure that these are considered during the design and implementation of any legislation which impacts, or potentially impacts on these communities. Depopulation is a major challenge for Scotland and merits greater attention and priority on the political agenda. This will in turn embolden and support the efforts of local communities to do whatever they can at their end to create housing and economic opportunities, and find creative solutions which address other practical problems and issues which exist at a local level.” (Response no 133, ID: 134676375)

Appin Community Development Trust also made reference to depopulation in its response, a problem it considered the Bill may be able to mitigate:

“It will help reduce the continued population decline in our community. It will help redress the demographic balance by in particular enabling younger families to live in our community, as well as enabling older people to remain at home. Note: the proportion of our population over the age of 65 is 33% which is much higher than the national average.” (Response no 91, ID: 131415660)

Some respondents felt that, by requiring public bodies to properly assess the needs of remote rural communities, the Bill would be a step towards placing such areas on a level playing field with urban communities. It was considered particularly helpful by some respondents that the requirement to consider remote rural areas in policy-making was to be enshrined in legislation thus making it a legal requirement.

## **Disadvantages**

Some respondents were concerned that the Bill may try and define remote rural communities as one homogenous group and, as a result, fail to take into

account the varying needs of different communities. One individual respondent, Charlotte Mountford, stated:

“It must be noted that a homogenous approach to all rural remote communities will prove challenging - a remote community in Sutherland is different to one in Dumfries and Galloway just as Shetland is different to Skye when considering the Islands bill. The bill should attempt to [be] flexible and responsive rather than one size fits all” (Response no 83, ID: 130408812)

Others expressed concern that it would be difficult to define what constitutes a remote rural community and thus which areas the proposed Bill would apply to, or not apply to, with Samaritans Scotland noting:

“One challenging aspect of the proposed Bill is how remote rural communities should be defined and where the ‘cut off’ point for statutory protection should be. ... As the consultation paper itself acknowledges, there may be people living in communities which meet the definition of remote rural, where residents do not feel remote, when those living in accessible rural communities may .... People’s perceptions and experiences of remoteness may be influenced by a range of factors, including car ownership, availability and affordability of public transport, and the range of activities and spaces that exist within and close to where they live. It is also important to consider the role that socio-economic inequalities may play in shaping people’s experiences of remoteness, as those on lower incomes may be more likely to rely on public transport and be at greater risk of fuel poverty.” (Response no 162, ID:134965634)

A view was expressed that the measures included in the proposed Bill may add unnecessary layers of bureaucracy or cause an increase in workload and pressure on local authorities. Scottish Land and Estates stated:

“In terms of disadvantages, the proposals may require a significant increase in workload for local authorities already under considerable resource pressure. We also reiterate the point that where a community sits just outside a remote rural ‘designation’ there is a risk that it will become disenfranchised.” (Response no 147, ID:134914058)

**Question 3: Which of the following best expresses your view of placing the concept of Remote Rural Proofing into legislation?**

One hundred and seventy-one respondents (98% of the total) answered this question. Of those respondents:

- 142 (84%) were fully supportive and 23 (13%) were partially supportive;
- three (2%) were unsure;
- one (<1%) was neutral;

- two (1%) were partially opposed.

Reference was again made to the specific challenges facing remote rural communities, with an expectation that building remote rural proofing into future policies would help improve matters. The lack of input that remote rural communities have regarding service provision was frequently referred to. One respondent, Tamara Hicks, discussed this in relation to the NHS:

“Demographically we currently have very little influence on centralised service decisions, in particular the NHS. We need stronger remote rural considerations as the lack of services have a huge impact on our lives, safety and health given the distances involved. I hope that the proposal [for] rural proofing will enhance the quality of our lives in this and many other areas.” (Response no 71, ID: 129858658)

Other issues particularly affecting remote rural areas, such as isolation and problems accessing local services, were cited as reasons that remote rural proofing was required. Paths for All considered that such issues could have a negative impact on the health and wellbeing of individuals:

“As members of the National Rural Mental Health Forum, and with the proviso that the Bill covers accessible rural as well as remote rural areas, we would be supportive of the Bill. Rural communities in Scotland face specific challenges – such as social isolation and access to sustainable transport (as well as local services) which can impact their overall health and wellbeing, and with rural communities accounting for a fifth of the Scottish population, the scale of this impact should not be underestimated. By bringing this Bill into legislation, the decision-making process would be more likely to result in equitable outcomes for those in rural communities.” (Response no 137, ID: 134766926)

It was considered that placing remote rural proofing into legislation would help ensure that the challenges facing remote rural areas were properly acknowledged and addressed, giving extra protection to often fragile communities. The James Hutton institute stated:

“Given the unique challenges they face, it is important that the implications for remote rural areas are considered when designing policies, so that a) any disadvantages they might introduce are addressed, and b) potential benefits are identified and harnessed. However,,...while greater consideration of the characteristics and needs of remote rural areas within decision making and policy implementation is welcome, it is also important to recognise the significant diversity of remote rural areas. This includes a range of socio-economic and demographic characteristics, and the resources, assets and expertise available for development. ‘Remote rural proofing’ should be accompanied by commitment to local-level consultation and

building knowledge to inform effective policy interventions.” (Response no 165, ID: 134299456)

Some respondents made reference to ‘island proofing’ which is provided for in the Islands Act. Applecross Community Company, among others, pointed out that those issues which affect island communities can also be faced by mainland, remote rural communities (Response no 136, ID: 132987786, Applecross Community Company) The Law Society of Scotland considered that provisions relating to remote rural proofing should match those in the Islands Act. This would ensure consistency and make clear that those who do not adhere to the legislation will face consequences. (Non-smart survey response no 3, Law Society of Scotland)

**Q4. Which of the following best expresses your view of giving Scottish Ministers power to issue statutory guidance to other relevant public bodies related to Remote Rural Proofing which they would be required to adhere to in exercising their functions and duties?**

One hundred and seventy-two respondents (99% of the total) answered this question. Of those respondents:

- 129 (75%) were fully supportive and 30 (17%) were partially supportive;
- six (3%) were neutral;
- three (2%) were fully opposed and one (<1%) was partially opposed;
- three (2%) were unsure;
- one (<1%) did not explicitly choose one of the options provided in the survey.

**Q5. If Scottish Ministers had such a power, which public bodies should it apply to, and in relation to which of their functions and duties?**

One hundred and forty-eight (85% of the total) answered this question.

A variety of public bodies were cited, including those which, have responsibility for, or work in the areas of:

- Local government
- Health
- Education
- Policing
- Transport
- Housing
- Utilities including banks and post offices.

SLAED Rural Group was of the view that statutory guidance should apply to all public bodies who have responsibility for delivering services, either to remote rural areas or to the whole of Scotland:

“It should apply to all public bodies with a responsibility for delivery of services in rural and remote areas, or across the whole of Scotland, to allow for a holistic approach, where all agencies are committed or encouraged to work more closely together to enable more added value to be delivered at the local level. To fulfil the opportunities that could be afforded by this legislation cannot be a tick box exercise. (Response no 159, ID: 134951081)

Similarly, George Farlow felt that any public body responsible for delivering services, or in receipt of public grants or funding, should have to report to the Scottish Government if they failed to adhere to the guidance. (Response no, 168, ID: 134990179, George Farlow)

Reference was again made to the Islands Act, with the Law Society of Scotland suggesting that the list of public bodies should mirror those contained in that Act. (Non-smart survey response no 3, Law Society of Scotland)

Scottish Land & Estates considered that it may not always be necessary for a full remote rural proofing exercise to be undertaken in every instance:

“We would support the principle of ensuring that all public bodies are required to ‘Remote Rural Proof’ when exercising their functions. However, we recognise that this might not be necessary in every case. Measures could be taken to ensure that significant public sector contracts or procurement activity, undertaken using public money, are subject to a remote rural impact assessment where appropriate.” (Response no 147, ID: 134914058)

**Q6. Do you agree that councils that serve remote rural areas currently have sufficient powers to deliver positive outcomes for their communities?**

One hundred and seventy-two respondents (99% of the total) answered this question. Of those respondents:

- 34 (20%) agreed that councils have adequate powers to deliver positive outcomes for their communities;
- 88 (51%) considered that councils do not have adequate powers;
- 47 (27%) did not know;
- three (2%) did not explicitly choose one of the options provided in the survey.

## **Councils have sufficient powers to deliver positive outcomes**

Some respondents were of the view that councils already had sufficient powers, and that increased funding was required rather than further powers:

“Councils already have sufficient powers. The issue is that they do not have sufficient funding to utilise their existing powers to deliver services to the level that they and the communities may wish. The lack of additional funding to service remote rural areas means that they cannot be supported as we would like at times. If there was legislation around this, including funding from the Scottish Government or Westminster, then it would ensure the voices of the few were heard. It is crucial however that in forming legislation that it adds to the current frameworks and there are already many powers available to Local Authorities. New Acts should not include powers that are in essence unfunded duties as seen with the recent Transport and Planning Acts. Communities contact the council to express their concerns of the limited services they perceive they currently receive from paying their council tax, including lack of gritting/snow clearing, street lighting, bin collections from end of rural roads, lack of grit bins and pick-up points for children and safe routes for schools via rural routes. (Response no 145, ID: 134898655, Aberdeenshire Council)

Others questioned how councils were exercising the powers available to them:

“They may have sufficient powers, but do not sufficiently exercise them whilst supporting and better funding large towns and cities, which swallows up]resources disproportionately and does not support urban areas with any level of equality. There may be a need for greater governmental guidance/direction and funding.” (Response no 112, ID: 130538679, Killin and District Volunteer Car Scheme)

One anonymous respondent felt that local councils were perhaps more in need of awareness of the important issues rather than powers:

“Not necessarily additional powers but additional awareness. For example, Highland Council already has powers of legislation in various areas but often focuses on the provision of services within Inverness and not so much the remote and rural areas. Committee and councils don’t always listen and fully take into account the voice of local councillors.” (Response no 34, ID: 134478506)

## **Councils do not have sufficient powers to deliver positive outcomes**

Many of the points made by those who responded in this way are similar to those discussed above. Some who chose this option were of the view that although local authorities have powers they are not utilising them appropriately. One respondent wrote:

“To clarify, the powers are probably there, however the focus is more on the populated areas, potentially due to budgetary restrictions and a lack of efficiency in providing services rather than a lack of powers.”  
(Response no 3, ID: 129916511, Anonymous)

Other respondents considered that the source of many problems facing remote rural communities is a lack of funding as opposed to a lack of legislative power (for example response no 152, ID: 134939128, Bettyhill, Strathnaver and Altnaharra Community Council)

A couple of respondents considered that the geographical areas covered by the councils were too large for the powers held to be sufficient:

“They’re too big – having the centre of the council services in Inverness which is 100 miles south of where a large part of the rural population lives is just ludicrous – the needs of the rural communities are totally different. Breaking up this area into smaller councils or similar legislative bodies would put the power back into the communities where it belongs and mean that local people get to make the decisions about the things that affect them, while knowing that they understand the ramifications of those decisions. (Response no 8, ID:130452969, Anonymous)

<b>Q7. Which of the following best expresses your view of requiring the Scottish Government to prepare a ‘National Remote Rural Plan?’</b>
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One hundred and seventy-two respondents (99% of the total) answered this question. Of those respondents:

- 138 (80%) were fully supportive and 24 (14%) were partially supportive;
- four (2%) were neutral;
- three (2%) were fully opposed and one (<1%) was partially opposed;
- one (<1%) was unsure;
- one (<1%) did not explicitly choose one of the options provided in the survey.

### **Supportive**

It was considered by many respondents that a remote rural plan is something which has been needed for a long time in order to address issues such as depopulation. A number of those supportive of the idea of a National Remote Rural Plan emphasised the need for consultation to take place with relevant stakeholders:

“Remote rural areas are in a state of crisis with the sustainability of many communities in question. Great care will have to be taken to ensure that whatever plan is devised really does address the needs of these areas and does not give rise to some sort of dispersed national park which accentuates tourism and scenery too powerfully. Thus, the

compilation of the plan would require meaningful consultation though we are acutely aware of how difficult it is to achieve that in places where even sustaining Community Councils is a struggle and where the population may be suffering from consultation fatigue. Especially, when past consultations, when there has been insufficient follow through, leaves people sceptical of the effectiveness of any plan". (Response no 152, ID:134939128, Bettyhill, Strathnaver and Altnaharra Community Council).

Other respondents, including Sportscotland, made suggestions regarding the structure and content of the proposed plan:

"A National Remote Rural Plan is essential. A framework for identifying goals, objectives, actions and responsibilities; and enabling monitoring, review and accountability should be considered as part of this. This should also include timescales for achieving key targets. As far as possible, this framework should align to, and use, consistent indicators as national frameworks already established." (Response no 158, ID: 134943156)

Caithness Chamber of Commerce also shared its views on what the plan should cover:

"It is important that this plan not be vague and aspirational, but present key targets and deliverables for Government support for remote rural communities. It should be developed in consultation with these communities and reviewed regularly. Any such plan should also look holistically at the issues affecting remote rural communities, as these issues often impact on each other – for example, there may be areas where improved digital connectivity allows delivery of telehealth services such as NHS Near Me, reducing pressure on public transport and healthcare". (Non-SS number 1)

It was considered by some that putting the plan on a statutory basis would ensure that action was taken by local authorities, with others stating that appropriate funding must be put in place by the Scottish Government. Some, such as Paths for All, were supportive of a plan but considered it should cover all of rural Scotland and not be limited to remote rural areas. (Response no 137, ID: 134766926, Paths for All)

## **Opposed**

Some concern was expressed regarding the creation of a 'one size' national plan. For example, Councillor Mark Rowley stated:

"If we are asking for increased focus on remote rural [it should be] should very locally-focussed and locally-driven. An imposed 'one size' national plan from central belt government wouldn't align with that or be helpful". (Response no 100, ID:133095273))

#### **Q8. How often should the plan be reviewed?**

One hundred and seventy-two respondents (99% of the total) answered this question. Of those respondents:

- 19 (11%) chose 'every 10 years';
- 84 respondents (49%) considered the plan should be reviewed every 5 years;
- 31 (18%) chose 'every 3 years';
- 14 (7%) chose 'every year';
- 12 (7%) didn't know;
- nine (6%) chose another frequency;
- two (1%) said there was no need for regular reviews.
- one (<1%) did not explicitly choose one of the options provided in the survey.

Of the seven available options, 'every 5 years' was selected most often by respondents (49%). The next popular option was 'every three years' (18%). The views of other respondents were spread between the remaining available options.

**Q9. The Boundary Commission is normally required to ensure that all constituencies and wards contain similar populations, even if that results in rural constituencies and wards being much larger than urban ones. At present, the only exceptions are for a few island areas (e.g. Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles must remain separate constituencies, despite their relatively small populations). Do you believe further exceptions should be made for mainland remote rural areas?**

One hundred and seventy respondents (98%) answered this question. Of those respondents:

- 122 (72%) felt that further exceptions should be made for mainland remote rural areas;
- 14 (8%) felt that no further exceptions should be made for mainland remote rural areas;
- 33 (19%) responded that they 'didn't know';
- one (<1%) did not explicitly choose one of the options provided in the survey.

## **Yes – further exceptions should be made for mainland remote rural areas**

A number of respondents considered that remote rural areas face many of the same challenges as islands and that any exceptions currently made for islands should therefore also extend to remote rural communities.

Ailsa Higgins was of the view that some rural mainland areas were more remote and isolated than islands:

“There are extreme context-specific factors which influence the needs/challenges and political preferences within remote rural areas. Some remote rural mainland areas (such as Campbeltown or Caithness) are more isolated than islands. Islands should not (in my opinion) be given more rights/recognition of isolation just because they happen to have a body of water surrounding them. There are mainland remote rural areas which are far more isolated. An example is Highland, where the mass of people in Inverness and their concerns, needs and political choices, will totally overrule the voting patterns of more isolated communities which have fewer numbers.” (Response no 132, ID:134632367)

One respondent, Adam Pellant, stated that some areas are underrepresented due to the current set up of constituencies and wards:

“The reasons for smaller-population constituencies/wards on some islands should apply for mainland remote areas too. I feel that besides population size, there has to be a consideration of geographical size/spread and the extent to which a constituency/ward can be considered as an area which can function as a whole unit and be served as a whole unit, given factors such as major access constraints throughout the area. Perhaps a measure could be taken of the journey times taken for a single MP/MSP/Councillor to cover the extent of a constituency’s/ward’s geographical area, in setting boundaries of constituencies/wards. Some maximum journey time for that could be a fair criterion in boundary setting, if balanced against population size. As things stand, some wards and constituencies in the highlands are vast, with poor road infrastructure further exacerbating coverage by single Councillors and MPs/MSPs, which in reality leads to under-representation of certain areas compared to others. (Response no 118, ID:130214470)

Some respondents, including Scotland’s Rural Collage/SLA consulting (SRUC/SLA), highlighted the potential benefits of making exceptions for some remote rural areas. It was suggested, for example, that such changes could lead to more area-specific decision-making and allocation of budgets. SRUC/SLA stressed however that it was unaware of any research on the impact such a change would have. (Non SS Response no 4, SRUC/SLA)

### **No further exceptions should be made for mainland remote rural areas**

Most who responded in this way were of the view that it is not necessary for ward and constituency areas to be made smaller, with many considering that there are already too many elected members in position. It was also expressed that changing boundaries could lead to confusion and thus be unhelpful.

One respondent considered that allowing for smaller constituency areas “would not be particularly fair” and that instead the focus should be creating an understanding the issues facing remote rural communities and funding being allocated to help support those communities. (Response no 134, 134733720, ID: Helmsdale Community Council).

Aberdeenshire Council noted that it was unaware of any demand in remote rural communities for any changes to boundaries to be made. (Response no 145, ID: 134898655)

#### **Q10. Taking account of both costs and potential savings, what financial impact would you expect the Bill to have on:**

**Government and the public sector;**

**Businesses;**

**Individuals.**

A total of one hundred and sixty-seven respondents (97%) answered this question. However, many of those who responded did not leave further comment. Those who did comment did not necessarily comment on all three sectors that the question asks about.

#### **Government and the public sector**

Of those who answered:

- 22 (13%) thought that the proposed Bill would lead to a significant increase in costs for the Government and the public sector;
- 83 (50%) thought it would lead to some increase in costs;
- 37 (23%) thought it would be broadly cost-neutral;
- two (1%) thought it would lead to some reduction in costs;
- three (2%) thought it would lead to a significant reduction in costs;
- 19 (1%) were unsure;
- one (<1%) did not explicitly choose one of the options provided in the survey.

As the figures above demonstrate most considered that the Bill would lead to at least some increase in costs for the Government and public sector.

Many respondents were of the view that the Bill would require the Government and local authorities to invest in remote rural communities in order to improve services and infrastructure. Any such investments would need to be tailored to the specific needs of remote rural communities and, as a result, could be more expensive. It was considered, however, that this would help to tackle issues such as depopulation by making remote rural areas more attractive for people to relocate to. Therefore, many respondents felt that any costs incurred would have a long-term beneficial effect on remote rural communities by boosting the local economy.

Some respondents considered that the Bill would be cost-neutral as, rather than incurring additional costs, it would lead to a redistribution of existing expenditure, with an anonymous respondent stating:

“If designed correctly, nationally [this] should be largely cost-neutral as it is just diverting spend and forcing efficiency improvements. For local individuals and businesses, improved services would be expected to reduce costs. The key is to spend money and provide reliable services and infrastructure, which with efficiency improvement and detailed spending scrutiny can actually reduce overall costing, while improving quality of service.” (Response no 3,, ID:129916511)

Very few respondents considered that the Bill would lead to a reduction in costs for the Government or public sector, with one stating that if spending was tailored to the needs of remote rural areas it would lead to less local opposition to projects and thus reduce costly delays.

## **Businesses**

Of those who responded:

- six respondents (4%) thought that the Bill would lead to a significant increase in costs for businesses;
- 29 (16%) thought it would lead to some increase in costs;
- 65 (38%) thought it would be broadly cost-neutral;
- 35 (21%) thought it would lead to some reduction in costs;
- seven (5%) thought it would lead to a significant reduction in costs;
- 25 (15%) were unsure.

While some respondents considered that a degree of initial outlay would be required from businesses in order to take any remote rural proofing measures into account, it was hoped that the Bill would benefit businesses financially in the long-term. It was noted that many businesses in remote rural areas are small or medium sized enterprises which must contend with issues such as

higher distribution and delivery costs and poor digital connectivity. It was anticipated that, in ensuring that any specific issues faced by remote rural communities are taken into account by the Government and public bodies when making policy, the Bill will help to counteract these issues and thus lead to savings for businesses. As SLAED Rural Group stated in its response:

“The business profile of remote rural areas across Scotland is largely SMEs with the majority of these being micro businesses, which do not hit the Government’s growth agenda for support but play a vital role in sustaining vibrant local communities. The ongoing challenges for remote rural SMEs are issues such as poor mobile/digital coverage, higher distribution/delivery costs, less choice of utility suppliers which can drive up the operating costs. However, this Bill could present a real opportunity to seek more resources for businesses in island/remote rural areas and in particular to support fragile island and remote rural communities with self-employment. (Response no 159, 134951081)

## **Individuals**

Of those who responded:

- four respondents (2%) thought that the Bill would lead to a significant increase in costs for individuals;
- 21 (11%) thought it would lead to some increase in costs;
- 61 (36%) thought it would be broadly cost-neutral;
- 49 (30%) thought it would lead to some reduction in costs;
- 12 (8%) thought it would lead to a significant reduction in costs;
- 21 (13%) were unsure.

It was again expected that the Bill would lead to some improvements to infrastructure and amenities in remote rural areas. This in turn would benefit individuals financially by offsetting the specific expenses associated with living in remote rural areas, such as the high costs of travel. One anonymous respondent stated:

“(T)here is a higher cost of living in rural Scotland – cost to travel, cost to import, heating (poor standard of housing) and low paying jobs. Any support from government would improve these factors and have potential savings to the local individuals and businesses” (Response no 7, ID:130443898)

Some concern was expressed, however, that any costs associated with the Bill would have to be met by local authorities and that those costs would be passed on to individuals by means, for example, of higher taxes. One respondent, Alison Smith, stated:

“In the short-term individuals across the country will need to be prepared to pay more in tax and service costs. In the long term, all of the population will be losers in terms of finance if the problems are not faced now.” (Response no 167, ID: 134985084)

**Q11. Are there ways in which the Bill could achieve its aim more cost-effectively (e.g. by reducing costs or increasing savings)?**

One hundred and eighteen respondents (68%) answered this question.

Many respondents suggested ways in which the Government and public sector could ensure efficiencies when carrying out remote rural proofing and producing remote rural plans. For example, by setting clearly defined objectives which are regularly tracked and reviewed. (Response no 3, ID: 129916511, anonymous)

Other respondents highlighted the need for information and experience to be shared between different communities and local authorities in order to lessen the likelihood of duplicated work. (Response no 84, ID: 130463122, Tim King) Others emphasised the need for the Government and public bodies to engage with local communities, with one respondent stating:

“Do on-the-ground research within remote rural communities to find out what would work. Fuel co-operatives in a highly forested area where forestry companies are bound to give or sell at a reduced rate wood to the communities would reduce fuel costs. Reducing road tax in rural areas, acknowledging the necessity of a vehicle and the lack of other transport options. Circular economy initiatives which encourage communities to find sources for food, fuels, etc locally would reduce the transport costs of bringing these in or individuals having to go and get them.” (Response no 25, ID: 134254507, Anonymous)

Some respondents discussed more practical ways in which costs could be kept low, for example, by ensuring the IT infrastructure is in place to reduce the need for travel over long distances for meetings undertaken by public body officials:

“The obvious, less government funded driving to meetings at who knows what per mile, overnight stays and staff hours involved, particularly when most fragile communities have access to reasonable broadband and video conferencing should be front and centre of any consultation. That saves some pennies, the real savings are to be made in employing and trusting to local people and expertise.” (Response no 103, ID: 133625426, Ewen McLachlan)

SRUC/SLA questioned whether remote rural proofing will need to be factored into all policies made by the relevant public bodies, noting that savings could be made if such considerations needed to be made only when the authority considered it necessary:

“It will be important to consider whether all policies, strategies, etc. emanating from relevant public bodies will be subject to remote rural proofing (as is the case with rural proofing in England, for example) or only some. The latter is the case with Island Communities Impact Assessments (ICIA), for example, where the process will only apply in instances where the authority deems they are required. While such an approach runs the risk that opportunities may be missed to undertake island proofing, it will reduce the burden on authorities who will not be required to undertake the process in every instance. Key, of course, will be making sure the rationale behind the decision not to undertake an ICIA is transparent. This is something that should be considered with potential rural proofing.” (Non SS Response no 4

**Q12. What overall impact is the proposed Bill likely to have on equality, taking account of the following protected characteristics (under the Equality Act 2010): age, disability, gender re-assignment, maternity and pregnancy, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation?**

One hundred and sixty-nine respondents (99%) answered this question. Of those respondents:

- 81 (48%) considered that the Bill would have a positive impact with 29 (17%) considering it would have a slightly positive impact;
- 41 (25%) considered that the impact would be neutral;
- three (2%) considered that the Bill would have a negative impact;
- 15 (8%) were unsure.

### **Positive impact**

It was suggested that those with protected characteristics can often find it difficult to access appropriate support services due to the constraints of living in remote rural areas (such as a lack of sufficient public transport). It was anticipated that the Bill could help improve this situation, particularly for older people and disabled people. One anonymous respondent stated:

“In rural locations individuals could sometimes feel isolated, and even embarrassed, if they cannot access services locally (relatively), and in some cases this could delay or prevent them from accessing. Improved services with less travel time can help to address this”. (Response no 3, ID:129916511)

The impact that living in remote rural areas can have on both older and younger people was highlighted by other respondents:

“The main problems I see relate to young people being able to afford to live and work here and for older folk to obtain the care they need to be able to stay here safely in their home (or at least to stay locally in

sheltered accommodation)”. (Response no 84, ID: 130463122, Tim King)

Specific mention was also made of challenges facing expectant and new mothers:

“It would be very good if maternity services could be improved and be more locally available. This could have the positive effect on local populations encouraging families to stay in their local communities.” (Response no 28, Anonymous, ID:134297839)

### **Negative impact**

Of the few respondents who considered that the Bill could have a negative impact on equalities, one was of the view that it might make those with protected characteristics less likely to seek support or help for fear of being stigmatised:

“It will make it harder for disabled people in remote rural communities to put their heads above the parapet and ask for their rights and easier for them to be bullied and for hate incidents to occur”. (Response no 39, ID:134884301, Anonymous.)

<b>Q13. In what ways could any negative impact of the Bill on equality be minimised?</b>
--

One hundred and six respondents (61%) answered this question.

Many respondents considered that any negative impact on equality could be minimised by consulting local communities on decision-making and by reviewing any decisions made. One anonymous respondent suggested that the following was required:

““Flexibility within the legislation to accommodate the diversity of remote communities – not treating them all the same. Community centred approach.” (Response no 40, ID:134892847)

Some reference was made to the issue of depopulation, particularly with younger people moving away from remote rural areas. It was considered that if the Bill could help address this problem communities would benefit. Morag Keenan called for:

“greater resident age range through more affordable housing, encouraging skilled workers, better and affordable connectivity and incentives for young people to settle and work in the area.” (Response no 102, ID:133305756)

**Q14. Do you consider that the proposed Bill can be delivered sustainably, i.e. without having likely future disproportionate economic, social and/or environmental impacts?**

One hundred and sixty-eight respondents (97%) answered this question. Of those respondents:

- 120 (71%) considered that the Bill could be delivered sustainably
- 11 (7 %) considered that the Bill could not be delivered sustainably;
- 37 (22%) did not know if the proposed Bill could be delivered sustainably.

**Yes – the proposed Bill can be delivered sustainably**

It was considered by some that the Bill could be delivered sustainably by ensuring decisions are made which take into account the differing needs and priorities of different communities. Reference was also made to the positive impact the Bill could have by leading to increased investment in remote rural areas:

“Sustainability should be at the heart of the Bill. Enabling remote communities to be resilient (and not fragile) would be beneficial economically, socially and environmentally. These places are often the face of Scotland that people from around the world come to see and visit. Better infrastructure and more focus on them will surely enable them to thrive, to be economically more sustainable, and to protect their extraordinary USP -- the unique and beautiful remote rural landscape”. (Response no 24, ID: 133833604, Anonymous)

The view that the Bill could help rural remote areas to thrive was echoed by others, with an anonymous respondent stating:

“In having specific legislation which supports remote and very remote rural areas, this would help communities stay viable and thrive. They would become attractive to live in and help counteract depopulation. With people being able to gain employment, education and access services in their area, there would be a reduction in travel to access those services, reducing the environmental cost of travel”. (Response no 31, ID: 134403709, Anonymous)

**No – the proposed Bill cannot be delivered sustainably**

Those who commented felt that the changes outlined in the Bill would incur costs for remote rural communities, thus lessening the likelihood of the Bill’s aims being delivered sustainably in the long term.

## **SECTION 4: MEMBER'S COMMENTARY**

Gail Ross MSP has provided the following commentary on the results of the consultation, as summarised in sections 1-3 above.

In writing this commentary I would like to thank the many individuals and organisations which have assisted me in the run up to, and during, the consultation on my proposal for a Member's Bill. I extend special thanks to the Scottish Parliament's Non-Government Bills Unit, my team, and of course the individuals and organisations who responded to the consultation.

During my time as Deputy Convener of the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee, I helped take the Islands (Scotland) Act (2018) through the Parliament. I noted that many of the issues that island communities faced and sought legislation to remedy were similar to issues faced by remote rural mainland communities such as my own. This proposed Bill suggested: introducing 'Remote Rural Proofing' similar to the 'island proofing' found in the aforementioned legislation, empowering remote rural communities, and a 'National Remote Rural Plan' which would place a duty on all future Scottish Governments to prepare a plan which would set commitments across all policy areas of Government in order to support and promote our remote rural communities.

Of the 173 responses, I was immensely pleased at the near-unanimous (95%) support of legislating to enhance the consideration given to remote rural mainland communities by public bodies in Scotland. Likewise, 97% of respondents were supportive of placing the concept of Remote Rural Proofing into legislation.

On reading the responses, there was a strong sense that remote rural communities felt left behind by the decision-making in Edinburgh and London. Those who supported the Bill saw it as a way of decentralising decision-making and empowering remote rural communities to make decisions based on their own interests. Just over half the respondents believed that councils do not have adequate powers to deliver positive outcomes for their remote rural communities. The proposed Bill suggests increasing the powers of local authorities in order to remedy this.

I noted with interest that 72% of respondents believed that rural mainland constituencies should be split into smaller sizes as this would address the huge disparity in constituency sizes across mainland Scotland. As someone representing a constituency where it takes almost 12 hours to drive a full lap of the constituency, I fully agree with this sentiment. Certain islands are permitted to remain as single electoral areas and I believe this should extend to the mainland too.

It would be remiss of me not to address some of the concerns that were raised in the consultation.

One perceived disadvantage was that the Bill would define remote rural communities as one homogenous group and, as a result, fail to consider the varying needs of different communities. I disagree with this. As mentioned previously, one of the ways the Bill seeks to empower remote rural communities is by granting additional powers to local authorities. This for example, would allow the Highland Council to make decisions that benefited their remote rural communities whilst allowing Argyll & Bute Council to make different decisions to benefit their own remote rural communities.

Another concern was that increased investment in remote rural communities may lead to increased taxes, affecting people financially. I agree that proposed investment would need to secure additional funding, but my belief is that investing in our remote rural communities will financially benefit these communities in the long run. A 'National Remote Rural Plan' as proposed in the Bill could see the Scottish Government find ways to decrease travel costs, improve housing, and attract inward investment to remote rural communities. I am confident that the Bill process will allow the necessary space for debate, discussion and for a clear communication strategy to be put in place to address these and any other concerns going forward.

The consultation period closed on 31 January 2020. Since then we have had a global pandemic that we are still combatting, and Scotland's future remains uncertain as the UK's exit from the EU continues. Now more than ever we will need to protect our remote rural communities and encourage them to flourish. After the consultation period closed, I also made a personal decision to not seek re-election for the 6th session of the Scottish Parliament. Though I will not be an MSP if this proposed Bill makes its way through Parliament, I hope I have laid some of the groundwork for this issue to be carried forward. As the consultation process has shown, a real desire exists for legislative safeguarding of our remote rural communities.

Let me conclude by once again thanking all who participated in the consultation and gave of their time. Your contributions are invaluable.

## ANNEXE

### Annexe A: Alphabetical list of public responses and reference numbers

Responses can be downloaded at:

<https://GailRossRemoteRuralCommunities.wordpress.com/>

<b>Name of individual/organisation.</b>	<b>Response no.</b>
Aberdeenshire Council	145
Allan, Kay	95
Appin Community Development Trust	91
Applecross Community Company	136
Argyll and Bute Council	153
Ballachulish Community Council	75
Barjonas, Peter	129
Bettyhill, Strathnaver and Altnaharra Community Council	152
Black, Jamie	96
Blair Atholl and Struan Community Council	164
Blargoans Limited	128
Burnett, Seoras	110
Caithness Chamber of Commerce	169
Cameron, David	104
Cardno, Sarah	77
Carradale Community Trust Planning Group	99
Community Land Scotland	157
Community Transport Association	117
Connect Assynt Ltd	144
Curwood, Ros	82
Development Trusts Association Scotland	133
Dounreay Stakeholder Group	170
Dumfries and Galloway LEADER Local Action Group	151
East & Central Sutherland Citizens Advice	123
Elder, R	94
Farlow, George	168
Forbes, John	121
Foxley, Michael (Dr.)	101
Gibson, Mark	79
Glenorchy & Innishail Community Council	92
Hamilton, Robert	74
Harper, Emma (MSP)	149
Helmsdale Community Council,	134

Highland	
Hicks, Tamara	71
Higgins, Ailsa	132
Highland Community Broadband	113
Highlands Small Communities Housing Trust	161
Honeyman, Bruce	72
Inspiralba	88
Isle of Gigha Heritage Trust	141
James Hutton Institute	165
John Muir Trust	160
Johnston, Andrew	116
Kaye, Maggi	124
Keenan, Morag	102
Kennedy, Ewan G.	142
Kerr, E	93
Killin and District Community Trust	89
Killin Care Trust	112
King, Mary	106
King, Tim	84
Knott, William	127
Knoydart Foundation	119
Law Society of Scotland	171
Lee, Simon	156
Leith, Ian	78
LING (Local Initiatives in New Galloway)	140
MacInnes, Megan	155
Macintosh, Fiona	81
McLachlan, Ewan	103
McMinn, Jannette	68
Morrison, John	85
Mountford, Charlotte	83
Murray, John	87
Murray, Lorna	120
National Rural Mental Health Forum	122
Newcastleton & District Community Trust	80
Paths for All	137
Pellant, Adam	118
Prendegast, Andrew	111
Reynolds, Sandy	90
Richmond, Becky	150
RIHAF	107
Robertson, Gordon (FRICS)	139
Robertson, Kat	98
Rose, Seb	86
Rowley, Mark (Cllr.)	100

Rural Housing Scotland	146
Rural Perth and Kinross LEADER Local Action Group	166
Samaritans Scotland	162
Scotland's Rural College (SRUC)/ SAC consulting	172
Scottish Land & Estates	147
Scottish Salmon Producers Association	138
Scottish Tenant Farmers Association	173
Scourie and District Community Council	135
Seaboard Centre	143
Semple, John	108
Simpson, Phillip (Dr.)	109
Siviter, Philip	69
Skelly, Michael (MSc.)	115
SLAED Rural Group	159
Smith, Alison	167
Smith, Angus	105
SportScotland	158
Sutherland, Giles Hansen	114
Sutherland, Lesley-Ann	154
Thurso Community Development Trust	131
Timber Transport Forum	163
Waugh, James	73
Wilding, Jane	97
Wilson, Aitken	76
Woodland Crofts Partnership	148
Wright, Betty	126
Wright, Stephen	125
Young, Jane	130