

# Evaluation of Scottish Rural Action

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## 1. Introduction

Scottish Rural Action is a non-profit organisation and charity which aims to act as a voice for rural communities by understanding their needs and strengths and communicating these with policy makers. Scottish Rural Action acts as a rural representative on a number of Scottish Government decision-making committees. They aim to support a rural movement, to connect with rural communities and are also responsible for the organisation of the biennial Scottish Rural Parliament.

The objectives of Scottish Rural Action<sup>1</sup> are:

- To encourage and actively support the development of an inclusive and sustainable Scottish rural movement that is rooted in Scotland's rural communities and empowers and connects them.
- To support the organisation of a Scottish Rural Parliament that meets with the purpose of giving a stronger, more coherent voice to Scotland's rural communities and enabling them to engage more effectively with government at all levels.
- To support and promote the development of a Scottish rural movement and Parliament.

The James Hutton Institute were asked by the Scottish Government to evaluate Scottish Rural Action. The Scottish Government requested this independent evaluation before determining future funding to Scottish Rural Action. The aim was to get feedback on achievements and future vision and Scottish Rural Action's relationship with the Scottish Government to ascertain with key stakeholders' future visions for the organisation.

### *Evaluation Aims*

Specifically, the evaluation aims to assess:

- The ways in which Scottish Rural Action is representative of the needs of rural people and communities.
- Whether the Scottish Government's contribution to Scottish Rural Action represents a valued contribution;
- Whether it is possible for Scottish Rural Action to be self-sustaining;
- Whether Scottish Rural Action is meeting its objectives;
- If there are any other ways of meeting the objectives of Scottish Rural Action;
- What key stakeholders think of Scottish Rural Action's future vision.

Ten key stakeholders were selected after consultation with the Scottish Government and Scottish Rural Action, thus the evaluation was intended to be small and represented the opinions of rural organisations rather than rural communities. The results presented in this report are based on the opinions and impressions of those who were interviewed. Interviews with representatives of the Scottish Government and Scottish Rural Action were also held. The ten stakeholder interviews, and written feedback we obtained, included representatives from past and current Scottish Rural Action board members, Scottish Community Alliance, Scottish Islands Federation, Development Trusts

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<sup>1</sup> The objectives were found here: <https://www.sra.scot/about/> on 30<sup>th</sup> June 2019. The evaluation was undertaken based on these objectives.

Association Scotland, Scotland's Rural College, Scottish Rural Network, Community Land Scotland, the Scottish Crofting Federation, Rural Housing Scotland. The report sought to evaluate Scottish Rural Action's longer legacy since its inception and interviewed those who had interacted with Scottish Rural Action now and in the past. Interviewees were also asked about the ways in which they had been involved or interacted with Scottish Rural Action.

The research took place in July and August 2019 and was conducted by the report's authors. All interviews gained approval via Institutional Ethics procedures and Scottish Government Research Approval processes. Copies of the information sheet, consent form and interview schedule are appended.

The interviews focused on nine sets of questions which were as follows:

1. We want to know **what you know about Scottish Rural Action?**
  - a. What is your opinion of the organisation?
  
2. Can you tell me if you have had **any interaction** with Scottish Rural Action in the past?
  - a. (If relevant) Can you explain the nature of the interaction?
  - b. Can you tell me if you found these interactions useful?
  - c. Can you tell me if any outcomes occurred as a response to these interactions?
  - d. Would you be willing to engage in partnership with Scottish Rural Action on specific projects or initiatives?
  - e. Would you consider co-funding work with them or commission them to provide specific feedback to your organisation?
  
3. Regarding the **objectives** of Scottish Rural Action;
  - a. Before you read the information sheet we sent, would you have been able to tell me what the objectives of the organisation were?
  - b. To what extent do you think these objectives are useful?
  - c. To what extent do you feel Scottish Rural Action meets these objectives?
  - d. Do you think that Scottish Rural Action should have any other objectives?
  - e. Do you think there are any other ways of meeting the objectives of Scottish Rural Action?
  
4. Regarding how **Scottish Rural Action is organised**;
  - a. How well do you feel you know how Scottish Rural Action is administered?
  - b. Do you have any opinions or reflections on how well the organisation works?
  - c. Do you think there are any ways it could be organised more effectively?
  - d. Do you have any other comments about its organisation?
  
5. Do you feel that Scottish Rural Action act as a **representative of the needs of rural people** and rural communities?
  - a. What is it you think that they do well?
  - b. What do you think they do that could be improved, and how would you like to see it being improved?
  - c. How do you think that Scottish Rural Action could be more representative of rural communities?
  
6. How does Scottish Rural Action **engage with rural communities?**

- a. How do they engage well?
  - b. How could they engage better?
  - c. Do you think that their new plans will represent more diverse rural interests?
7. The Scottish Government provides Scottish Rural Action with 90% of their funding?
- a. How sustainable do you think this is as a funding model?
  - b. Are there any other alternative funding models that you think Scottish Rural Action could employ?
  - c. Do you think it would be possible for Scottish Rural Action to continue without Scottish Government funding?
8. Scottish Rural Action say that going forward they want to adopt a more regional approach to let more local voices be heard. This would create an ongoing process with local organisations to set up a consistent networking programme.

Regarding Scottish Rural Action's **plans going ahead**;

- a. To what extent do you think this is a useful way ahead?
  - b. Do you have any concerns about the proposed approach?
  - c. Do you have any recommendations about how it could be improved to be representative of rural communities and to represent diverse rural voices?
9. Is there **anything else** I have missed that you would like me to tell you about Scottish Rural Action or anything else you would like me to add?

## 2. Results

The results present the findings of these interviews in accordance to the points of the evaluation, but they reflect the questions that were asked.

### 2.1 The ways in which Scottish Rural Action is representative of the needs of rural people and communities.

Scottish Rural Action emerged in 2012, viewed by some interviewees to be a replacement of the rural voice that was left over from the Rural Forum, with objectives to run the biennial Scottish Rural Parliament and to create a rural movement. However, in the time between the end of the Rural Forum (1982 – 1999) and initiation of Scottish Rural Action, other organisations had emerged who were already addressing many of the rural issues Scottish Rural Action wished to encompass. Although it should be noted that many of these “new” organisations had a more specific, sectoral rural approach than Scottish Rural Action. Nonetheless some interviewees stated that these other rural organisations are not always able to address all of the rural issues in practice, or take such a cross-sectional approach as that which Scottish Rural Action state they aspire to. An original steering group was established to work with an advisory group of 42 organisations operating in rural Scotland at the time in order to ascertain the role of Scottish Rural Action. Interviewees questioned whether there was a need or legitimacy for Scottish Rural Action in the first place given the already “*cluttered landscape*”. This position likely reflects Scottish Rural Action’s current working relationship with

some rural stakeholders (discussed further below), rather than a criticism of the process by which it was set up.

Overall there is recognition from the interviewees that Scottish Rural Action's objectives are ambitious and will take time to achieve. Moreover, interviewees that had worked directly with SRA felt that the board and staff were working hard to achieve these goals. Nevertheless, there were some strong reservations from the interviewees concerning Scottish Rural Action's strategies to date. First, interviewees stated that the initial board were not keen to deliver any more than the Scottish Rural Parliaments. Reasons for this vary but include the possibility that board members were expected to deliver more than they were able to but also, more worryingly, that initial board members felt that SRA might encroach on their organisations' respective spaces in the existing landscape of rural stakeholders. Second, following successive changeovers in board members, it is unclear whether or not SRA has succeeded in communicating its purpose and strategies to both its own members as well as other stakeholders. Third, as a consequence of the aforementioned frequent turnover of board members, interviewees feared that the current board might have lost key skills and 'know-how'. As one interviewee stated, *"I am not sure that the board has the time or the skills to do justice to what was expected of them"*. The quote highlights that Scottish Rural Action's remit is highly ambitious and thus very difficult to achieve. However they, and other interviewees, feared that significant experience had been lost through board turnovers. Moreover, the lack of board members from prominent rural organisations or with explicit fundraising experience was interpreted by interviewees as being a drawback for SRA in terms of securing a sustainable place for itself within the existing network of rural actors.

There have been two staff who have recently left including the Chief Executive. This was felt to be attributed to uncertainty of current Scottish Government funding. The chair and the Executive Committee are now taking on these roles in a voluntary capacity, but the former Chief Executive was felt to have built up connections which have been lost with her departure. Interviewees stated that they felt that it was crucial to have the right people on board to move the organisation ahead. The changes to the board and staff have meant that it has been difficult to get common agreement across the board as to their course of action, and, was thought by some interviewees to be related to the way in which people were elected on to the board. Scottish Rural Action were felt by interviewees to be in a difficult position in its current staffing predicament.

It is clear that in the current circumstances the board is working very hard to keep Scottish Rural Action active and to plan for the future. Nevertheless, a number of our interviewees expressed some reservations concerning the board's ability to bring people and organisations together and felt that the board should be accountable on this matter. This is concerning given that Scottish Rural Action have lost working relations with many of the original advisory group of rural organisations and are seeking to re-establish connections with them. For example, at a recent stakeholder event Scottish Rural Action held (the National Stakeholder event on the 27<sup>th</sup> September 2019) there was a lack of stakeholders present from the original advisory group used to develop Scottish Rural Action in its current form. It is also evident that if Scottish Rural Action are to present a clear message of who they are and what they do for rural Scotland, they need to establish a stable board.

There has been - and remains to be - a lack of clarity of what Scottish Rural Action is. Board members of Scottish Rural Action described it as an *"inclusive platform for diverse voices of rural Scotland"*, but acknowledged that bringing together diverse opinions of Scotland's rural communities is not easy. Interviewees we spoke to knew Scottish Rural Action mostly from their organisation of the Scottish Rural Parliament and many opinions we received about Scottish Rural Action were based on

that, as well as on the understanding that Scottish Rural Action are a contact point with the Scottish Government on rural issues.

Some interviewees pointed out that Scottish Rural Action have been approached by the UK Government to present evidence; *“Where SRA do have an advantage though is that they are invited to go down and give advice in Westminster, which most of the organisations up here aren’t.”*

Interviewees reflected on what Scottish Rural Action do differently. There was confusion amongst a few interviewees about the difference between Scottish Rural Action and the Scottish Rural Network. Scottish Rural Network is a European-Funded and Scottish Government network and enables rural development of the Scottish Rural Development Programme. The parameters are determined at a European level but there is flexibility in focus for Scotland. Thus, the Scottish Rural Network is less independent and autonomous than Scottish Rural Action. Scottish Rural Action also state that it *“is independent of government and [is] a long-term movement and voice for rural people. Government policy may come and go, but rural communities go on forever...”*

The breadth of Scottish Rural Action was described by the board as being a strength of the organisation with the implication being that Scottish Rural Action could provide a more coherent rural voice than other more sectoral-based rural organisations due to its avoidance of silo-working, however this is useful for issues where there is no existing organisation with that expertise.

Scottish Rural Action was described by one interviewee as being set up to amplify rural voices rather than to usurp specialist organisations. There is an urgent need for Scottish Rural Action to self-evaluate what they are good at and use that to work with other existing organisations. Scottish Rural Action should be in a position to particularly focus on important rural issues that are not represented by existing organisations, and there is evidence that this has happened recently. Some interviewees mentioned that they thought Scottish Rural Action were gaining political traction and were effective at lobbying; however, many respondents also raised concerns over SRA’s perceived lack of cooperation with other rural stakeholder groups outside the Scottish Rural Parliaments Recommendations are given later on in the report about how Scottish Rural Action can work most effectively with other organisations.

There are a number of unresolved, predominantly internal issues for Scottish Rural Action to determine. A few examples were:

1. Is Scottish Rural Action top-down or bottom-up and how does it seek to do both? Many interviewees reflected that it is difficult for them to get over the top-down way in which they were implemented (they were established by the Scottish Government but were left to self-govern, but to be informed through grassroots).
2. Is Scottish Rural Action a platform or an advocacy body? If the board feel they are both then then need to be clearer amongst themselves on how they plan on doing this and on communicating this plan.
3. Is the current model for electing the SRA’s board members the most effective option for encouraging more local-scale engagement with the organisation?
4. How can SRA more accurately communicate its organisational structure and strategy for implementing action plans to its funders and the people it represents?
5. Scottish Rural Action need to think about how they network and interact with stakeholder organisations *“SRA is never going to be a big organisation, it has to collaborate and work in partnerships in order to deliver”*. Scottish Rural Action need buy-in from other organisations to aid their legitimacy. They need to ensure they focus on being collective and more

enabling than just leading. They have too few people with too few resources to do otherwise.

6. Current funding and a lack of stability in the Board and key staff may impinge on the ability of Scottish Rural Action to progress.

## 2.2. Whether the Scottish Government's contribution to Scottish Rural Action represents value for money; and whether it is possible for Scottish Rural Action to be self-sustaining

Fiscal uncertainty across the Scottish Government has meant that all funding is under scrutiny. Any public funding to organisations therefore must look at what funding has delivered to date; hence this evaluation. Uncertainty of funding from the Scottish Government has been frustrating to Scottish Rural Action and is perceived to compromise the sustainability of the organisation. There is overall agreement amongst the interviewees that the Scottish Government should continue to fund Scottish Rural Action if it considers the objectives of Scottish Rural Action to be worthwhile goals and that Scottish Rural Action are meeting those objectives.

A major concern of many interviewees is that Scottish Rural Action will be unable to convince potential funders of their value and role in the rural community if the financial support and backing is entirely lost from the Scottish Government, as this was seen to reflect their legitimacy. Moreover, some stakeholders feared that, if funding were removed, all of Scottish Rural Action's efforts would be spent seeking funding rather than playing a role in rural Scotland. There were other third sector organisations interviewed, some of whom were concerned that if Scottish Government support were removed from Scottish Rural Action, that this would set a precedent for other third sector organisations. An additional issue in this respect is that Scottish Rural Action is already perceived by some interviewees as threatening the existence of other organisations in rural Scotland. There is therefore the possibility that, by requiring Scottish Rural Action to compete with these other organisations for external funding, its perceived threat to other rural stakeholder organisations will increase.

Nevertheless, there is also agreement amongst the interviewees that Scottish Rural Action are too reliant on government funding, especially if it is to function as an independent platform for rural voices. Interviewees also agreed that Scottish Rural Action's financial situation was not currently sufficiently visible or accountable. There is also the perception of a few interviewees that SRA should by this point in time have demonstrated its value to rural Scotland enough that other organisations should be willing to fund being part of it. While one interviewee suggested the use of membership fees – in part to test SRA's perceived value – others were wary that this approach might lose the least affluent voices and those which would benefit the most from SRA.

## 2.3 Whether Scottish Rural Action is meeting its objectives; and If there are any other ways of meeting the objectives of Scottish Rural Action; and what could SRA do better?

In terms of Scottish Rural Action's objectives, one interviewee commented that they were fine; however, there was general confusion amongst the interviewees about what a rural movement was, how it could be achieved and evaluated. Similarly, comments were made about the Scottish Rural

Parliament, the fact that it was considered by interviewees to be based on a top-down model was felt by many interviewees to be counter-intuitive.

Many interviewees felt that there is already a plethora of organisations that support rural communities in different ways. The evaluation sought therefore to understand what Scottish Rural Action is doing well, how it adds value to existing work and if there were other ways their discrete objectives could be met and if anything could be done differently.

### 2.3.1 Scottish Rural Parliaments

Since Scottish Rural Action has been established, they have organised three Rural Parliaments. The first in Oban (2014), the second in Brechin (2016) and third in Stranraer (2018). There was a number of points raised by interviewees about what they felt were good about the parliaments. The Scottish Rural Parliaments were felt to have had good attendance, particularly from Scottish politicians and ministers who became better informed of rural issues as a result. The third Scottish Rural Parliament allowed those on the ground greater understanding about how policy is being shaped by Brexit. Some interviewees felt that the Scottish Rural Parliament was participative as well as enabling connections to occur that wouldn't otherwise have happened.

There were also aspects of the Scottish Rural Parliament that interviewees felt were in need of improvement. In terms of its organisation, those individuals leading the engagement exercises weren't always felt to be good, and there was felt to be poor discussion and quality of the facilitation in some of the workshops. It was also felt that information given to organisers was confusing and people who committed to attending some of the workshops didn't always show up. There was also a sense that the capturing and follow up and progress on outputs wasn't clear (although it should be noted that after the most recent Scottish Rural Parliament, a key member of staff left soon afterwards). Overall, interviewees commented that they were unsure of how Scottish Rural Action has taken forward the issues raised at the rural parliaments and what happens in-between parliaments. In terms of who attended; some interviewees were not sure that the right people were in attendance e.g. *"the usual suspects"* and felt that there was a disconnect between what is happening on the ground and how that related to what was happening nationally. One interviewee felt that there was little concern by Scottish Rural Action about who they weren't engaging with. The legitimacy for Scottish Rural Parliaments was felt to exist less in Scotland than in other European countries – where there was a grassroots movement over years. Some interviewees were not sure about what the Scottish Rural Parliaments have achieved and what impact they have had and others felt there hasn't been enough action coming out from the Scottish Rural Parliaments, or follow up afterwards. The evaluation also included the views of some rural organisations that Scottish Rural Action haven't connected with well, they stated that they felt they were invisible to Scottish Rural Action and stated that they weren't happy at going to a meeting and not getting follow up. They stated that they had halted engaging because *"they didn't get anything out of it"*. It is imperative that Scottish Rural Action are viewed as wanting to work with others and about being good at doing so.

### 2.3.2 Rural movement

Despite the establishment of a rural movement being one of its two primary objectives, it was found that Scottish Rural Action began by focusing on the Scottish Rural Parliaments before latterly considering the rural movement, this has been attributed by Scottish Rural Action to the SNP Manifesto of the time. Interviewees proffered two possible reasons for this; the first being that the initial board felt that running the Scottish Rural Parliaments would stimulate a rural movement; and the second because people internal and external to Scottish Rural Action are confused as to what a



rural movement is. A rural movement was described as a *nebulous goal*, and therefore difficult to measure its success or otherwise. It is highly problematic if Scottish Rural Action themselves do not have clear ideas about what a rural movement is. Some interviewees felt it fundamentally required grassroots buy-in, was a hard thing to achieve but was currently only seen to be tokenistic by Scottish Rural Action. Interviewees stated that in part the objective of a rural movement reflected their ambitious set up and neglected to consider the tapestry or other rural organisations that had also recently been set up. The rural movement in Sweden and subsequent rural parliaments had taken years to develop and were developed from a grassroots level.

There has been more focus on the rural movement in the last couple of years, this does suggest that Scottish Rural Action has the capacity to change their focus when they feel their objectives are not being met. The associated manifesto was felt to not state anything new or unsurprising, but others reflected whether it should and felt that it should reflect what people in rural Scotland know and highlight these issues for consideration by policy makers. There was some feeling by interviewees that the manifesto has *pooled together rural issues that are being address by other organisations across Scotland*. However, Scottish Rural Action needs to be responsive to changes within policy as well as issues within rural communities. For example one interviewee commented that when the community empowerment act was being drafted lots of different organisations were involved, but not Scottish Rural Action: *“at no point of that did SRA feature...and any response that they’ve done, I can’t recall a time that they have asked for our thoughts or views on anything that they have been developing”*.

There were various levels of knowledge about the manifesto which appeared to be dependent on whether those interviewed had signed up to Scottish Rural Action’s newsletter. Some interviewees were also frustrated by the manifesto as it does not explicitly state how Scottish Rural Action are going to achieve it. It was felt that Scottish Rural Action should have a record of action taken and impact relating to the manifesto if this is known about, otherwise *“It is hard to have a sense of how meaningful the campaigns have been.”*

Scottish Rural Action need to improve at both self-evaluation and monitoring their impact and could start by ensuring that they explicitly ask for feedback on all aspects of their work. For example, how other organisations have used it, what did they like about it, what could be better, as well as the tangible and intangible outputs has this led to. One interviewee we spoke to stated a number of ways that they had used Scottish Rural Action’s work.

Interviewees who were not directly involved with Scottish Rural Action on projects were very unsure of what happens between Rural Parliaments, this may be in part because Scottish Rural Action have not been successful at holding regional meetings.

Scottish Rural Action are aiming to work more on the rural movement by rebuilding the large advisory forum that they once had. Interviewees who felt that the manifesto was too all-encompassing stated that they felt that the Scottish Rural Action would gain legitimacy by building up more gradually through focusing on the things they do well. A rural movement was felt by interviewees to be too much and there are too few resources despite the staff and board working *“incredibly hard”*. Interviewees also suggested that there is a need for Scottish Rural Action to be more participative in others’ events; working relationships need to be reciprocal including Scottish Rural Action attending other organisations’ events.

### 2.3.3 What SRA are doing well

Scottish Rural Action have developed methodologies and training about how to use these methodologies (for example about workshops) that other organisations have found useful. Interviewees felt that Scottish Rural Action are getting more traction with policy makers and ministers in a way that they weren't before and that they now appear to be influencing change; however it was felt that Scottish Rural Action could be firmer in its advocacy work as it was felt that Scottish Rural Action are able to be heard more loudly than civil servants. Scottish Rural Action has been effective at lobbying and reaching out to ministers and politicians. The focused topic reports in key areas were particularly credited with assisting to move agendas forward with policy makers. *"They are invited to go down and give advice at Westminster, which most of the organisations up here aren't"*. This should be acknowledged as being a really useful role and they have been given legitimacy in this role because they were set up by the Scottish Government and run the Scottish Rural Parliaments. One interviewee stated that they feel that Scottish Rural Action is a good forum to allow rural voices to be heard when the voice of local authorities don't always filter. Interviewees felt that impact has increased in recent months and could increase further if Scottish Rural Action can aid with rural and island proofing policies.

Frequently mentioned however was that *"[Scottish Rural Action] have become much more adept at focusing on key areas and not trying to do everything"*. Many interviewees felt that Scottish Rural Action had been successful when they have focused on a specific issue or campaign, what we describe hereon as key areas. These have included rural banking, housing, transport, fuel poverty, Brexit and these, on the whole, were mentioned positively. The videos that were produced as part of the rural housing campaign were impactful and it was felt that Scottish Rural Action worked well with Rural Housing Scotland - *"which is a great example of how it could be done effectively"*- and that this sort of partnership approach should be adopted as standard in the future. Work with Transport Scotland was viewed positively too. The campaigns were also viewed as having a political impact and were seen to have acted as a proxy between policy makers and grassroots organisations.

It was argued by one interviewee that when Scottish Rural Action have engaged in these key areas they represent many rural voices on a specific topic. However, Scottish Rural Action should be cognisant of follow up after they have engaged on a specific issue. Most interviewees felt that future effort by Scottish Rural Action should continue to focus on these sorts of key areas, adopting key areas that are the *"buzz themes"* and *"the ones the matter to rural Scotland"*. Adopting such an approach offers the best prospect of Scottish Rural Action increasing their legitimacy and forwarding a rural movement, however it is important that Scottish Rural Action works with other organisations in partnership to build trust and common agendas.

There is the impression that Scottish Rural Action are trying to 'go it alone' on the issues that rural Scotland faces instead of collaborating. This was a repeated criticism of Scottish Rural Action by interviewees and that in attempting to be *"the authentic voice of rural"*, Scottish Rural Action have set themselves apart (and in times against) other organisations. This may be a response to prove that Scottish Rural Action are the organisation leading a rural movement, but it is counterintuitive. In other words, the objective of a rural movement may have acted to set Scottish Rural Action apart from other organisations and not always being collaborative. It was suggested that Scottish Rural Action needs to work with other organisations and improve in promoting and advocating other's work. There is evidence that some aspects of their work have adopted a more collaborative and partnership approach – for example the key areas, thus continuing to work on these key areas is likely to build up this approach.

When Scottish Rural Action was originally set up it included the views of an ‘advisory forum’ which was made up of 42 rural organisations (which included women’s group and farming etc). This group played a major part of the development process and structure of Scottish Rural Action. However, that advisory group was not used once Scottish Rural Action became an established organisation. Aiming to reconnect with these organisations is overdue and necessary, as Scottish Rural Action should be a platform for encompassing and representing diverse rural views of different organisations. However, it remains to be seen whether having not continued to engage with these organisations for so long, it will still be possible, this will be more obvious after the September meeting. If good relationships are built up between Scottish Rural Action and other organisations, it can be expected that other organisations will contact Scottish Rural Action to work on key areas together. This would require Scottish Rural Action to be supportive of events that other organisations working on rural issues are developing. Communication between Scottish Rural Action and other organisations can’t be one-way, Scottish Rural Action needs to adopt more of a partnership and networking approach which would highlight how other organisations recognise the value of these interactions. The evaluation also found evidence of Scottish Rural Action losing contact with some organisations due to staff changes both within Scottish Rural Action and also with the other organisation, it is worth being aware of this risk and developing new connections when previous ones move on.

#### 2.4 What key stakeholders think of Scottish Rural Action’s future vision.

Interviewees were specifically asked about Scottish Rural Action’s plans to adopt a more regional approach to let more local voices be heard. Scottish Rural Action felt this would create an ongoing process with local organisations and to set up a consistent networking programme. Some interviewees see this as a good idea in principle as it creates better links between local and national. However, there were worries that Scottish Rural Action would find it difficult to be cover both place and sectoral rural objectives. Such a plan was seen as too ambitious with current resources in place. Comparisons were made to the Development Trust Association Scotland who had found this approach challenging despite having greater resources than Scottish Rural Action. One interviewee voiced concerns that the organisation will lose its expertise if the focus is more on geographic location rather than skills and expertise, but this could be solved with a re-instatement of the expert advisory board sitting alongside a more regionalised board. Generally, there was most positivity from interviewees about continuing the work focusing on key areas and developing a better network as this has been shown as a good way of connecting over adopting a new, potentially over ambitious, plan.

### 3. Conclusions

This evaluation has been conducted interviewing and receiving comments from a mixture of interviewees from organisations that are well known in the rural scene. The evaluation does not directly include the opinions of people living in rural communities, just representatives of them. Speaking to rural communities directly would have had different results.

Opinions of Scottish Rural Action were very mixed, some interviewees were very positive and these highlighted the effectiveness of the work done in key areas and ability to engage with policy; whilst

other interviewees were very negative and felt Scottish Rural Action hadn't done enough, weren't legitimate and need to include greater inclusion and reflection over others' work.

Below, are the questions that the evaluation sought to answer, with the opinions of the authors based on the evidence emerging from the evaluation:

### 3.1 The ways in which Scottish Rural Action is representative of the needs of rural people and communities.

Scottish Rural Action have attempted to be representative of the needs of rural people and communities by establishing a biennial rural parliament in Scotland and attempting to establish a rural movement. Their unique selling point is their ability to influence Scottish and UK Governments, however it's not their voice interviewees want to hear, it's the voice of others. Scottish Rural Action should consider more closely what knowledge and expertise they would like to bring to rural Scotland. Their benefit should be more than simply being able to sample rural voices more broadly than other organisations. Instead we believe they could focus their efforts on lending their communication skills (and others) to existing organisations. Videos in the rural housing was lauded as a good example. We suggest they should publicise their efforts more on social media.

### 3.2 Whether the Scottish Government's contribution to Scottish Rural Action represents value for money

Interviewees felt that, as long as the Scottish Government felt satisfied that Scottish Rural Action was achieving its objectives and that this represented value for money, it should be continued to be supported by the Scottish Government. We suggest that thought should be given to continue the objective of the rural movement and that it may be useful at this stage to initiate the movement through a more concerted focus on the particular objectives arising from the Scottish Rural Parliaments. We suggest that it would be useful to devise a way of measuring the impact of Scottish Rural Action, in order for them to demonstrate their value for money.

### 3.3 Whether it is possible for Scottish Rural Action to be self-sustaining;

There was most clarity from all interviewees about this, and, that without Scottish Government funding it would be difficult for Scottish Rural Action to be able to continue. In particular, the provision of funding from the Scottish Government demonstrates its support for a Scottish rural movement. This support should aid Scottish Rural Action in its search for additional funding. Moreover, the stability of Scottish Government funding is imperative to the future of Scottish Rural Action, particularly at a time of organisational change. Nevertheless, Scottish Rural Action should become more self-sustaining through seeking alternative sources of funding following this period of organisational change. Should the Scottish Government decide to withdraw funding from Scottish Rural Action, we suggest that the Scottish Government do this over a period of two or three years to give Scottish Rural Action a chance to adapt whilst still playing a role.

### 3.4 Whether Scottish Rural Action is meeting its objectives;

This is most difficult to assess, many interviewees highlighted that the objectives were overly ambitious, and this has impinged on the success of Scottish Rural Action. SRA has held three biennial rural parliaments, so that has been met but could have been done better. The rural movement is more difficult to assess, (refer to section 3.2). Recent work focusing on key areas has been viewed positively. However, who Scottish Rural Action are and what they do is not yet particularly well-known amongst stakeholders and communities in rural Scotland. There were a number of suggestions about how Scottish Rural Action needed to work more effectively with other rural organisations to enhance their legitimacy on the work they are doing. They have concentrated on the Scottish Rural Parliament to begin with, but now they are working on the rural movement. Section 4 provides recommendations about where Scottish Rural Action should aim to focus on in the immediate future.

### 3.5 If there are any other ways of meeting the objectives of Scottish Rural Action; and what key stakeholders think of Scottish Rural Action's future vision.

Interviewees were questioned about what they thought of Scottish Rural Action's plans to adopt more of a regional approach. Analysis of these findings revealed that many interviewees felt that this was an overly ambitious approach, and that the best approach for future work should include focusing on key areas, working hard to develop more effective networks with existing organisations and possibly developing a consultative group of partnership organisations; particularly at a time of changes of staff and board members. This would help create a more legitimate rural movement and was considered to promote the best buy-in. When such an approach has been adopted then Scottish Rural Action should attempt to engage with the excluded groups within rural communities and this may be when a more regional approach should be adopted.

## 4. Recommendations

The evaluation of Scottish Rural Action has identified the following areas for improvement:

1. Organisational structure and transparency of the board.
2. Ability to work effectively - at all times - with other organisations including when delivering rural movement activities, representing others' voices (i.e. advocacy) as well as follow-up and communication after events such as the Scottish Rural Parliament.
3. Over-reliance on Scottish Government funding.
4. Ability to demonstrate their unique selling point, their distinct contribution and the impact of their work.

These recommendations therefore attempt to provide suggestions as to how Scottish Rural Action can improve understanding for others about what Scottish Rural Action can do that is different to other organisations, specifically to host Rural Parliaments and capture and advocate the rural voice through a rural movement.

Scottish Rural Action needs to be able to prove (over an agreed time period) to the Scottish Government and rural communities that it has developed adequate support from rural stakeholder groups and that it is of benefit to rural communities outwith the contributions it makes through the Scottish Rural Parliament. This requires the Scottish Government to be clear about the levels of

support available and the expectations that come with this support. The Scottish Government and Scottish Rural Action need to work together on how they would like to see success being measured. Recommendations about how to do this in a more transparent and inclusive way are made below. By this it is meant that there is more clarity with regards to the way in which Scottish Rural Action work and what they are doing.

The most recent Programme for Government highlights a commitment by the Scottish Government to work with Scottish Rural Action and others to promote a rural movement. Rural movements have developed effectively in other parts of Europe and are non-governmental. Building a movement is about listening to people in rural Scotland and learning from the grassroots. There is also a need for any rural movement to be more collaborative going forward – it's wider than Scottish Rural Action alone. This means ensuring a rural movement will be built by creating links, connecting organisations and campaign groups and working collaboratively locally, nationally and internationally as advocates to improve the lives of people in rural Scotland. Importantly, an effective feedback mechanism to Scottish Government policy makers is needed so that efforts are maximised and information is available and action taken in the right place at the right time for communities.

We suggest that **Scottish Rural Action focuses on the advocacy part of the rural movement**, specifically by concentrating on short-term key topics along with strategic outreach (i.e. providing influence on over-arching topics when needed) and advocacy work; Scottish Rural Action simultaneously need to engage at the grassroots and seek other forms of funding. If, in the future, the Scottish Government are unable to continue funding Scottish Rural Action, we suggest this should be over a period of two or three years to give Scottish Rural Action a chance to adapt whilst still play a role in promoting a rural movement in Scotland and this continuation recognises the expectations they have created to date.

Scottish Rural Action **should adopt a different approach to its current organisational structure** and could be organised more effectively. The board needs to become more accountable and transparent. We agree that Scottish Rural Action's regionalisation approach could succeed in making the organisation more accountable and transparent. However, we also believe it to be important that Scottish Rural Action maintain a strong connection with existing stakeholders, in addition to pursuing its regionalisation approach. We therefore suggest that a **consultative group be created** to act as trusted external facilitators to provide advice to the Board. This consultative group should remain independent of members of the current or previous boards. This could involve representatives from rural communities, rural organisations, academics, local government and representation from outwith Scotland, but should be independent of the Scottish Government and Scottish Rural Action. We suggest that Scottish Rural Action may want to approach the Rural Community Liaison Group to ask for them to help set this group up and to suggest possible participants. The purpose of the consultative group should be to provide critical guidance to the board particularly on the rural movement work; to peer-review and to assist in setting up a way to evaluate the efforts of Scottish Rural Action; and to help Scottish Rural Action establish the most effective way of progressing their objectives. In establishing this consultative group there is an implicit assumption that the group would assist the ability of Scottish Rural Action in promoting a rural movement collaboratively and in partnership with other rural stakeholders. Scottish Rural Action should agree, following the advice of the consultative group to a set of actions they wish to implement in the next two years and these need to be effectively delivered and monitored to promote the successes of Scottish Rural Action whilst simultaneously addressing areas of improvement. Such an approach could help Scottish Rural Action to justify its direction of travel and

provide impact case studies. This will help to aid its legitimacy with other rural stakeholders as well as promoting its advocacy.

We also suggest that Scottish Rural Action needs to be more **focused**, better at knowing what they do well and areas in which they could improve. The evaluation has highlighted examples of what Scottish Rural Action is doing well, in particular short-term key topic focused activity (examples include housing, transport, Brexit). Rural stakeholders who had engaged with Scottish Rural Action for these key topic focused areas had been happy about the interactions they have had with the organisation. Despite these positive stories however, there were examples of how stakeholders were not happy with interactions in respect of other aspects of Scottish Rural Action's work, for example sometimes poor facilitation and not getting follow-up feedback from Scottish Rural Parliaments and other events that Scottish Rural Action had organised. We recommend that Scottish Rural Action **continue to focus on these key topic focused activities**, as they were viewed positively by interviewees and required SRA to adopt collaborative and partnership approaches to working with other organisations (which some interviewees suggested Scottish Rural Action could work on improving on). This collaborative way of working is one that Scottish Rural Action should be seeking to make standard. We also suggest that by **focusing effort on key topic focused activities identified by communities at future Rural Parliaments** (by key topics we mean thematic – grassroots led themes that are nationally emerging priorities), participants of the rural parliament will see more tangibly the value in participating in Rural Parliaments. Adopting such an approach offers the best prospect of Scottish Rural Action increasing their legitimacy **and forwarding a rural movement by building trust and adopting common agendas**.

We understand that Scottish Rural Action's current plan to encourage a rural movement revolves around engaging with communities at grassroots level directly, however, we believe that this engagement should be more explicitly targeted towards key issues that have been established at the rural parliaments rather than, in this point in time, starting with a broad brush approach i.e. Scottish Rural Action could give voice to issues that arise between rural parliaments, however their main focus should be on the key issues emerging from these parliaments. We therefore recommend that the Board needs to prioritise effort on what is currently working well, whilst attempting to gain more stability through the advice of a newly established consultative group as suggested above. Whatever direction Scottish Rural Action chooses to take in this regard and having discussed these plans with the consultative group, this new plan needs to be stated explicitly for others' (rural community stakeholders and the Scottish Government) benefit. Finally, Scottish Rural Action also need to ensure that they remain representative of rural communities whilst organising aforementioned grassroots meetings across the country. This again highlights the need for Scottish Rural Action to collaborate more effectively with other rural stakeholder groups. Other rural groups, such as the Scottish Rural Network, may help to gather feedback and use their event and social media reach to better reflect rural opinion to feedback to Scottish Rural Action. Finally, Scottish Rural Action should seek to consider other online methods to communicate at the grassroots level with those in rural communities across Scotland.

## Appendix 1: Information Sheet



### **Evaluation of Scottish Rural Action – Information sheet**

#### *Background*

Scottish Rural Action is a non-profit organisation and charity which aims to act as a voice for rural communities by understanding their needs and strengths and communicating these with policy makers. Scottish Rural Action acts as a rural representative on a number of Scottish Government decision-making committees. They aim to support a rural movement, to connect with rural communities and are also responsible for the organisation of the biennial Scottish Rural Parliament.

The objectives of Scottish Rural Action<sup>2</sup> are:

- To encourage and actively support the development of an inclusive and sustainable Scottish rural movement that is rooted in Scotland's rural communities and empowers and connects them.
- To support the organisation of a Scottish Rural Parliament that meets with the purpose of giving a stronger, more coherent voice to Scotland's rural communities and enabling them to engage more effectively with government at all levels.
- To support and promote the development of a Scottish rural movement and Parliament.

The Scottish Government has requested this evaluation which will review Scottish Rural Action, its achievements and future vision and its relationship with the Scottish Government to ascertain with ten key stakeholders' future visions for the organisation.

#### *Evaluation Aims*

Specifically, the evaluation aims to assess:

- The ways in which Scottish Rural Action is representative of the needs of rural people and communities.
- Whether the Scottish Government's contribution to Scottish Rural Action represents value for money;
- Whether it is possible for Scottish Rural Action to be self-sustaining;
- Whether Scottish Rural Action is meeting its objectives;
- If there are any other ways of meeting the objectives of Scottish Rural Action;
- What key stakeholders think of Scottish Rural Action's future vision.

For more information please contact: Dr Margaret Currie (Project lead) at [Margaret.currie@hutton.ac.uk](mailto:Margaret.currie@hutton.ac.uk) or on 01224 395 297 or Dr Dan Fisher on [Daniel.fisher@hutton.ac.uk](mailto:Daniel.fisher@hutton.ac.uk) or on 01224 395 410.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.sra.scot/about/>



## Appendix 2



### RESEARCH CONSENT FORM

#### Participant Identification Number:

<b>Title of Project:</b>	Evaluation of Scottish Rural Action
<b>Principle Investigator:</b>	Dr Margaret Currie
<b>Study Number:</b>	TBC

**Please Initial Box**

I confirm that I have read, or had read to me, and understand the information sheet dated __/__/____ for the above study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and these have been answered fully and explicitly.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary, and I am free to withdraw at any time, without providing any reason and without my legal rights being affected.	
I understand the study is being conducted by researchers from The James Hutton Institute and at the request of the Scottish Government.	
Confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained at all times and it will not be possible to identify me from any publications/outputs.	
I agree to take part in the above study.	
I agree for my interview to be recorded but it will not be transcribed.	
I acknowledge that I have read and understood the privacy notice.	

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\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant (please print)      Signature      Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
PI/Researcher Name (please print)      Signature      Date

### Privacy Notice

The James Hutton Institute (“Hutton”, “us” or “we”) will use your personal data for the purposes of the research undertaken in this project **Evaluation of Scottish Rural Action**. Our legal basis for processing your data is that it is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest in relation to research funded by the Scottish Government.

We are the Data Controller over your personal data. We will not share your personal data, unless required by law and shall only retain it for as long as is necessary to fulfil the research undertaken on the project and deliver project outcomes. You have rights in relation to your personal data. Please see our Privacy Notice at [www.hutton.ac.uk/terms](http://www.hutton.ac.uk/terms) for further information or contact our Data Protection Officer on [dpo@hutton.ac.uk](mailto:dpo@hutton.ac.uk).

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## Appendix 3 – Interview schedule

### Evaluation of Scottish Rural Action – Interview schedule

*Sending the interviewee information sheet and consent form in advance of the interview, ask them to return prior to the interview. If this is not possible, ask if they can verbally give their consent to the questions in the consent form whilst being recorded.*

*Explain the project to the interviewee again and check they are happy with everything.*

*Thank the interviewee for the time and ask how much time they are available for today.*

*Check that the interviewee is happy for the organisation to be identified as a participant in the final report.*

*If they have stated that they are happy to be interviewed, let the interviewee know the digital recorder is being switched on.*

1. We want to know **what you know about Scottish Rural Action?**
  - a. What is your opinion of the organisation?
2. Can you tell me if you have had **any interaction** with Scottish Rural Action in the past?
  - a. (If relevant) Can you explain the nature of the interaction?
  - b. Can you tell me if you found these interactions useful?
  - c. Can you tell me if any outcomes occurred as a response to these interactions?
  - d. Would you be willing to engage in partnership with Scottish Rural Action on specific projects or initiatives?
  - e. Would you consider co-funding work with them or commission them to provide specific feedback to your organisation?
3. Regarding the **objectives** of Scottish Rural Action;
  - a. Before you read the information sheet we sent, would you have been able to tell me what the objectives of the organisation were?

*The objectives of Scottish Rural Action<sup>3</sup> are:*

- *To encourage and actively support the development of an inclusive and sustainable Scottish rural movement that is rooted in Scotland’s rural communities and empowers and connects them.*
  - *To support the organisation of a Scottish Rural Parliament that meets with the purpose of giving a stronger, more coherent voice to Scotland’s rural communities and enabling them to engage more effectively with government at all levels.*
  - *To support and promote the development of a Scottish rural movement and Parliament.*
- b. To what extent do you think these objectives are useful?
  - c. To what extent do you feel Scottish Rural Action meets these objectives?
  - d. Do you think that Scottish Rural Action should have any other objectives?

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.sra.scot/about/>

- e. Do you think there are any other ways of meeting the objectives of Scottish Rural Action?
4. Regarding how **Scottish Rural Action is organised**;
    - a. How well do you feel you know how Scottish Rural Action is administered?
    - b. Do you have any opinions or reflections on how well the organisation works?
    - c. Do you think there are any ways it could be organised more effectively?
    - d. Do you have any other comments about its organisation?
  5. Do you feel that Scottish Rural Action act as a **representative of the needs of rural people** and rural communities?
    - a. What is it you think that they do well?
    - b. What do you think they do that could be improved, and how would you like to see it being improved?
    - c. How do you think that Scottish Rural Action could be more representative of rural communities?
  6. How does Scottish Rural Action **engage with rural communities**?
    - a. How do they engage well?
    - b. How could they engage better?
    - c. Do you think that their new plans will represent more diverse rural interests?
  7. The Scottish Government provides Scottish Rural Action with 90% of their funding?
    - a. How sustainable do you think this is as a funding model?
    - b. Are there any other alternative funding models that you think Scottish Rural Action could employ?
    - c. Do you think it would be possible for Scottish Rural Action to continue without Scottish Government funding?
  8. Scottish Rural Action say that going forward they want to adopt a more regional approach to let more local voices be heard. This would create an ongoing process with local organisations to set up a consistent networking programme.

Regarding Scottish Rural Action's **plans going ahead**;

- a. To what extent do you think this is a useful way ahead?
  - b. Do you have any concerns about the proposed approach?
  - c. Do you have any recommendations about how it could be improved to be representative of rural communities and to represent diverse rural voices?
9. Is there **anything else** I have missed that you would like me to tell you about Scottish Rural Action or anything else you would like me to add?

**Thank the person for the time, explain that we are writing a short evaluation report for the Scottish Government.**

This interview schedule is designed to reflect the aims of the evaluation which are to assess:

- The ways in which Scottish Rural Action is representative of the needs of rural people and communities.
- Whether the Scottish Government's contribution to Scottish Rural Action represents value for money;
- Whether it is possible for Scottish Rural Action to be self-sustaining;
- Whether Scottish Rural Action is meeting its objectives;
- If there are any other ways of meeting the objectives of Scottish Rural Action;
- What key stakeholders think of Scottish Rural Action's future vision.