

Migration and Mobilities - Trajectories of Young People and Young Adults in Rural Scotland

March 2025

Executive Summary

Rural youth outmigration, retention and attraction have received increased policy attention in the context of an ageing population and concern about youth outmigration from some rural and island areas. This report aims to:

- provide an overview of recent migration patterns of young people and adults aged 16 to 45 years in rural and island areas in Scotland drawing on existing data (chapter 2)
- offer insights on the experiences of and attitudes to migration /mobility in the lives of these age based on a review of peer reviewed and grey literature and a workshop with the Young Islanders' Network (chapters 3 and 4)
- identify key messages and learning points for research and policy development (chapter 5).

While most previous research focuses on the mobility of young people at the post-school and tertiary stage (16-24) in rural areas, this report examines migration and mobility through a life course lens in relation to young people and adults aged 16-45 years. Mobilities are best understood as dynamic combinations of aspirations, intentions and decisions taken over the lifetime. The age range in this report captures key milestones/transitions in relation to three life course stages: the post-school, tertiary education/training, and post-tertiary stages respectively.

Demographic patterns – diversity and the importance of in- as well as outflows

The report presents new analysis of existing data on demographic aspects of mobilities and their wider impact on population. This draws on National Records of Scotland (NRS) data from Scotland's three island local authorities (Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles) and on published Census data down to island/island group and civil parish levels for selected rural mainland and island areas. We also use a comparison of age distributions over time, drawing on data from Mid-year Population Estimates, Scotland, to estimate net in and out flows of distinct age cohorts.

Our analysis of the statistical migration patterns and trends by age in the three island local authorities (LAs) highlights that each has its own history and identity. Moreover, patterns at a finer grained geographic scale within each LA illustrate some of the diversity of wider population and migration trends in rural areas of Scotland.^{1,2}

Our analysis also demonstrates that almost everywhere, both at LA level and below, rural youth mobilities are marked by inflows as well as outflows and we argue that too little attention is being paid to the former. Certainly, there are substantial patterns of outmigration amongst young people aged 17-21, although it is worthy of note that this is true of patterns of movement in this age group across the whole of Scotland (see p. 16). However, we also identify often-overlooked patterns of inflows, both of children aged 15 and under, presumably arriving with their parents, and of adults aged over 20. This raises the question whether sufficient attention is paid not only to the size of losses at ages 17-21, but the size and age pattern of net inflows at older ages. We suggest that encouraging and supporting increased inflows might be a more fruitful policy approach than seeking to stem or prevent outflows.

¹ See the following publication from the Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population (EAG): [Designing a pilot remote and rural migration scheme – analysis and policy options](#)

² See the following publication from the Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population (EAG): [Place-based policy approaches to population challenges – lessons for Scotland](#)

Aspirations, intentions and decisions – insights into mobility in the lives of young people and adults

Mobility decisions are influenced by key life events/milestones which may include leaving school, tertiary and post-tertiary education and training stages, employment and household formation. Structural factors including limited educational and employment opportunities, lack of affordable housing and transport and limited access to some services (childcare, health and mental health in particular) are often noted as presenting challenges to young people and adults living in some rural and island communities. These factors are identified in research on the mobility choices and decisions of young people and can provide a useful focus for policy interventions.

Mobilities, and the aspirations, intentions and decisions of rural young people and adults are also shaped by other factors including social relationships, biographical and personal backgrounds, quality of life, emotions and experiences, social and cultural opportunities and constraints. These are less often a focus for policy and practice. Both negative discourses, such as representations of rural areas as ‘lagging’ behind, or a view of staying as a marker of ‘failure’, and more positive associations with the natural environment, quality of life and feelings of ‘rootedness’ in rural cultures, can all play a significant role in mobility aspirations and decisions, impacting differently at different life stages.

In order to understand the factors that influence young people’s and adults’ willingness to return or to move to rural areas it is important to draw on their insights and experiences.

Key messages and learning points for research and policy development

1. There is a need for better data.

If we are to understand the complex interactions between in- and out-movements among young people and adults we need access to and analysis of the best possible **separate** data on inflows and outflows, by age and preferably by sex, and for smaller geographies than just LAs.

We also need better and more robust data to understand the complexities of mobility aspirations, intentions and decisions. There is a need, for example, for more research on understanding the role of schools in shaping young people’s mobility decisions. The commitments in the Scottish Government’s Addressing Depopulation Action Plan (ADAP), to support research to inform and support policy development, as well as initiatives by local authorities and enterprise agencies to survey local populations are welcome. Care must be taken to design such research in ways that is most useful, for example so that differences between age cohorts, or between young men and young women can be identified.

A life course lens provides a framework for considering the different factors that come into play in relation to mobility decisions and choices at each life course stage. Individuals’ mobility choices and decisions are part of their life trajectories and changing life circumstances which are best captured by robust research drawing on longitudinal studies and a combination of large scale and small-scale studies.

2. Policies might focus more on benefits than deficits.

High levels of outflow among rural teenagers and those in their early twenties are a normal part of very many individuals’ life courses. Attempts to discourage these outflows are not only likely to fail but could well lead to less qualified and more

narrowly experienced labour forces in these areas, which would be an inhibiting factor on economic, cultural and social services development.

Policy interventions might more productively seek to maximise the combined benefits of youth outmigration and middle age return, as well as the potential for in-migration of newcomers. This might include policy development specifically focused on facilitating and encouraging in-moves among slightly older people (both returners and newcomers), especially those in their later twenties to early forties who are most likely to bring or have children which will help balance population age structures.

More and better policy integration underpinned by systematic and rigorous data collection is also required if interventions are to be successful. International evidence suggests that cross-sectoral working and strong partnerships at local, regional and national levels can play a critical role in attracting young people and adults to rural areas. This needs effective partnership working across sectors at an appropriate local scale underpinned by shared commitments to clear policy goals.

3. Understanding diversity

Both analysis and policy development can benefit from increased understanding of the diversity of demographic patterns in different rural areas, and of their drivers. Rather than attempting to find universally applicable policies, it may be best to prioritise and resource the development of a set of possible initiatives that can be tailored to carefully analysed, and particular local needs and to support exchange of learning and good practice where relevant.

By the same token, policies need to take account of the diversities which shape young people's and adults mobilities. An intersectional approach is important to recognising the complex identities and social positions (including gender, disability, ethnicity, race, migrant status, social class, sexuality) that impact on mobilities and to developing appropriate policies and interventions.

Involving a diversity of young people and adults directly in discussions and decisions regarding the development of rural and remote areas can help to find solutions. This requires local bottom-up context-specific policies and strategies based on relevant agencies working collaboratively with young people and adults by building on the unique qualities and cultures of places to improve their wellbeing as well as that of the whole community across the life course.

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1. Background, aim and objectives

This report was commissioned in April 2024 with the overall aim ‘to produce a report which will review existing data and literature, identifying areas for further development in relation to the mobilities/migration of young people and adults (16-45 years) in rural Scotland through the lens of a life-course approach.’ It focuses on one aspect of the Scottish Government’s (2024) ‘Addressing Depopulation Action Plan’: rural youth outmigration, retention and attraction. These have become a focus of policy attention given concerns about the impacts of ageing and declining populations, and feature in several government initiatives, a selection of which are outlined in Appendix 1. In pursuit of this overarching aim, the objectives of this report are: (i) to summarise existing demographic data on patterns of mobilities of young people and adults (Chapter 2); (ii) to identify insights on the mobilities of rural young people and young adults through the lens of a life course perspective (Chapters 3 and 4); (iii) to draw out key learning points for future policy and areas for further research (Chapter 5).

1.2. Life course lens

The report uses a life course lens to frame the discussion on understanding the mobilities of young people/adults. This approach considers their past lives to contextualise their present and future lives, choices and decisions (Elder et al., 2003). The temporal frame used is broadly young people and adults between 16 and 45 years of age.^{3,4} The rationale for this choice is to capture key milestones/transitions in relation to three life course stages where research demonstrates impacts on young people’s and adults’ mobility decisions (that is the post-school, tertiary education/training, and post tertiary stages respectively). Within this context it is recognised that life can be messy and does not always work out in a defined chronological sequence. The lives of individuals and groups are influenced by changing social, cultural, historical and biographical contexts (social pathways’), institutional structures, and national and global trends, which are all important in understanding their mobility decisions.⁵ Transitions and how they are understood and experienced vary historically, across national, social and cultural contexts, as well as depending on the biographical history of an individual.

³ At 18 years of age an individual in the UK is categorised as an adult. However, the literature reviewed tends to use the term young people to refer to those aged 16-30 years. For the purposes of this report the term ‘young people and adults’ is used to refer to those aged between 16 and 45. Constructing age boundaries, for example where youth begins and ends and adulthood, middle age, etc. starts, is dynamic and contested, particularly as people are living longer and decisions related to employment, family formation, reproduction etc. are being delayed ([Office for National Statistics, 2019, ‘Milestones: journeying into adulthood’](#))

⁴ See also YouGov (2018). [How young are “young people”? And at what age does a person become “old”?](#)

⁵ The life course as a theoretical orientation/lens has emerged from a desire to understand these social pathways, their developmental effects, and their relation to personal and social-historical conditions. In order to understand how temporal/historical, biographical, social, and cultural contexts influence how lives are ‘socially organised’, the term ‘trajectories’ is used to describe the ‘sequences of roles and experiences, which are themselves made of *transitions* (our italics), or changes in state or role’. (Elder et al. 2003, 8). For example, leaving home or a place to study, entry into work, and setting up a household all entail changes in status or identity which in turn may result in changes of behaviour and decisions (for more detail, see Elder et al., 2003).

1.3. Young people and adults' mobilities in the rural context

An urban-centric focus, and the dearth of literature on the experiences of young people living in rural areas, particularly within youth studies, have been highlighted in the academic literature (Farrugia, 2013). Where attention has been paid to rural young people, academic studies have sought to highlight and challenge a tendency in policy to view rural youth outmigration and mobility decisions through a predominantly economic and individual lens. This tendency has been reflected in implicit and explicit assumptions that rural young people have to leave for urban areas to be seen as 'successful' individuals, thus stigmatising those who choose to stay (Corbett, 2007; Farrugia, 2016; Looker and Naylor, 2009). Policy responses to rural youth outmigration and migration/retention have been subject to critical scrutiny since the late 1990's (e.g. Dey and Jenstch, 2001; Jentsch, 2006; Jones and Jamieson, 1997). However, the most recent policy and research interests in rural youth outmigration have emerged in the context of growing concerns about aging/declining populations.

Mobilities (movements of people) encompass four aspects/elements, which this report will touch upon. These include a) mobilities in the context of people's lives; b) access to transport c) social and cultural norms and expectations of mobility at different stages of life; and d) social and policy implications of mobilities (Bruzelius and Shutes, 2022; Hannam, Sheller and Urry, 2006). In the policy-focused literature on young people and adults, a dichotomy of mobility-leaving versus immobility-staying has tended to imply mutually exclusive groups. By contrast, the academic literature has emphasised mobilities as encompassing a variety of movements, from daily movements to one-off moves, each of which may involve varied distances and relational processes/practices over the life course, and this has resulted in a growing recognition that mobility is best understood over the life time and as part of life events/transitions which include post-school education, employment, household/family formation, 'empty nest', retirement, etc. (Findlay et al., 2015a&b; Ní Laoire and Stockdale, 2016).

1.4. Structure of the report

The report is arranged as follows. Chapter 2 provides a context for the report by focusing on demographic (age and gender) aspects of in/out migration and their wider impact on population in three island local authorities (Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles), drawing on data published by NRS. It also draws on published Census data down to island/island group and civil parish levels for selected rural mainland and island areas. Despite some limitations in the spatial data available, the chapter identifies significant diversity in migration patterns between different areas (particularly of in-movements) and thus points to important policy implications in relation to the mobilities of young people and adults. Chapters 3 and 4 provide insights on the mobilities of young people and adults in rural communities and highlight the complex and diverse factors that shape mobility decisions over the life course. The chapters draw on a range of sources: academic literature from the global north and Scotland/UK; applied and policy related studies and surveys undertaken in Scotland; and selected insights drawing on a workshop undertaken with the Young Islanders Network (YIN) in August 2024. Chapter 5 identifies the key messages and areas for further development that emerge from chapters 2, 3 and 4. Appendix 1 presents an overview of selected Scottish policy actors, strategies and interventions relevant to the focus of this report.

Chapter 2 - The demographic context: age profiles of mobilities

This chapter aims to provide some demographic context for the policy and empirical evidence discussed elsewhere in this report. It charts some of the diversity of rural migration patterns by age across different parts of the country and begins to show how variations in age/gender-specific patterns of migration affect the changing sizes and age profiles of populations in particular places over time.

2.1. Sources of data

Unlike in much of Northern Europe, where there is a legal requirement to report all changes of address and where the resulting statistics are regularly made available for analysis of migration flows, in Scotland, NRS, and its predecessor the General Register Office for Scotland (GRO(S)), have for many decades used a variety of survey and administrative sources (including school and GP registrations) to make their own annual estimates of in- and out-moves, down to quite small geographies. It is these, along with the much more robust vital registration statistics on births and deaths, that they then use each year to produce their published estimates by age and sex, of the populations of the top-level administrative areas (local authority/Health Board (LA/HB)), and also of populations down to 'datazones' (most of which have between 500 and 1,200 people).⁶

Unfortunately for our present purposes, however, NRS has only ever published a limited range of estimates of their underlying migration flows. These are normally confined to LA/HB geographies. As a result, in the areas being considered here, we only have separate NRS migration flow data for the three island authorities. In addition, the published data have normally been limited to in-, out- and net movements for the total populations of each LA/HB, plus net moves for five-year age-groups broken down by sex, and net figures by single year-of-age, but these are for 'all persons' only, with no breakdown by sex or any other variable.

So, although, as we shall show below, there must have been major difference in migration patterns between different sub-populations within each LA, we cannot use the NRS published migration data to get direct insights into these variations. Of particular relevance to this report, we cannot get even the limited published statistics for just the more rural parts of Highland, Argyll and Bute, and Dumfries and Galloway – and it is clear from what we show below that the LA-level statistics for these authorities, dominated numerically as they are by their urban and suburban areas, in no way reflect the migration patterns of their most rural areas.

It is for these reasons that for our more localised analysis we have had to fall back on inference from changes in the estimated age profiles of populations over time, and on comparisons between the age profiles of places at the 2011 and 2022 Censuses.

In addition, our ability to discuss the most recent years is affected by the impact of Covid-19 on urban to rural movements, some of which may turn out to be more than just temporary blips if they are continued into new patterns of learning and working in the future.

⁶ There is always a level of uncertainty of population estimates at the small-area level because of the undercount of moves by young people, especially men (see Expert Advisory Group on Population and Migration, 2021).

Nevertheless, despite these limitations, we believe useful broad conclusions can be reached.

2.2. Island local authorities

Until now, separate in-, out- and net-migration estimates have only been made public once, in a special chapter on population diversities in the Registrar General's Annual Review for 2006 (Anderson and Wright, 2007, 77-8; Anderson and Roughley, 2018, 181-4). These figures show the average of four years of data for in- out- and net moves between 2002 and 2006 for each of the 32 LAs (Anderson and Wright, 2007).⁷ For this report, however, NRS has made unpublished data available to the Expert Advisory Group which show a similar set of figures across the last pre-Covid-19 years of 2017-19 and also for 2020-22.

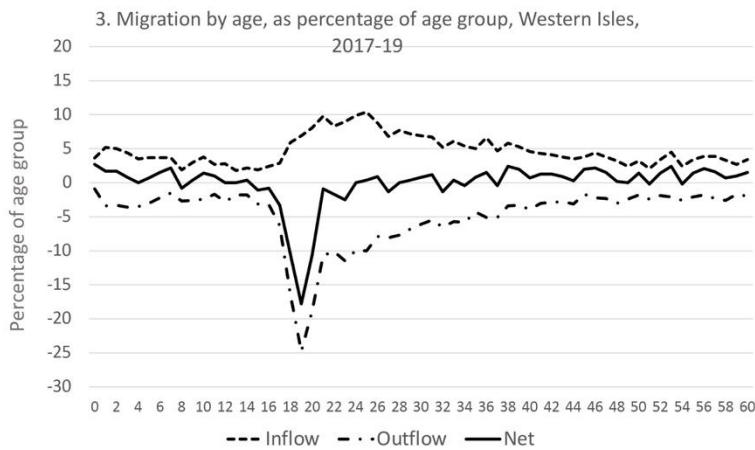
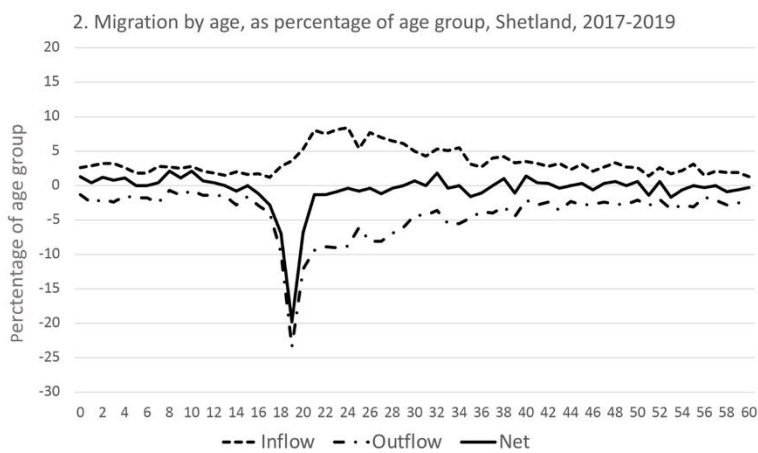
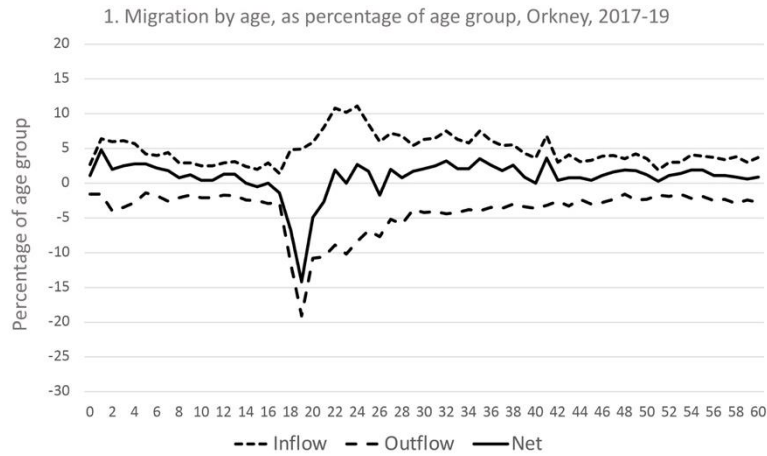
In the Mid-2021 Population Estimates, Scotland (p.12), NRS identified clearly unusual patterns of migration for the 2020-2021 year. They point out that the estimates were, as usual, in part derived from changes in GP registrations; and that this may have accentuated a rise in 'migrations' through people moving from cities to new or second homes in rural areas to minimise the impacts of Covid-19 and registering with a local GP to ensure access to treatment and vaccinations. NRS also notes that some students remained at their parents' rural addresses rather than moving to an urban place of study.

While comparison of the 2020-22 and 2017-19 figures in the unpublished migration data supplied to the Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population (EAG) by NRS shows a general overall similarity in patterns of movement across the two periods, it does suggest some noticeable differences. In 2020-22 both gross and net late-teenage outflow figures were lower compared with 2017-19, most noticeably in the Western Isles. In-movements at older ages were also markedly higher in 2020-22 in Shetland, though less so in the Western Isles and with no significant differences apparent in the Orkney figures.

Faced with a choice of which data to use, to avoid our more detailed analysis of estimates-based migration being influenced by the unusual pattern of late teenage migration in 2020-22, we have chosen in this section to focus mainly on 2017-19 data, in preference to the most recent figures.

Figures 1, 2 and 3 show migration-by-age patterns for the three island LAs for these years and reveal some interesting differences between them. Crucially, they also show how much having separate in- and out-migration estimates can add to our understandings, compared with just the usual net figures.

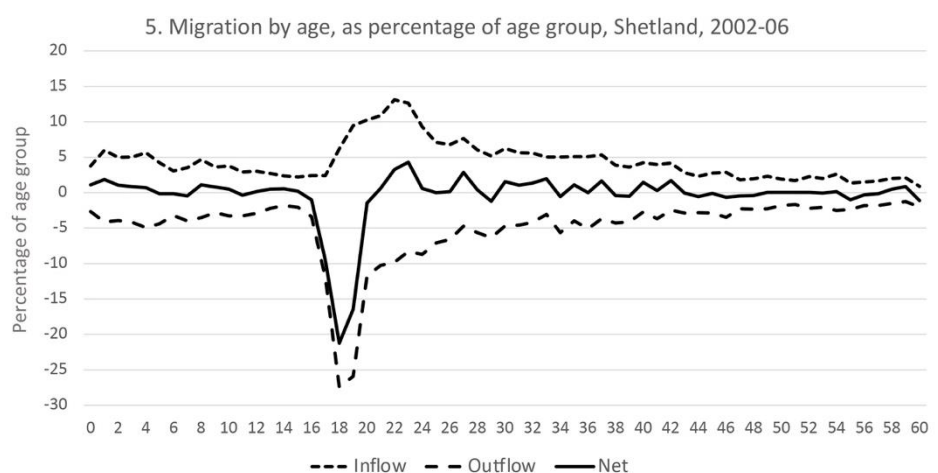
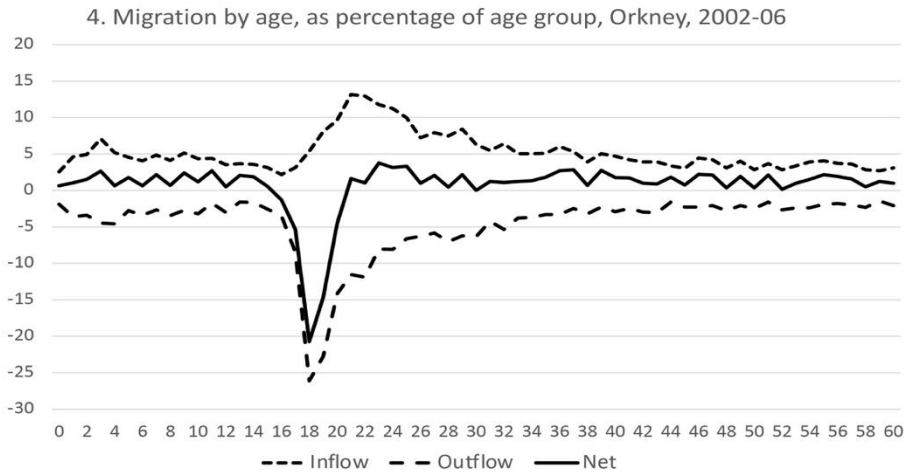
⁷ see also Anderson and Roughley, 2018, 181-4.

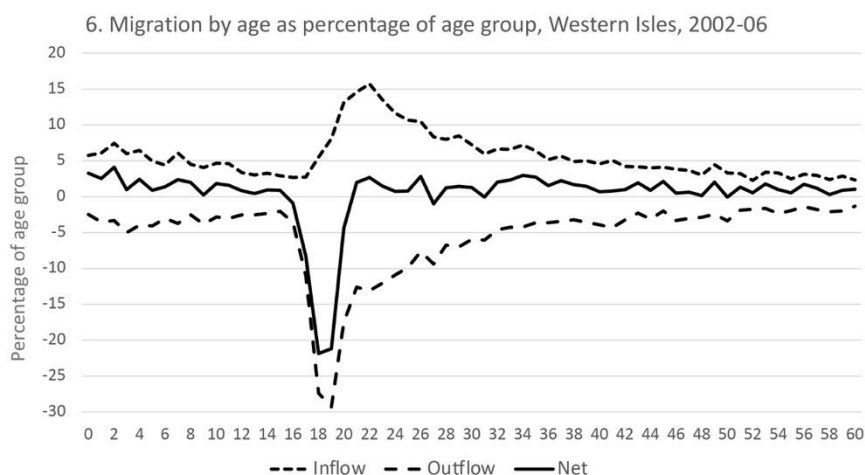


In all three island LAs, there was both in- and out-movement at almost all ages in 2017-19. That a small net inflow of children was occurring everywhere (especially in Orkney) is presumably a sign of family migration; however, by age 16 a small net outflow is apparent in all three LAs. In 2017-19, the first significant gross and net outflows only started at age 18, when gross flows of 10 per cent of the age group left Shetland, 11 per cent left Orkney and 16 per cent left the Western Isles. Age 19 then saw the peak gross and net outflows in all three island groups, the gross out-flows involving a quarter of the age group in the Western Isles, 23 per cent in Shetland and 19 per cent in Orkney (and the nets 18, 19 and 14 per cent respectively). Strong outflow continued at age 20 (still 19 per cent in the

Western Isles), and even though there was more inflow, the Western Isles still lost another 11 per cent of the age group at this age.

Thereafter in the Western Isles, gross out-flows remained above or around a tenth of the remaining age-group right through to age 25. But from 24 onwards these were at least roughly matched by in-flows, so, averaging across all years, a very small positive balance (around one per cent per year) occurred right through to age 65. The Shetland pattern was rather similar, with a slightly lower outflow pattern also being accompanied by lower inflows, but there the sum of the post-age 30 net figures is balanced at best, and from 45 marginally negative rather than positive. By contrast, Orkney show a clearly different pattern, with numbers of out-movers down to between three and six per cent of those aged from 27 to 45 and equalled or exceeded at every age by in-movers. Orkney thus experienced net inflows of between two and four per cent in almost every year from ages 30 through to 38 (and with never another negative year through to age 65).





Comparison of the 2017-19 data with the figures published in the 2006 Report for 2002-06 appear to show that some important changes in age-patterns of migration took place in the first two decades of the twenty-first century (Anderson and Wright, 2007; compare Figures 4 to 6 with Figures 1 to 3). In the 2017-19 data, in all three island LAs (and especially in Orkney) there was only a modest increase in gross or net outflows at age 17 compared with younger ages, with significant rises then at 18 and clear peaks only at 19, with these peaks nowhere exceeding 25 per cent of the age group. In 2002-06, by contrast, there was a clear rise in out-movements among those aged 17, with around one in ten in all three areas of young people leaving even at this age. There was then a big jump at 18, with departures of between 26 and 28 per cent of the age group in all three areas, and further very high levels of outflow at age 19, with the Western Isles actually peaking at this age, having out-movement by 29 per cent of the age group; this compared with out-flows of 26 per cent in Shetland and 23 per cent in Orkney. In the Western Isles, 17 per cent left at age 20, and departures of more than ten per cent continued there through to age 24 and at more than five per cent to age 31. Out-flows of more than five per cent also continued to the late-twenties or early 30s in the other two island groups.

Importantly, however, in 2002-06 these large out-movements were accompanied in all three island groups by substantial in-moves at the same set of ages: more than five per cent in all three LAs at age 18, rising to 13 per cent peaks at ages 21 and 22 in Orkney, and at ages 22 and 23 in Shetland; in the Western Isles they were above ten per cent at every age between 20 and 26, where the peak inflow was 16 per cent at age 22. The result was that in all three LAs the net flows were clearly positive right through the mid- to later-twenties of people's lives, and they remained modestly so in most years right through to age 60 and beyond in Orkney and the Western Isles, though no better than a rough balance in Shetland.

2.2.1. Impact of migration on population change, 2002-06 and 2017-2019

Figures 1 to 6 show how the patterns of migration have influenced populations in the three island authorities over the two most recent decades. They particularly point up the large numbers of late teenagers and people in their early twenties who left at all periods (proportionately larger in each case than from any non-island LA except Perth and Kinross in these years). But a key question for anyone interested in overall population change is to what extent out-movers at these ages have been replaced by in-movers at other ages, and what impact this might have had on the age profiles of the populations.

Table 1. Mean gains or losses, by age group, of people, island local authorities, 2002-06, 2017-19, and total and percentage impact on population change

Location & Date Range	Age 0-15	Age 16-17	Age 18-20	Age 21-29	Age 30-44	Age 45-59	Age ≥60	Total Change	Change % of pop
Orkney 2002-06	+53	-17	-77	+31	+66	+57	+35	+148	+0.8
Orkney 2017-19	+53	-3	-49	+16	+68	+62	+20	+167	+0.8
Shetland 2002-06	+22	-31	-86	+24	+31	-5	+16	-28	-0.1
Shetland 2017-19	+29	-10	-75	-16	+4	-13	-16	-97	-0.5
Western Isles 2002-2006	+76	-31	-113	+27	+84	+57	+44	+144	+0.5
Western Isles 2017-19	+32	-10	-82	-11	+34	+71	+16	+50	+0.2

Table 1, now using numbers not percentages for clarity, shows some quite major contrasts between the three LAs both in the age profiles of migration and over time. The marked reduction between 2002-06 and 2017-19 in net outflows at ages 16-17 comes through very clearly in all three LAs, with the main concentration of net loss in both sets of years being at ages 18 to 20. In the 2002-06 data, net flows at older ages then became, often quite strongly, positive in all three LAs at almost every age up to the mid-forties, and for most ages thereafter. But the 2017-19 data suggest that a more differentiated was occurring in those years compared with 2002-06. In Orkney, rather like in the years 2002-06, the 2017-19 net flows were positive at almost every age after 21 and this resulted in a significant cumulative positive flow in people's twenties, thirties and thereafter. In the Western Isles, by contrast, flows only went clearly positive in most years after the age of 28, and in Shetland, taking one year with another, the net flow pattern was clearly outwards for the whole of the rest of people's lives.

The results are that in 2017-19 only Orkney had enough adult inflows before age 45 to counterbalance its out-migration at ages 16 to 20. Only Shetland, however, had overall net losses by migration in both 2002-06 and 2017-19, and this was in large part because it continued to lose out-migrants at older ages, while both Orkney and the Western Isles attracted significant inflows of middle-aged and older people up to retirement age and beyond – but, in the latter case in particular at some detriment to their overall age profile.

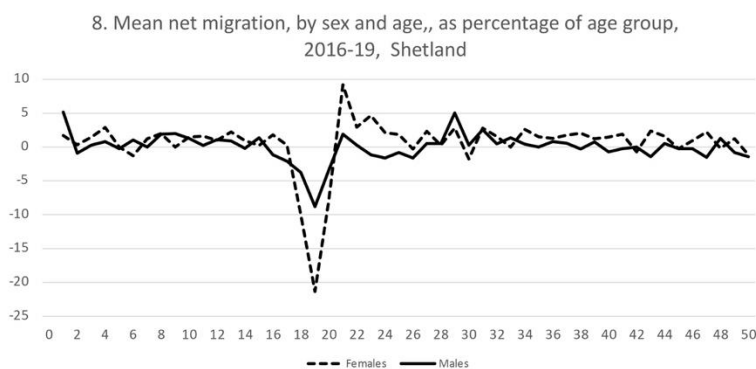
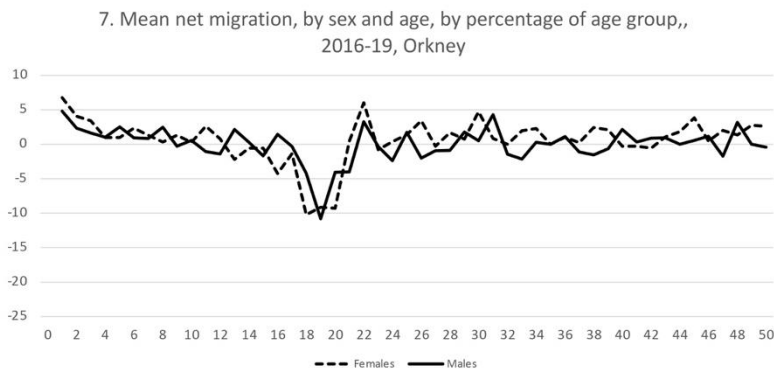
However, in all three island groups one other, often under-emphasised, factor was significant as a positive contributor to migrant flows: the arrival of in-migrant children (presumably as part of parental inflows from their later twenties onwards). In-flows of children of 15 and under provided a third of the overall net inflow into Orkney in 2017-19, and two thirds of the flow into the Western Isles – and, in doing so, also made an, admittedly modest, contribution to the balance of the age profiles of the islands. But what appear to have been markedly lower numbers of in-migrant children as a share of the population of Shetland, has been a further factor feeding its population decline.

2.2.2. Further exploration, using age-cohort depletion

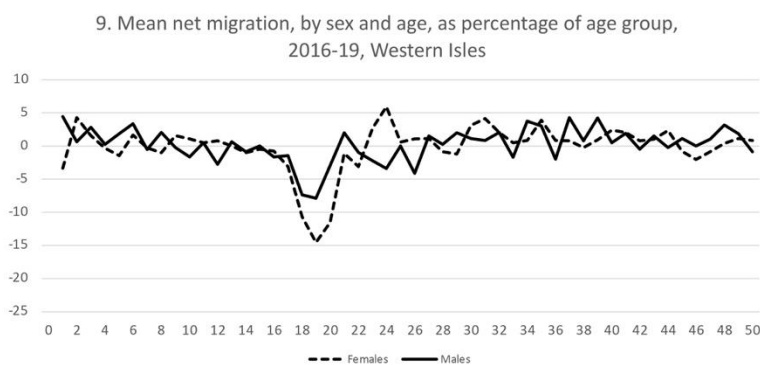
No more sub-national data on separate in- out- and net-flow migration patterns by single year of age are currently available from NRS. Net flows, however, can be inferred by comparing population age distributions over two or more periods of time, using data from each year's Mid-year Population Estimates, Scotland. This is done by using 'age-cohort depletion', which is based on counts of the number of people at each year of age who

either ‘disappeared from’ or ‘appeared in’ that age group over a chosen period of time.⁸ So, if we are estimating net flow numbers between any two years, we subtract the number in the earlier year-of-age from the number in that same birth cohort (now one year older) in the same place a year later. An example of this kind of one-year ‘depletion’ would be the difference between the number of people counted at age 20 in 2022, and the number who would have been ‘expected to be’ present in that year if there had been no migration or deaths of people who were aged 19 in 2021. It should be noted that the figures cited below do therefore include deaths, but up to the early 50’s these are minimal, and do not significantly affect our results. One advantage of these data is that they allow us to undertake our analysis for males and females separately, and this is done below.

As noted above, Covid-related behaviour will have affected the data for 2020 and 2021, and quite probably on a limited scale for 2022. We therefore show in Figures 7, 8 and 9 analysis of net migrations, for the island authorities, by sex, for the years 2016 to 2019.



⁸ This is also called ‘the vital statistics method’ or ‘the survival rate method’ when deaths are also considered (Hamilton, 1967).



The graphs show the mean net percentage estimated gain or loss in numbers present across the years 2016 to 2019, for each year of age from the first to the 49th, for females and males separately.

At most ages, there were no major differences in net migration patterns between women and men, but with two marked exceptions.⁹ First, in the late teens, there was everywhere a clear excess of female net outflows over male; this excess was modest in Orkney but very marked in the Western Isles and especially in Shetland, where it seems likely to be the result of the large number of well-paid (but not requiring qualifications) jobs for young men in resource-based industries. Second, in the Western Isles, the net outflow for men was almost as large at age 20 as at age 19 (but only half as big across the two age groups among women), and in Shetland the net outflows suggest that, while significant numbers of women but fewer men left the islands at age 20, net flows of women were then positive at each age through to 27, while flows for men remained negative in these years. Just what caused these relatively small differences in migration patterns by age and gender must await further research.

2.3. Islands and mainland rural areas; use of Census data

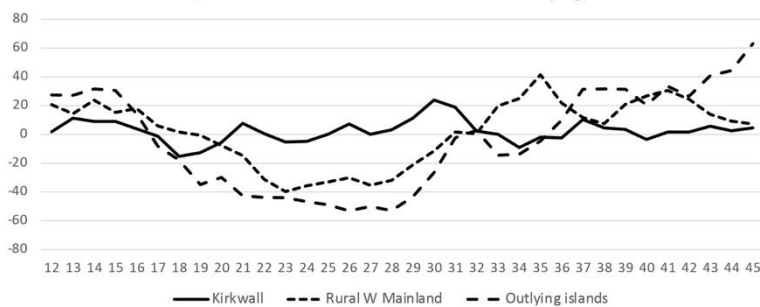
As noted above, NRS has not published any recent data which would enable us to identify year-by-year patterns even of net migration movements below LA level. This gap is important, because there is huge variation in settlement patterns within LAs. For example, taking just the three island LAs that were examined above, more than two fifths of the population of the Orkney LA live in the town of Kirkwall, more than a third of people living in the Shetland LA are resident in Lerwick, and more than a quarter of the Western Isles LA's population live in Stornoway.¹⁰ All three towns have a wide range of good standard commercial, administrative, medical, educational and leisure infrastructure, providing services not only to direct residents but also to more immediately surrounding populations, many of whom commute into the towns regularly for work, shopping and/or education. As a result, the social and economic situation of both these urban residents and of those living nearby is dramatically different from that of people living in the more distant and sparsely populated rural places, whether on the mainland of Scotland, the largest islands, or the smaller inhabited islands.

⁹ Some caution is needed when interpreting the results. Flows of (young) men may be underreported; (young) women normally register GP changes, whereas men do not always register (Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population, 2021).

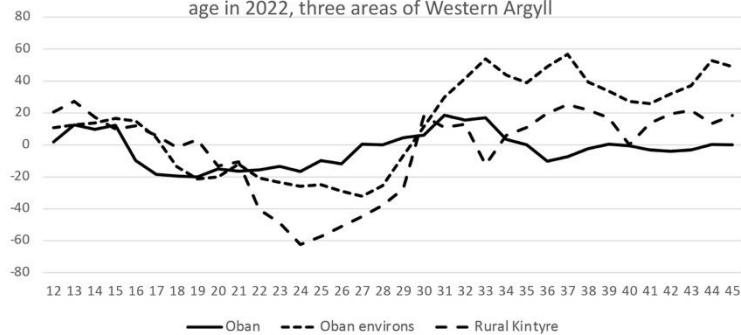
¹⁰ The extreme example of a town dominating its island is Rothesay, which is home to almost three-quarters of the population of Bute.

It is therefore important that separate data be made available for analysis of migration in places further from these significant towns – and the same applies to places nearer and further from towns like Oban, Fort William, Wick and Thurso, which play a similar role in their parts of otherwise rural west Argyll and north Highland. Though not ideal, NRS has published Census data down to island/island group and civil parish (CP) levels. These at least allow us to compare single year-of-age counts at the 2011 census with the counts of the number of people eleven years older in the same spatial units in 2022. And this makes it possible to get some insights into the net cumulative impacts of migration flows over the previous eleven years, as experienced by each successive year-of-age; it also provides a useful perspective on the effect of migration on the communities concerned.

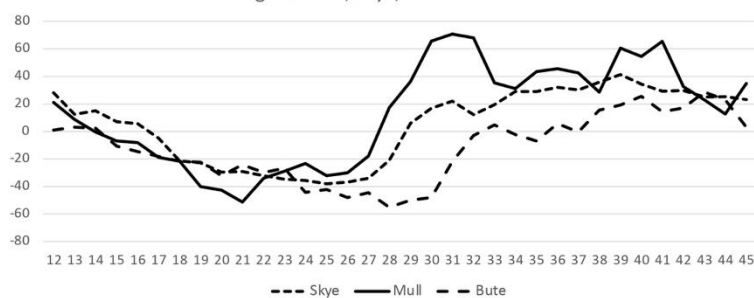
10. Eleven year gain or loss in population , by. year-of-age in 2022, Kirkwall, rural West Mainland and Northern outlying islands



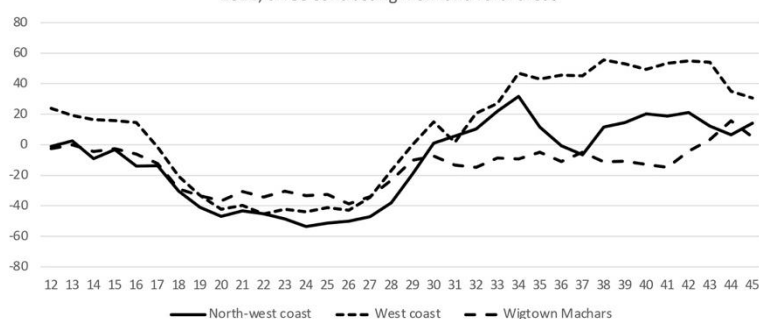
11. Eleven year percentage net gain or loss in population, by year-of-age in 2022, three areas of Western Argyll



12. Eleven year percentage net gain or loss in population, by year-of-age in 2022, Skye, Mull and Bute



13. Eleven year percentage net gain or loss in population, by year-of-age in 2022, three contrasting mainland rural areas



Figures 10 to 13 show the very marked contrasts in the patterns of these movements, across different sub-sets within the same broad spatial areas, between the 2011 and 2022 censuses. The underlying data are, for each place and single year-of-age, the differences in numbers counted in 2022 and numbers counted in 2011 who were eleven years younger at that time. The figures thus show cumulative patterns of net gains and losses over the previous eleven years. To reduce uncertainty in the estimates due to random variation, the plots in the graphs are three-year moving averages across ages.

Figure 10 shows that in all three Orkney areas (especially in the five northern islands most distant from Kirkwall, less in the rural areas of West Mainland, and only minimally in Kirkwall), the numbers of children under the age of 16 were higher than expected in 2022 compared with numbers in 2011 eleven years earlier. This is clear evidence of some net family in-movement over the eleven-year period. At older age groups, by contrast, there had been very significant net out-movement from the outlying northern islands, particularly marked among those in their mid-late twenties in 2022, more than 55 per cent of whom had disappeared since 2011. Losses among those living on rural West Mainland were somewhat lower, and there had been some quite significant in-movement there among those in their later thirties/early forties in 2022. In Kirkwall, however, inflows at best did little more than equal outflows for most age groups through to age 45.

A rather similar pattern of contrasts between town, surrounding parishes, and more distant parishes can be seen in Figure 11 for Oban and the west of Argyll.¹¹ Oban itself had had tiny net inflows among children and for those who were reaching their early 30s in 2022, but otherwise modest patterns of net loss. By contrast, there had been substantial in-

¹¹ For a similar pattern around Stornoway see Jamieson and Copus (2018), and further discussion below.

movements into Oban's surrounding parishes, of children and even quite young middle-aged adults. These are all areas from which large numbers of people commute to Oban for work and/or depend on its significant shopping, educational and other infrastructure. Further south, in rural Kintyre, the picture was very different. In all but one of these parishes, populations fell between the two censuses, with huge outflows of people in their early and mid-twenties, and very modest in-flows thereafter.

Figure 12 shows the differing migration profiles of three of the largest non-LA island groups. Mull, and much more, Skye, had marked growth in population between 2011 and 2022. Nevertheless, both had quite marked net outflows among those in their teens and early twenties; in Mull this even involved some children of secondary school age, probably because of moves (some on a week-time only basis) to mainland secondary education; this is a pattern of education also seen in other Argyll islands. However, Mull experienced net inflow among people from their late twenties (peaking at over 60 per cent around the age of 30), and Skye was similar, with inflow rates having approached 40 per cent among those around the age of forty in 2022. The contrasts with Bute are marked, with net losses there apparent at almost every year-of-age up to the late thirties.

Finally, Figure 13, shows something of the marked contrasts between different mainland areas. All the 'North-west coast' parishes (those located southwards from Durness to Lochbroom) had population decline between 2011 and 2022, and all had experienced very severe net outflows (peaking at over 50 per cent at all ages among those from 13 to 30 in 2022), with only modest reversal of flows among those who were by then in their thirties and early forties. By contrast, the coastal parishes further south (from Gairloch down to Morvern) all experienced population growth in the same period, and although their teenage/young adult net migration outflows had been on a similar scale to those further north (but for fewer years and slightly less extreme), they clearly had had a very different pattern of net family and middle-aged inflows, at well above 40 per cent among those in their mid-30s and over in 2022. The contrast with the predominantly agriculture-based rural parts of the Machars area of Wigtownshire (the parishes south of Newton Stewart) could not be more marked. Only one of these parishes had population increase between 2011 and 2022, and Figure 13 shows this area as having had significant and continuing net outflows at all ages through to the early forties.

2.4. Overall impact

The graphs and data in the previous section show a widespread, but not universal, pattern of net inflows among children (and therefore in most cases of their parents), followed almost everywhere by net outflows, as teenagers (in a few cases clearly a significant majority) left home parishes or islands for education and or training elsewhere. In this they were actually joining people from similar age groups right across Scotland, because, for example, in 2016-19 only seven local authority areas, all with significant higher education provision, had net inflows in the 17-20 age groups – and, of course, many teenagers whose homes were in one of them actually went elsewhere for their studies/training. This is an important point, too often overlooked in writings focused just on rural areas.

By contrast with these earlier years of life, there has been huge variation in the direction and scale of net migration flows at older age groups. This raises two further key questions for the present and future demography of these areas; first, to what extent have switches at older ages from net outflow to net inflow (where they have occurred) maintained total population sizes today, and second, what impact have they had on population age structures for the future. There will be big differences in the consequences depending on

whether the incomers are of childbearing age or bring pre-school or school-age children of with them, or are concentrated very much among older groups.¹²

Table 2 attempts to throw some light on these two issues by summing net gains/losses over groups of ages, presented now as a proportion of the 2011 population (as opposed to of age groups as in Figures 10 to 13). It includes the places for which data are plotted in the graphs and some additions, notably in Shetland and the Western Isles.

Overall, the data suggest that total net in-migration by age groups involving children and those aged 31 to 65 only offset net outflows in the age group 17 to 30 in a small majority of the areas covered. Even more crucially, net total positive inflows before age 46 only occurred in Kirkwall, the surrounds of Oban, the rural parishes of Orkney's West Mainland, Mull (by a large margin), Islay, and the west coast parishes between Gairloch and Morvern; Skye was just about in balance at these ages. In the other areas, therefore, even if there were total net migration inflows overall, they are unlikely to have improved the age profile of the population.

On the other hand, all of the urban areas included here, except Kirkwall, experienced overall population declines between 2011 and 2022; in particular, Stornoway and Lerwick had migration losses in all four age categories distinguished in the table. It is worthy of note however, that this pattern is not dissimilar from trends in many towns elsewhere in Scotland away from the cities of the Central Belt. Away from urban areas, very large numbers of in-migrants among those who were 46-65 in 2022 were particularly important in offsetting or nearly offsetting net outflows at earlier ages in Arran, Bute, the north-west mainland parishes, North Uist, and the distant Shetland and Orkney islands. Interestingly, Barra, the most distant of the Outer Hebrides from Stornoway, offset its very high late-teenage and early-twenties losses (presumably caused by the need to seek almost any advanced training/education off the island) by high levels of in-migration among people only a few years older, presumably stimulated by its strong economic growth from tourism, fish processing, and inshore fishing.

¹² Age-cohort depletion methods are less helpful with the oldest age groups because they cannot distinguish between losses from out-migration and from death, but fortunately for our present purposes data on these older age groups are not required.

Table 2: Net migration changes and population growth for selected areas 2011-2022 (All figures are percentages in 2022 of the 2011 population figures and relate to ages in 2022)

Locations	Pop change 2011-22 %	Gain/loss 11<17	Gain/loss 17<31	Gain/loss 31<46	Gain/loss 46<66	Net impact on pop size
Stornoway	-7.3	-0.2	-3.9	-0.3	-0.3	-4.7
Lewis/ Harris less Stornoway CP	-5.2	+0.1	-4.6	+1.6	+3.7	+0.8
North Uist	-3.4	+0.2	-3.4	+2.1	+5.0	+3.9
South Uist	-6.0	+0.3	-6.3	+3.2	+1.5	-1.3
Barra	+3.7	+1.8	-7.4	+4.7	+3.2	+2.3
Orkney Mainland	+3.7	+0.4	-2.3	+1.8	+2.1	+2.0
Kirkwall CP	+5.3	+0.4	+0.3	+0.3	+0.7	+1.7
Orkney West Mainland rural CPs	+0.0	+1.0	-3.4	+1.9	+2.9	+2.4
Distant Orkney islands	-5.9	+1.4	-5.9	+1.6	+6.2	+3.3
Shetland Mainland	+0.2	+0.7	-3.1	+0.9	-1.1	-5.8
Lerwick CP	-5.0	+0.1	-1.0	-1.8	-2.3	-5.0
Distant Shetland islands	-2.6	+0.7	-4.6	+0.4	+4.8	+1.3
Skye	+8.2	+0.6	-4.2	+3.6	+6.6	+6.6
Mull	+9.4	+0.4	-2.8	+4.8	+7.0	+9.4
Islay	-1.7	+0.4	-2.7	+2.7	+2.7	+3.1
Bute	-6.6	-0.3	-5.4	+0.7	+4.5	-0.5
Arran	-0.4	+1.0	-4.0	+2.1	+7.1	+6.2
Northwest coast CPs	-5.7	-0.1	-6.1	+1.3	+4.9	-0.0
West coast CPs	+3.4	+1.0	-4.4	+3.8	+7.0	+7.4
Wigtown Machars CPs	-7.7	-0.2	-4.1	-0.9	+3.0	-2.2
Stranraer CP	-7.3	-0.8	-2.6	-1.9	+0.1	-5.2
Oban's CP	-1.5	+0.4	-1.7	+0.2	+0.0	-1.1
Oban environs CPs	+8.9	+0.8	-2.6	+4.3	+7.3	+9.8
Rural Kintyre CPs	-2.8	+0.7	-4.4	+1.6	+4.2	+2.1

2.5. Conclusion

The above analysis highlights three important issues for research and policy development on mobilities of young to middle-age adults in rural Scotland.

The first is that, if we are to understand the quite complex interactions between in- and out-movements among people of these age-groups, it will be very important to find a way that NRS can allow researchers to obtain the best possible **separate** data on inflows and outflows, by age and preferably by sex, and for smaller geographies than just LAs. Such data are anyway needed because there is no such person as a net-migrant (Rogers, 1990).

The second point is that, as elsewhere in Scotland, high levels of outflow among rural teenagers and those in their early twenties are, and for good reasons must be expected to be, a normal part of very many individuals' life courses. This suggests that attempts to discourage these outflows are not only likely to fail but could well lead to less qualified and more narrowly experienced labour forces in these areas, which would be an inhibiting factor on economic, cultural and social services development. More positively, it also suggests that policy interventions could aim more effectively to maximise the combined benefits of these processes of youth out-migration and middle-age return. Of particular interest would be policy development specifically focused on facilitating and encouraging in-moves among slightly older people (and not just returners), especially those in their late twenties to early forties who are most likely to bring or have children which will help balance population age structures.

The third point is to stress the key importance in both analysis and policy development of understanding the diversity of demographic patterns in different rural areas, and of their drivers. Across Scotland's more than 90 inhabited maritime islands there are huge contrasts in size, recent patterns of growth/decline, age profiles, ease of access to major educational, medical, commercial and other infrastructures, opportunities for, or restrictions on, day-commuting to school or work, and underlying local economies and cultures. The same is true of different parts of the rural mainland. All these variations will significantly affect patterns of mobilities at all ages. Any notion that universally applicable policies can work to cover all these diversities is bound to fail. Instead (but bearing in mind that within this diversity there are similar economies and demographics, so few places are unique), the best way forward seems to be to develop a set of possible initiatives that can be tailored to carefully analysed, and particular, kinds of local needs. It is encouraging to see recent Scottish Government policy initiatives such as the establishment of Community Settlement Officer posts within a number of local authorities and support for community-based and/or community-led organisations, such as community councils moving in the direction of supporting place-based solutions (see Appendix 1).

Chapter 3: Contextual factors - mobility in the lives of young people and adults

Chapters 3 and 4 provide insights on the mobilities of young people and adults in rural communities and highlight the diverse factors that shape mobility decisions over the life course focusing on those aged 16-45 in Scotland's rural and island areas. Mobility decisions do not take place in a vacuum nor are they individual decisions. The nature of decision-making and the aspirations of rural young people and adults must be understood in the context of their relationships with others and to places, as well as societal shifts (e.g. economic, political, social, etc.), all of which differ widely and evolve over time (Wyn et al., 2020). Decisions about leaving/staying/returning are shaped by multiple interacting factors.¹³ These include structural opportunities and constraints at personal as well as local, national and transnational levels, which shape young people's lives in urban and rural areas, although the influences and effects may be different between and within each context.

The main focus of Chapter 3 is on the ways in which the provision of and access to economic and social infrastructure and social and cultural differences in particular shape the experiences of young people and adults. Chapter 4 goes on to look at empirical evidence concerning attitudes to and experiences of mobility amongst young people and adults. Both chapters draw on the following selected sources: (i) peer-reviewed and applied literature on the mobilities of young people and adults in rural contexts;¹⁴ (ii) a review of recent Scottish and regional research and consultations in relation to young people/adults in rural and island areas¹⁵; and (iii) a workshop with a small number of young people/adults, whose views are integrated and referenced throughout the text as relevant.¹⁶

3.1. Ruralities

How best to conceptualise 'rural' contexts and/or experiences, is contested and varies across disciplines and countries. Rural literature has emphasised the mutually interacting nature of physical landscapes, environments, places and people. The dynamic nature and diversity of rural areas/regions as well as their embeddedness in national and transnational networks is widely acknowledged. The interconnectedness between rural and urban is described less in binary terms and more as a continuum characterised by diverse movements of people, goods and services facilitated by transport and information and communication technologies and influenced by national, regional and local planning

¹³ Bronfenbrenner (1974) used the term 'socio-ecological context' to describe the complex relationships between the individual and the environment (e. g. social, psychological, cultural, physical, etc) and the ways in which it shapes behaviours, experiences and actions. It is a framework that has been adopted by UNICEF as well as being applied in the context of child and youth studies in relation to a wide range of issues ([UNICEF, The Social Ecological Model](#))

¹⁴ The parameter set for the literature search was from the 1990s to 2024. Various search terms were used; for example: 'rural/remote-rural/island - youth/people/adults'; 'rural-mobilities/migration/outmigration/retention/attraction/place-attachment/belonging'. Search engines used included: Google Scholar, Semantic and CORE. Geographical searches covered Scotland, Europe, Canada, USA, and Australia.

¹⁵ For example see, HIE, 2018; Glass and Atterton, 2022; Youth Work Dumfries and Galloway, 2023; Scottish Government, 2018b; 2019, 2021a&b; Youth Work Dumfries and Galloway, 2023.

¹⁶ A workshop was facilitated with a group of nine young people and adults from the Young Islanders Network (YIN) attending the Big Ideas Annual event at Stirling University, 29th August 2024. The majority were from Mainland Orkney, with one participant each from the Islands of Shetland, Western Isles and Skye. Participants were 16 to 45 years old. Most participants had some connection with youth services, for example, as part of Community Learning and Development Services. To preserve the anonymity of the small group involved, each participant is identified in this report only by a number.

policies.

3.1.1. Changing rural contexts

The restructuring of rural economies has received considerable attention since the 1980s among rural researchers, policy makers and agencies (e.g. OECD), with studies in the global North focused primarily on changes in the agriculture sector. Rural economies are now much less dominated by agriculture - the consolidation of farms and adoption of capital-intensive farming, including labour-shedding technologies have resulted in significant losses of jobs and increasing demand for labour flexibility. This 'New Rural Economy' as it came to be known has resulted in greater rural diversity, including a more diverse economy. The latter is characterised by a growth in the service sector including tourism and the public sector which has been identified in the literature as the biggest employer and source of income in some rural areas and by a dominance of mainly small and medium sized enterprises. It is also widely acknowledged that there is no one 'rural'; rural areas are diverse in various ways and many of their economies are increasingly more like urban areas (Hill, 2006; Shucksmith, 2012; Ryser and Halseth, 2010; Ward, 2006). Furthermore, recent changes related to the growth in information and communication technologies (ICT), as well as events such as the financial crisis in 2008, BREXIT and Covid-19 have all impacted on rural economies in ways which are relevant to understanding young people/adult lives today (de Lima, 2021). Some indication of the extent of these changes on the occupational structure of the three Scottish Island Local authorities can be seen from Table 3.

Table 3: Percentage of economically active people engaged in different industry groups, by sex, island LAs, 2022

Area	Western Isles F	Western Isles M	Orkney F	Orkney M	Shetland F	Shetland M
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries	1	9	4	15	3	14
Mining, manufacturing, construction, utilities	6	34	7	35	7	28
Trade, transport, storage	13	22	15	22	15	33
Accommodation and food services	8	4	8	4	7	3
Education, social care and health	43	9	37	9	40	9

In none of the island LAs was even the combined category of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (AFF) the largest male employment group, and in the Western Isles each of the separate census categories of Construction, Manufacturing, Transport and storage, and Wholesale and retail trade all employed more men, while the separate Health and social care sector alone employed around a quarter of women. The clustering of women and men in these sectors reflects gender related occupation segregation which is a Scotland-

wide issue (Highlands and Islands Enterprise, 2017; Scottish Government, 2019) and is discussed further in section 3.2.2.

More broadly, the last decades have seen significant societal changes and events shaping experiences and opportunities as people navigate through the different phases of their lives. A growing body of literature has sought to explore how young people negotiate their lives in what is described as an increasingly 'risk-based' society. Important factors include, for example, the more deregulated nature of labour markets, increasingly precarious employment consequences of financial crisis and neo-liberal fiscal policies, and the widespread use of social media, as well as the impacts of Covid-19 and BREXIT. The labour market changes have led to a decreasing emphasis by young people and adults (assuming they have a choice) on having linear career paths (Pavlidis, 2009; Wynn et al., 2020). These factors are critical to understanding the mobilities of young people/adults and should be considered more carefully in policy design.

Research on leaving/staying/returning in relation to young people and adults in rural contexts has also highlighted the importance of considering the socio-ecological context in which mobility decisions are made. These include structural opportunities and constraints as well as other factors such as family background, length of residence, social relationships involving schools, communities, family, partners/spouses and peers/friendship groups, and quality-of-life factors such as culture, entertainment and the physical and affective qualities of place associated with scenery/aesthetics of landscapes (Forster and Main, 2018; Wynn et al., 2020). Some of these are discussed further in chapter 4.

3.2. Scottish rural socio-economic context

Scottish rural areas and islands are diverse in their geography and landscapes, their proximity or distance from the main urban centres and from smaller but still important towns, their histories, economies, cultures, and their populations. In rural and island communities, greater distance and sparsity (very small population size and dispersed population locations) are closely associated with specific challenges related to cost, access, provision and increasing rationalisation or centralisation of services (Maclaren et al., 2024; Highlands and Islands Enterprise, 2018, 4-5; Scottish Government, 2018b). These challenges are exacerbated for some groups more than others, and in some, particularly more distant and sparsely populated areas more than others (Dey and Jenstch, 2001; Glass et al., 2020; Pavis et al., 2000; 2001; LGBTQ Youth Scotland, 2023).

Scottish Government has estimated that the minimum cost of living in remote rural Scotland was between 15 per cent and 30 per cent higher than urban parts of the UK. This has been attributed to additional costs related to food, clothing, household goods and holidays. The costs of being mobile in rural areas are high, with the cost of travel featuring 'as the dominant extra cost'. Households in remote rural areas in Scotland need a higher income to achieve the same standard of living as those living in other parts of the UK (Scottish Government, 2021a&b).

Social and economic infrastructural challenges (across all services) impact all ages and feature prominently in discussions of 'drivers of rural youth outmigration'. Recurrent issues from the reviewed literature and other sources, are briefly summarised below (Glass et al., 2020; Glass and Atterton, 2022).

3.2.1. Travel and transport

Issues of availability and access to affordable public transport are identified as a major challenge by young people and adults living in many rural areas and islands across Scotland. The need, where these are available or are an option, for people to use multiple modes of transport (e.g. car plus ferry or bus or train or plane) also poses challenges of connectivity and costs. For young people and adults from islands and remote rural mainland areas who have moved to other parts of Scotland for study or work, visits home can not only be costly but also very time-consuming and may result in them leaving their home locality permanently (Alexander, 2021). This was an issue that was particularly highlighted in the discussions with participants from the Young Islanders Network (YIN).

The limited availability and high costs of public transport for those living in more remote rural and in many island areas, mean that access to employment, as well as services such as health, daily shopping, education, childcare, social and cultural activities, is nearly always dependent on having access to a car, and is an additional cost. This has implications for young adults and results in a high level of dependence on their family/households to access services, social and leisure activities. It also impacts on those in low paid work by contributing to in-work poverty. Women in rural regions such as the Highlands and Islands are less likely to have a driving licence compared to men and, when combined with limited public transport, this can result in isolation and may contribute to reinforcing traditional gender roles (Highlands and Islands Enterprise, 2018).

3.2.2. Employment

The employment activity rate for young adults in rural areas of the Highlands and Islands has been reported as comparing favourably with urban areas, and yet young people's and adults' access to secure, high quality and well-paid employment with career progression opportunities is limited, especially so for graduates (HIE, 2018). A Highland and Islands Enterprise survey of young people reported that, in 2017, 70 per cent those aged 16-24 were in employment, but of these just under half were working in retail and hospitality (HIE, 2018, p.8). It is also well-known that rural incomes can be volatile and precarious, with unpredictable incomes from seasonal or casual work and zero-hours contracts characteristic not only of land-based and tourism employment but extending across many sectors of rural economies (Glass and Atterton, 2022, p.7).

The 2022 Census data for the three island LAs suggest a rather similar pattern of employment in hospitality and retail for 16–19-year-old females, with somewhat lower levels (around a third overall) for males of this age, and markedly lower figures in the 20-24 age group; at most around a quarter for both sexes, less for men in Shetland. These sectors are characterised by low pay and poor conditions, but younger women especially, have limited available alternatives. This changes for older age groups, and women in their late twenties, most of whom will have completed education and training either on the islands or elsewhere, are more likely to have found other jobs for example in health, social care and education (see Table 4).

Table 4: Percentage of economically active people engaged in different industry groups, by sex and age groups, Orkney, 2022

Area	Age 16-19 F	Age 16-19 M	Age 20-24 F	Age 20-24 M	Age 25-29 F	Age 25-29 M
Agriculture, forestry, fisheries	1	12	3	15	4	13
Mining, manufacturing, construction, utilities	6	40	10	44	10	44
Trade, transport, storage	32	20	17	16	11	11
Accommodation and food services	30	12	10	6	9	5
Education, social care and health	20	0	28	4	38	6

Occupational segregation has been identified in some academic studies as a reason for young women to express a greater desire to leave rural areas (Brandth and Haugen, 2010; Little and Panelli, 2010; Little, 2003). Despite some improvements in women’s employment, occupational segregation and the gender pay gap are recognised as varying by geography (Scottish Government 2019; HIE, 2017; Olsen et al., 2018). In the Highland and Islands men are more likely to be more highly represented in two of the three of the most senior and well-paid occupational groups¹⁷ and, compared with men, women are more likely to work part-time, work in lower grades in organisations or 'low value sectors' (HIE 2017, 1 and 14; see also Close the Gap, 2022; 2023). More men (87 per cent) than women (54 per cent) work full-time (HIE, 2017, p.5). Women in remote rural areas and island local authorities and in local authorities with 'substantial urban populations' experience a higher gender pay gap than those living in mainly rural local authorities (Scottish Government, 2019, p.12). In the absence of recent research, the extent to which the desire to leave rural areas is driven by gender needs to be further explored further.

3.2.3. Childcare

'It's awful, it doesn't exist' was a view expressed by a number of participants at the YIN workshop. Parents in remote rural areas tend to have very poor access to childcare. These issues are not new, despite recent efforts by Scottish Government to improve access (Scottish Government, 2022). Women’s access to employment is disproportionately affected, resulting in 'women leaving their roles or taking prolonged breaks' (YIN participant 4). A lack of childcare may also result in '...people having to move around the isles to access services, perhaps from more peripheral islands' (YIN participant 1).

The specific challenges of providing and accessing appropriate childcare in rural areas and the reliance on family support (for those with family in the locality and/or who can

¹⁷ Three pay bands are listed: the 'highest pay band' includes managers, directors and senior officials; professional occupations; and associate professional and technical occupations; the mid-pay band includes skilled trades and occupations, process plants and operatives, administrative and secretarial occupation.

access such support) are well-documented. Childcare providers also face challenges in sustaining childcare services in those rural and island areas most affected by distance and population sparsity. Published research on the voices of women with no local support appear absent from the policy focused research that is available. Recurrent issues highlighted by the literature (Scottish Government, 2022) include lack of wrap-around care, crèches and holiday play schemes, lack of flexibility and alignment with working hours, distance of travel to access childcare facilities, and associated travel costs particularly in a context where there may be limited public transport. In addition, the high cost of childcare impacts negatively on parents' current and potential employment, resulting in some parents having to give up work which can contribute to increasing risk of child poverty (Glass and Atterton, 2022). Pathfinder interventions funded by Scottish Government as part of the Addressing Depopulation Action Plan (2024) include a focus on new and flexible ways to deliver child (and elder) care in rural areas (see Appendix 1).

3.2.4. Housing

The challenges of accessing appropriate, affordable and diverse housing choices to rent or to buy in some rural areas, as well as issues of homelessness and having to stay in parental homes, are long standing issues reflected in a recent report on housing published by YIN (Young Islanders Network, 2024). Participants at the YIN workshop described challenges related to accessing accommodation both for those who have chosen to stay and for those who have decided to return. Access to appropriate, good quality and affordable housing is dependent on local planning, local rental market land values, housing availability and access to finance (Scott et al., 2017). These present major challenges for young people and adults. As one YIN participant (7) highlighted:

... people asking 'why is nothing getting done?' – one issue is local planning capability. It feels like we've been having the same conversations for 10-20 years. It's not that the funding is not there, it's the permissions and access to the land.

Access to the type of accommodation required is likely to vary at different life course stages. For young people and adults at the post-school and tertiary stages and for those who wish to remain in their local community, access to affordable, shared rental accommodation might be important, and for those at the post-tertiary stage access to affordable accommodation to buy or rent are potentially key considerations in choosing where to live. More recently, the YIN (2024) 'Housing Challenge Report' identified a range of challenges in relation to accessing affordable housing including the presence of vacant homes as well as other issues which are perceived by young people as affecting the sustainability of some of the rural communities.¹⁸

Although access to affordable housing is a Scotland-wide issue for young people and adults, the situation in some parts of rural Scotland has been identified in recent years as a particular challenge attributed to an increase in short-term lets for tourism, as well as increases in pre-retirement/retirement migration and second home ownership (The Indigo House Group in association with IBP Strategy and Research, 2019). For young people and adults these trends can mean prolonging dependence on their families when they might prefer to live independently, not being in a position take up employment, or making decisions to move away (Pavis et al. 2000; Young Islanders Network, 2024). Lack of affordable accommodation was also identified by a YIN participant (1) as impacting on recruitment of key workers in sectors such as health, and he suggested the need to factor

¹⁸ The report reflects views gathered from 223 young people aged 12-25 from across the island local authorities.

in 'tied housing' for key workers when new public service facilities are being built. 'Affluent people' buying houses in some rural communities was also cited as an issue in the YIN (2024) survey of housing issues.

3.2.5. The 'sticky stuff'

As the HIE (2018, p.73) survey of young people highlights, it is also important to focus on '...the "sticky stuff" – the factors that sit behind the economic drivers that serve to attract and retain talent in the first instance, and will help to anchor young people in an area, whether they choose to stay in, come to or return to the region.'

In addition to the factors discussed above, many young people in rural and island communities highlight other challenges (Rural Youth Project, 2018, 2020; Youth Work Dumfries and Galloway, 2023; Nordregio 2023). The prohibitive cost of accessing social and cultural activities means that they cannot participate in 'experiences that normal teenagers have' (YIN participant, 9). Despite the structures that have been established for youth representation and participation (e.g. Scottish Rural and Island Youth Parliament and Young Islanders' Network), tokenism in the involvement of young people ('youth washing') and not being heard are issues that are consistently cited. The lack of support for community development and youth work as well as lack of inclusive safe public and social spaces can have special significance in dispersed communities and one street rural towns where spatial choices for socialising are limited.

It is not enough to focus on economic policies only, it is vital to ensure that policies related to other domains such as social infrastructure, communication technologies, transport, culture and health are also aligned and integrated to achieve the same overall purpose and objectives in relation to the retention/attraction of young people and adults (Maclaren et al. 2024; Rural Youth Project, 2018; 2020). There is a recognition of the importance of various policy sectors in the Addressing Depopulation Action Plan (Scottish Government, 2024). Appendix 1 highlights some strategies (e.g. The Scottish Government's Housing to 2040 Strategy) which include an explicit reference to young people. Furthermore, initiatives which support young people's active engagement on a range of policy issues also have Scottish Government support (e.g. The Young Islanders Network, The Scottish Rural & Islands Youth Parliament). In general, however, there appears to be a lack of explicit emphasis on targeting specific age groups consistently across policy areas which is an area for policy consideration.

Policy integration is not without challenges given the complex dynamics and coordination required between different '... actors and agencies across policy subsystems, the combination of instruments from different policy sectors...' as well as the different sectoral logics at work (Cejudo and Trein, 2023, p.9). Policy integration underpinned by systematic and rigorous data collection must take place at the appropriate local level if it is to be effective. This will require effective partnership working across sectors involving young people/adults at an appropriate local scale underpinned by shared commitments to clear policy goals (Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population, 2025).

Many of the issues highlighted in this section are not new and are recognised as interlinked. Despite the volume of research (applied in particular) that exists on the issues highlighted in this report, commissioned research tends to be fragmented, one-off and often lacks rigour and consistency with regard to research design, sample selection (e.g. issues related to various stratifications, such as age or gender) and geographical coverage/scale amongst other factors. The lack of data broken down by gender, age and other characteristics in some of the research highlighted in this chapter presents a major

barrier in developing an effective understanding of trends among specific groups of young people/ adults to facilitate the development of appropriate policies. The commitments made by the Scottish Government (2024) in its 'Addressing Depopulation Action Plan', including support for research to inform and support policy development, are welcome. This presents an important opportunity to address issues of rigour and consistency in research with the objectives of informing policy on the mobilities of young people and adults in rural and island areas as well as facilitating integration across policy sectors at the appropriate geographical scale.

3.3. Social and cultural differences

All places (including rural and island areas) embody varied meanings associated with social hierarchies (e.g. class, gender, sex, ethnicity, disability and age), and this results in diverse 'attachment experiences'. Not all young people and adults have good relations with their family, and some may also have negative childhood experiences in close-knit rural communities. Research has highlighted factors including education and social background of parents, length of residence, migration history, stigma associated with mental health, gender and sexuality as potentially impacting on young people's and adults' decisions of staying, leaving and returning (Jones and Jamieson, 1999; Jones, 1997).

3.3.1. Gender

Rural and island areas have frequently been characterised as masculine spaces, with the dominance of male employment giving rise to gender role differences and inequalities between men and women. This view is still found among at least some young people. Gendered employment opportunities arose as a central theme during our discussion at the YIN workshop. Young participants held strongly to the view that, '... most boys go into fishing or oil' (participant 8). Another explained, 'most young boys and men go into a trade or apprenticeship'. while a third noted that: 'Orkney thrives on fishing, farming, trades, healthcare, roads. But no big business, IT, clothing'.

As we have shown above, this perception of the dominance of land-based (agriculture, forestry and fishing) and in some cases extractive, (e.g. oil and gas) sectors is an increasingly out-dated one. Indeed, this has been the case for decades (Shucksmith, 1994). However, it is one that continues to loom large in young people's expectations of their own and others' employability. It is worthy of note that the employment sectors cited by participants in the YIN workshop above are all male dominated, except for the healthcare sector where women are more likely to be employed (see Table 4). As a recent report by Close the Gap (2023, p.1) notes, young people continue to experience

...gender inequalities within the skills system, including subject segregation in education and gender segregation in apprenticeships, [which] reinforce and sustain the inequalities women face in the wider labour market such as occupational segregation, their higher levels of poverty, and the gender pay gap.

The outmigration of women from rural areas has also been attributed to a desire to escape the experiences of highly gendered social and cultural norms that developed around traditional rural activities (e. g. agriculture and forestry) as well as the close-knit nature of communities leading to experiences of social control and oppressive/exclusionary experiences (Ní Laoire, 1999). In the last decade there has been a growing recognition that gender relations are changing and women's experiences of living and working in rural areas are heterogenous across social classes and educational levels. However, equality may not be experienced across all domains.

One recent study has explored the persistence of patriarchal structures in the 'Up-Helly-Aa', a major annual cultural festival on Shetland. The festival has in recent years come under scrutiny and is a source of polarised debates in relation to women's participation and role in the festival (Budge and Shortall, 2022). Until 2025, only men were allowed to take part in the main procession, whilst women were confined to supportive roles as a "hostess" or attending one of the eleven halls, consequently, the authors argued that:

The festival continues to send a strong message to young girls from Shetland regarding their position in the island's society, even more so now that the Junior Up-Helly-Aa has been extended to all boys across Shetland. This level of discrimination is likely to push some girls away, resulting in them becoming disconnected from the islands.' (Budge and Shortall, 2022, p.193).

3.3.2. Sexuality

The importance of acknowledging changing ideas of rural masculinities and femininities and their experiences including the varied and diverse experiences from LGBTQ+ communities in rural areas has been highlighted by academic scholars for some time. (Little and Panelli, 2010; Pini and Leach, 2011; Taylor, 2011). More recently, these issues have also been taken up by campaigning organisations such as LGBTQ Youth Scotland.¹⁹ A recent report by LGBTQ Youth Scotland (2023), based on a survey of the experiences of 1,279 LGBTQ+ young people in Scotland aged 13-25, produced a thematic report on rural areas.²⁰ The report, whilst recognising the diverse experiences of young people in rural areas, also highlights some specific challenges faced by rural LGBTQ+ youth. 39 percent of young people in rural areas (compared to 59 percent in non-rural areas) described their local areas as a good place for LGBTQ+ young people. The report highlighted that:

'Homophobia, biphobia and transphobia are a core part of LGBTQ+ young people's lives in rural areas, and in particular the growing prevalence of transphobia.'

This was experienced in a range of settings including education, workplace, community and when engaging with services, resulting in social isolation (p. 3).

Lack of safe spaces and anonymity makes it difficult to 'come out' in rural communities. A study in Dumfries and Galloway (LGBTQ Youth Scotland, 2019), whilst highlighting that more young people were out at home, school and community, noted that they continued to experience bullying, negative reactions and discrimination. There are also concerns about the consequences of 'traditional values', including the influence of some religious sects /denominations, can have in relation to estrangement from the family, community and peers (D'Agueli et al., 2022).

3.3.3. Ethnicity and (international) migration

Scotland's rural areas have become more diverse with the increasing presence of international migrants, refugees /asylum seekers and minority ethnic groups. Yet, the academic and policy-focused literature on young people's and adults' mobilities in rural areas barely acknowledges their presence in the context of addressing demographic challenges (Kerrigan and de Lima, 2023; Butler, 2020). Some recent exceptions include a small-scale study of European Union migrants, internal (UK) migrants and stayers in the Moray Firth area of the Scottish Highlands. This focuses on the ways in which diverse social relations develop in a context where rural communities have often been described

¹⁹ LGBTQ is the acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual, Trans, Queer.

²⁰ see also LGBTQ Youth Scotland 2019 report on Dumfries and Galloway.

as 'welcoming and friendly'. The research highlights the importance of public spaces such as schools, parks and streets, as well as interest-based groups (for example, arts, outdoor activities, mother toddler groups) and family (this mainly related to 'stayers') as critical in developing diverse social relationships in a place (Pietka-Nykaza, 2024).²¹ The lack of research that systematically uses an intersectional lens in the design and conduct of research in the context of rural youth and adult mobilities is a barrier to developing effective policies based on diverse identities and experiences.

A study of diverse migration routes into three regions in Spain highlights the need for careful attention to differences between experiential and structural opportunities and pathways:

[Alongside] the arrival of newcomers, the shrinking areas are also benefiting from the arrival of returnees and root migrants (from both external and internal migration), who decide to return to their roots, drawn by emotional ties. These migration patterns are different, yet complementary, in terms of sustaining life in rural areas. (Alonso-Pardo et al., 2023, p.5995).

For 'young returnees', earlier emigration enabled them to achieve social mobility when they returned. This contrasted with the situation of 'newcomers' (mainly migrant workers) who were in low-paid precarious employment, with no possibilities of accessing better paid employment and limited intra- and inter-generational social mobility, resulting in a population 'churn' with some newcomers arriving and others leaving – i.e. temporary and circular migration. Although this may suit newcomers who are there to save and leave, it leaves little choice for those who may have wished to stay in the region.

The authors argue that the segmented labour market characterised by 'labour precariousness' leads to circular migration and that newcomers/migrant workers in this context are less likely to put down roots. One of the conclusions of the study is that:

Population settlement is, therefore, 'trickle-down', with migrants who have lived in Spain for a long time managing to settle and gradually achieve greater stability through the development of resilience strategies. (Ibid. p. 5989).

The study suggests the importance of having a clear strategy for attracting and retaining different types of migrants at the local/regional level and an acceptance that there is likely to be a churn in population over time at different stages of their life course and for different reasons. It also highlights the importance of developing a clear understanding of the diverse mobility patterns of different migrant groups and the factors that are likely to make them stay or leave as a basis for developing effective policies.

Alonso-Pardo et al highlight the important role of bridging and 'reception initiatives' provided by the third sector, as well as support provided by local and/or regional governments working alongside cultural/neighbourhood associations, in facilitating settlement by returnees/root migrants (i.e. those with ancestral connections/descendants of Spanish emigrants). In Galicia, for example, the autonomous regional government provided financial aid to support the initial settlement of returnees and root migrants, as well as supporting LEADER funded projects to facilitate an 'entrepreneurial ecosystem' in particular sectors (e.g. service and care). Collaborative initiatives between town councils

²¹ An [on-going research project in Dumfries and Galloway](#) by the same research team is focusing on young people's social connections.

and neighbourhood associations focusing on 'integration' of newcomers, and the use of ethnic diversity as a positive feature of a town, were also identified as important in attracting newcomers and helping them to feel settled.

3.3.4. Culture

Alonso-Pardo et al.'s study highlights the importance of cultural connections in relation to intergenerational migrants ('root migrants') as well as returnees, and Fielding has observed that it was rare for migration research to include culture, given the difficulties of definitions and measurement. He did, however, suggest that:

A culture which loads a high weight upon place identity would, in places where that culture was important, produce low outmigration and high return-migration; a place where such a culture was not important would have high out-migration and low return-migration. (Fielding, 1992, 203 cited in Barcus and Brunn, 2010, p.284).

Dey and Jentsch (2001) noted in their research on rural youth in Scotland that the importance of maintaining cultural traditions and values were implicit in the rural youth outmigration and retention discourses. Retention as a policy focus not only conflates the interests of young people with that of the community but is problematic in a society that emphasises the freedom of the individual to make choices and also undervalues the contribution of newcomers to rural communities.

Social and cultural characteristics of rural places can be both exacerbated by, and contribute to, youth out-migration (Budge and Shortall, 2022, Jones and Jamieson, 1997). Rural residents' concerns about 'cultural dilution' have been associated with the arrival of new migrants and a desire by rural communities to maintain continuity of cultural traditions and values (Dey and Jentsch (ibid.)). This concern was reflected in the YIN workshop:

Culture is really important. Our dialect is being used by less and less people (YIN participant 8)

Questions of retention and attraction are all practical problems, but the main reason you want to retain people is to retain a culture. It is much easier for people to come and go (without being lost) from a strong community (YIN participant 1)

However, the same participant went on to provide a distinction between his view of 'incomers' and 'stayers'

There is a difference between someone that stays for five minutes or someone that comes to contribute (e. g. key skills) and stays for a longer time. Someone, who integrates. Affluent people coming in for second homes and treating the place like a holiday are causing communities to die. It's not Disneyland, these are real places! (YIN participant 1).

3.3.5. Gaelic language

One aspect of the centrality of specific designated places in preserving and strengthening culture is reflected in the current Gaelic language debate in Scotland. There is an ongoing debate about policies and support for vernacular speakers, on the one hand in particular geographical areas where they are a significant proportion of the population and, on the other, in the Scottish Government's emphasis on supporting Gaelic learners wherever they are in Scotland (Scottish Government 2022; See Appendix 1). The decline of vernacular Gaelic speakers since 1981 has been well documented. It is no longer the main language

of family and community practice in regions such as the Western Isles (Ó Giollagáin et al., 2020).²² Scottish policies on Gaelic language have failed to stem the declining vernacular communities, 'without a societal revival, the education system alone cannot effectively implement revitalisation efforts among the Gaelic vernacular community' (Ó Giollagáin et al. 2020, 237; see also Ó Giollagáin et al. 2022).

Ó Giollagáin et al. argue that for the Gaelic language to survive and thrive and potentially contribute to encouraging young people and adults to stay in or move back to vernacular communities, it must be embedded in everyday social, community and economic activities and interactions. The current dominant emphasis on Gaelic-medium education amongst other sectors (e. g. Gaelic performance and the arts, and scholarship on Gaelic heritage and culture), '...promotes the civic appeal of the cultural assets of the declining Gaelic speaker group without protecting the group's viability' (ibid., p18). The 'demise' of the vernacular Gaelic community and the lack of intergenerational transmission of the language are attributed to a range of factors including: a failure to integrate 'language policy and socio-economic development' in the places where there have been significant vernacular speakers; inadequacy of public policy and lack of targeting and funding to stem the decline of vernacular Gaelic speakers; and lack of policy engagement and decision-making at the local level of existing vernacular communities in decisions related to the development of Gaelic in their communities.

3.4. Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the importance of taking into consideration the provision and access to economic and social infrastructure as well as social and cultural differences in designing policies related to facilitating the mobility choices and decisions of those aged 16-45 years. Chapter 4 discusses specific factors that emerge as important in influencing mobility choices at particular stages of the life course.

²² Giollagáin et al.'s study involved preschool age groups, secondary school children and local community participants in three vernacular communities: Western Isles, Island of Skye (Staffin) and Tiree (Argyll and Bute).

Chapter 4 - Insights into experiences of and attitudes to mobility in the lives of young people/adults

This chapter aims to summarise some key insights into the mobilities of young people and adults aged 16-45 in Scotland's rural and island areas and to discuss implications for further research and policy development. This chapter uses a life course lens to highlight the specific factors that are important at three life course stages: post-school, tertiary education/training, and post-tertiary. Overall, however, and particularly in Scotland, broadly focused literature on young people and adults from rural areas during and after the tertiary education stage is scarce.

Despite some older academic and policy-focused interest in Scotland on the lives of young adults living in rural areas and on their mobilities, there continues to be a gap in information (e.g. Jamieson, 2000; Jones, 1999; Jones and Jamieson, 1997). The last review of literature on rural youth migration in Scotland was published in 2008 (Jamieson and Groves, 2008). There are also some previous academic studies that have explored specific issues such as social exclusion among young people living in rural communities (Dey and Jentsch, 2001; Shucksmith, 1996; Pavis et al, 2000; 2001). The last decade or so has seen an increase in academic work on 'returnees' and migration to rural areas at different life course stages, as well as a growing body of literature on leaving, staying, returning and newcomers.

The literature cited in this chapter draws primarily on research focusing on rural youth and adult mobilities in the UK and Scotland, as well as some studies from Australia, Canada and Europe. Most of this literature has focused on specific local places and communities, both near and distant from major cities or metropolitan areas, but particularly on what is referred to as predominantly 'peripheral' or 'remote' rural regions (e.g. Alonso – Pardo et al., 2023; Barcus and Brun, 2010; Corbett, 2007; Forster and Main, 2018; Wyn et al., 2020). In the Scottish context much of the literature refers to the Highland and Islands, and to some extent the Borders, and Dumfries and Galloway. As noted in Chapter 2, each of these areas has much internal diversity with regard to distance from towns, population sparsity, communities, economies and socio-cultural factors, and it is a challenge to reflect this in an exercise such as this. This literature also tends to place particular emphasis on movement from rural to urban areas, particularly at the post-school education stage and most is set within the national context, although there are some exceptions where the focus is on mobilities within or between regions within a country.

4.1. Post-school mobilities – decisions and aspirations

Educational/employment aspirations, limited choices and lack of available tertiary education, training and apprenticeships in rural and island areas for young people aged 16 - 24 have received considerable attention in the academic and policy literature. In this context, the assumption that social mobility is synonymous with spatial mobility, as reflected in the oft-repeated phrase 'you have to leave to succeed', has long been associated with contributing to a 'brain drain' of the most 'able' young people and a stigmatisation of those who choose to remain.

There is a particularly comprehensive discussion of these issues in rural Scotland in a Highland and Island Enterprise (HIE) report of results from a large-scale survey on mobilities of young people aged between 15 and 30 (Highlands and Islands Enterprise,

2018).²³ The 2018 HIE survey found that in some rural areas moving away was ‘almost an expectation’ (Highlands and Islands Enterprise, 2018, p.18). Similar assumptions have been attributed to societal perceptions of rural areas as lagging behind urban areas perpetuated through family and community narratives and expectations, the metrocentric nature of the education system and through ‘development’ discourses (Farrugia, 2015; Corbett, 2016; Schafft, 2016). Describing the post-school trajectory of one of her daughters, who ‘could not wait to leave the Island to go to University’, a YIN participant highlighted that a year into her university studies she:

...has come through the stage of ‘oh my goodness it’s so awful it’s small’. We do hear from the schools ‘if you don’t move away, you’re not doing anything with your life’. School has a huge impact on young folk and whether they want to stay or leave’ (participant, 4).

Some other recent Scottish regional surveys on rural and island areas have also targeted young people as respondents (e.g. Youth Work Dumfries and Galloway, 2023; Sleeping Giants, 2022) and highlight the prevalence of intentions to leave even amongst some of the youngest age groups.²⁴ Both the HIE and the Youth Work Dumfries and Galloway reports include some material on intra-regional variations.²⁵ However, the findings of these surveys are less helpful than they might be as they lump age cohorts together, combining the aspirations and experiences of teenagers with those aged 18-24 years of age whose mobility experiences and expectations, as shown in Chapter 2 above, will have been, and will be very different.²⁶ It would be helpful if future surveys of this kind differentiate age groups throughout their analysis. Despite the important role and influence of schools and communities, there appears to be limited research into their role in shaping the mobility decisions of young people and adults in the Scottish context. This is another area where future research would be helpful.

4.1.1 Initiatives to improve access to post-school training and education

Concerns about the outmigration of young people in rural and islands areas have led to improving access to post-school education and training in rural and island areas in Scotland, particularly from the 1990’s onwards. This trend coincided in Scotland and the UK with major structural changes in the further education sector and in relation to

²³ This survey was a follow-up from an earlier one undertaken in 2015, but there are major differences in the age profiles of respondents between the two surveys, which must cast some doubt on the comparability of many of the results, we have therefore confined consideration to the 2018 survey here.

²⁴ 52 per cent of the 10-12-year-olds in the Dumfries and Galloway survey said that they did not plan to stay in the region in the future, as did 60 per cent of those aged 13–17 (Youth Work Dumfries and Galloway, 2023). In a follow-up question the most cited reason for planning to leave among the 10 to 12 year olds was ‘Travel’, followed by ‘Study’ and ‘Work’. For the 13 to 17 year olds ‘Travel’ was also the most cited, but ‘Study’ was selected more often than ‘Work’.

²⁵ The D&G Report includes data broken down by ward, but unfortunately these are not controlled for age group. It may nevertheless be significant that the highest figure for ‘planning to leave’ was for Stranraer ward, presumably reflecting the perceived lack of opportunities in what has become a very depressed town now that it is neither the ferry hub nor even has a town centre railway station. The second highest figures were for the predominantly rural most easterly wards of the region. The HIE report at some points contrasts ‘fragile’ and ‘non-fragile’ areas, but presumably includes data for the city of Inverness, which is now an undoubted urban area, with a population of over 80,000, and of many other smaller towns, so its data unfortunately cannot be seen simply to reflect issues relating to ‘rural’ areas.

²⁶ The Highland and Islands Enterprise (HIE) area reports cover Shetland, Orkney, Outer Hebrides, Caithness and Sutherland, Inner Moray Forth Area, Moray, Skye, Lochaber and Wester Ross, Argyll and Islands. Only 28 per cent of those still at school were classified from their responses as ‘committed stayers’, as opposed to 63 per cent of those aged 25 to 30.

polytechnics (which became universities) resulting in the expansion of higher education provision.²⁷

In Scotland, it led to the founding of the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) in 1992 and the Crichton Campus in Southwest of Scotland in the mid-1990s, to provide more choices for young people and adults who wished to remain in their locality /region, as well as attracting students from outside the region (Taylor, 2023). YIN participants did highlight examples of young people and adults who had chosen to stay in their home locality because of strong family connections, selecting courses available locally or on-line through the UHI as well as other universities. Overall, the 2018 HIE survey found that 74 per cent of school pupils indicated that they wanted to go on to HE or FE, with significant variation by area (from 63 per cent in Shetland to 81 per cent in Caithness and Sutherland). Male school pupils were more likely than females to aspire to an apprenticeship²⁸ (12 per cent versus 4 per cent) or a job (15 per cent versus 7 per cent) (Highlands and Islands Enterprise, 2018, p.23).

Despite the growth in post-school provision in regions such as the Highlands and Islands and the more positive perceptions of tertiary provision in the region, the HIE report (2018) also highlighted that course options and reputation rather than proximity to the nearest town and access to social facilities were important in young people's/adults' choices of a university or college. The report acknowledges that the influence of significant others (e. g. family and community, etc.), as well as factors such as independence and being exposed to new experiences, were also important in post-school decision making choices. For some young people and adults, however, living in an urban environment may be particularly difficult for personal and or health reasons. One YIN participant (9) highlighted that she felt overwhelmed by the noise in a city environment and preferred a quiet environment.

Overall, therefore, despite concerns about young people leaving rural areas to access post-school education/training, it is now widely acknowledged in the Scottish and the wider international literature that post-school mobilities are diverse and varied. Moving for educational or employment purposes at one stage in the life course does not preclude returning or staying, as Evans (2016, p.514) notes in his study in Wales.

Young people's relationships with place were often complex, multifaceted and contradictory and were not characterised by binary positions of 'late-modern' detached-leaver or 'traditional' attached-stayer (Jamieson, 2000) but rather by conflicting aspirations.

Moving beyond binaries is also highlighted by Silva et al. (2021, p.17) in their study of young adults in the border regions of Portugal just before and at the school leaving stage. They argue that:

the imperative to leave and have better chances and new experiences means that they don't see leaving as abandonment or irreversibly nullifying prospects of putting

²⁷ For a fuller discussion see HIE, 2018, chap.2).

²⁸ An HIE (2017, 10) report on occupational segregation notes that, although data at the local level was not available on the types of apprenticeships undertaken by women and men, the regional trend showed marked gender differences. Men were more likely to take up apprenticeships in sectors such as construction, engineering and energy, transport, ICT, animal care, land and water. Women, by contrast women were disproportionately represented in 'sectors classed as lower value' which included personal service and administration as well as sport.

down roots in their regions at some future juncture. ... Bonds with family, a strong appreciation for their home regions, quality of life factors, and cultural traditions are amongst the primary motives that young people refer to when considering staying or returning.

So, as one of our YIN discussants noted, post-school mobility and emotional ties with one's home or local community are not mutually exclusive:

people often have the perspective of 'been on the island my whole life and there is a whole Scotland to explore' – most of my friendship group do want to eventually come back. It's such a good place to live (YIN participant, 8).

There is, indeed, now a broad agreement amongst scholars in this field that, rather than expending increasing effort in preventing young people from moving at the post-school stage, much more policy effort and commitment is required to put in place the conditions that would enable young people and adults to return should they wish to (Silva, *ibid*; Jentsch, 2006).

Much of the literature (policy focused and academic) on tertiary education decisions has focused on intentions expressed or decisions made at the point of leaving school. However, intentions expressed at the school/post-school stage may not always materialise as intended. Maersk (2022, p.18) in her research on the mobilities of rural young people and adults in Denmark and the Netherlands argues for the importance of:

... broadening the scope of mobility and immobility choices of students to go beyond the binary question of 'staying or leaving?' and more towards 'staying and leaving – by whom? Where? And why?'

4.2. Tertiary and post-tertiary mobilities

Studies focusing on the aspirations of young adults during their tertiary studies and following graduation are scarce, particularly in Scotland (e.g. Alexander, 2023). For this reason, we discuss these two stages/events here together and draw more heavily on research insights from other countries.

Maersk (2022, p.227) notes that young adults in Denmark and the Netherlands related to their home region differently at different points in time – at the point of going to university they expressed a sense of belonging to their community with no intention of going back which changed to a 'more balanced approach at the point of graduation, reflecting the dynamic nature of place-based attachments across life course events'. She identifies social networks and wanting to provide the same opportunity as they had to bring up their children in their birth area as the primary reasons for the change. Research undertaken in Europe, and Alexander's study of young people and adults on Orkney and Shetland, have highlighted that some young adults intentionally choose courses which they consider more likely to lead to jobs which they hope will facilitate their return. Courses cited include those which are likely to lead to public sector employment in areas like education and healthcare, which are seen to be more available in rural and island areas (Alexander, 2021 & 2023; R'erat, 2014b).

There are examples of international policy initiatives targeting students whilst at university to encourage them to consider working and living in rural communities as a post-tertiary option. For example, in Zaragoza province, Spain, the Rural Erasmus Programme, a joint initiative between the University of Zaragoza and the Provincial Council, was established

as a way of addressing rural depopulation. This programme provides students studying at the University with varied opportunities to experience living and working in a rural area (University of Zaragoza (ud)).

In Scotland, there are some initiatives to build and maintain rural links amongst young people and adults during their tertiary education studies as well as at the post tertiary stage. For example, the Scottish Government since 2016 has funded the Scottish Rural Medicine Collaborative (SRMC) to develop ways to improve the recruitment and retention in rural areas of people working in primary care'.²⁹ The enterprise agencies - HIE and Scottish Enterprise - offer graduate placement programmes in the geographical areas they operate in. However, the extent to which the graduate placements are in rural areas and the contribution of these programmes to the attraction and retention of young people and adults is difficult to assess from the literature available.³⁰

Elsewhere, research undertaken by Silva et al (2021) and Maersk (2022) has explored the role of local governance structures (e.g. local municipalities) in facilitating and maintaining attachment to place among young adults who leave their home region for tertiary education. Maersk (2022) explored an initiative established by a municipality in the western part of Jutland (Denmark) called 'expatriate West Jutland people' which targeted students from the area who were studying and living in other regions. Through the use of newsletters and social media, students could keep in touch with business opportunities and professional networks in West Jutland in case they decided to return at a different point in their lives.

Maersk (Ibid) notes that municipalities may have the potential to influence young adults to return if they provide information on employment opportunities and what is going on in the region and facilitate professional networks. However, she concludes:

Municipalities that seek to attract academically oriented adults who have out-migrated from their region need to focus on the young adults who have already obtained a strong sense of belonging to the region during their childhood, because these are the ones who seem to be most receptive to the type of stimulation the home region is able to provide (Maersk 2022, p. 222).

This research suggests that it is important to understand the experiences of children and young people in relation to place attachment and belonging as these shape mobility decisions including 'returning' to their birthplace later in life³¹. Such issues have received little if any attention to date in the Scottish rural context.

Silva et al (2021, p.16) in their study in the Portuguese border regions highlighted that municipalities did not have a strong narrative regarding "keeping youth at home"; instead, they focused on a range of place-based activities to attract young people at tertiary education to connect and/or return. The importance of cross-sectoral working and strong partnerships at local, regional and national levels are emphasised as critical in attracting young people/adults. The activities noted included extending educational opportunities, financial assistance for those renting accommodation and tax incentives for young couples or single people who wanted to purchase a house, improving quality of education, as well

²⁹ [Scottish Rural Medicine Collective](#) (see also Maclaren, 2024).

³⁰ [Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Technology Placement Programme; Starting your career and Scottish Enterprise.](#)

³¹ see also Bjarnason, 2021; Terman, 2020.

as cultural activities. Both Maersk (2022) and Silva et al. (2021, p.55) conclude that those brought up in a particular rural region/area have 'location specific advantages':

Young people understand the value of being backed by the accumulated social capital of a collective. Bonds with family, a strong appreciation for their home regions, quality of life factors, and cultural traditions are amongst the primary motives that young people refer to when considering staying or returning (ibid, p.17).

However, they also acknowledge that such strong social bonds are not experienced by all. As Maersk (2022, p.227) explains 'young adults who expressed having bad memories of their childhood and youth in their local region expressed strong intentions of not returning back'.

The important nuances and intersections between age, gender and other demographic and identity characteristics³² explored in this chapter, illustrate the need for disaggregated data and a more dynamic understanding of mobility as a lifelong process, if we are to understand rural young people and adult's mobilities.

The University of Zaragoza Rural Erasmus Programme provides an interesting opportunity for young people to experience living and working in a rural environment; however, the extent to which this attracts young people/adults to rural areas is difficult to assess. The examples from Denmark and the border regions of Portugal suggest that there is a role for local partnerships involving local/regional authorities in facilitating more place-based activities. A growing awareness that childhood experiences are important in later mobility decisions, highlights a need to include the views of children which is lacking in much existing research. Furthermore, a tendency to privilege 'return' migration neglects the potential to attract migrants with no previous connections to rural places, an issue that requires much more emphasis within the context of rural depopulation discussions.

Moving on to a discussion of post-tertiary mobilities, the return of graduates to their parental home for a period following graduation is not new (Dey & Jentsch, 2001). Alexander's (2023) research explores the diverse experiences associated with the interaction between career and relationships (partners and those with caring responsibilities) in return migration among recently graduated students (within a year of completion) resident in Orkney and Shetland. She argues (ibid, p.8) that:

Mobility and career decisions therefore develop through time, so that changing relational frameworks (where people are based, who is in their relational network) and career frameworks (where opportunities are coming up) could result in quite different spatial horizons. Therefore, it is important not to understand young people's mobilities in isolation but to understand them as embedded within wider relational networks and employment and occupational structures.

Careers and occupational structures and requirements evolve over time and can assume flexibility with regard to mobility. For those living on islands and in remote rural areas, accessing occupational training may require being away for periods of time. This can be particularly challenging for those with partners and children or with other caring responsibilities and can make it difficult to establish and/or maintain a career. Alexander (ibid) found that in cases where employment aligned with 'career interests and a partner,

³² For example, social class, ethnicity/race, sexuality, disability, language.

young people can feel settled', for others returning to their parental home without either can lead to feelings of being relatively 'unsettled' (see also Maclaren et al. 2024). She argues for more graduate support, including specific funding in relation to accessing training, graduate placements and internships, as well as careers guidance.

R´erat (2014a, p83) observed that although regional labour markets and the possibility of accessing relevant professional jobs are important, return migrations is a result of '... a conjunction of factors related to social and personal life, living environment and labour market', which are difficult to disentangle. Issues such as attachment and sense of belonging to the region/place the quality of the rural living environment and social ties involving family, partner, friends and community were also identified as significant factors in the return narrative. The interconnectedness between the physical and social environment in mobility decisions at the post tertiary stage is also acknowledged as important in possible return and migration decisions in the Scottish and international context. A Youth Work Dumfries and Galloway report (2023) and a HIE survey of over 5,0000 adults in the Highlands and Islands cited 'quality of life' as being an important factor amongst returnees and movers (Highlands and Islands Enterprise, 2022, p.4)

The literature identifies a range of life course events that provide a motivation for moving at the post-tertiary stage, with social relationships being consistently emphasised as significant in staying/returning/moving to rural areas. One of the most cited reasons for young people and adults returning or moving for the first time to rural areas includes family formation and/or a desire to bring up children in a rural community which is associated with being small, safe and spacious (Ní Laoire, 2007). For those who have been born or grown up in a rural community, moving at the household formation stage is associated with strong kin/family bonds and 'insider' advantages which include access to: housing, employment and mutual family support (especially care responsibilities for parents) (Ní Laoire and Stockdale, 2016; Maersk, 2022). Understanding these differences between returners and migrants are critical in designing relevant policies in relation to attracting young people and adults to rural areas.

4.3. Conclusion

Reviewing the literature on the mobilities of young people/adults in rural areas faces some challenges which have been highlighted previously in relation to rural migration and continue to be relevant (see Crow, 2010). These include the following: the varying age parameters used in studies in relation to young people and adults; the prevalence of one-off small-scale studies and the lack of large-scale studies and particularly of longitudinal studies which allow the tracing of individuals' behaviour patterns over time; the diverse geographies and individual motivations that influence mobility decisions and are difficult to capture in an exercise such as this.

Despite these challenges there are some recurrent themes. Mobilities are best understood over the life course, and it is life events (including leaving school, post-tertiary education, employment, household formation, divorce, empty nest, and retirement) rather than age that are the key influences on mobility decisions, reflecting the increasing fluidity between and within the life course. As this chapter has also highlighted, acknowledging and understanding diverse mobility patterns of different groups, defined for example by diverse migration backgrounds, as well as by gender, socio-economic background among other factors – are also important in designing research and developing appropriate policies.

It is widely acknowledged in the literature that rural youth outmigration and retention should not be a sole, or even primary, main focus of policy. Instead, the emphasis should

be on supporting and enabling young people /adults who wish to return and attracting new in-migrants as well as addressing the wide range of infrastructural issues identified in the previous chapter which constrain young people's mobility choices.

Despite initiatives designed to give young people a voice (for example, the Young Islanders Network, Scottish Rural and Island Youth Parliament), many or perhaps even most young people in these areas continue to feel excluded from decisions on issues and policies in areas such as education, housing and transport that are impacting on their lives.

Chapter 5 Key messages

This chapter highlights some of the key messages that have emerged from Chapters 2, 3 and 4.

5.1 Demographics and data

Chapter 2 has highlighted the importance of making separate data on inflow and outflows available by age and gender, and for smaller geographies, to capture the complex interactions between in and out migration among young people and adults. The chapter emphasises the importance of understanding the diverse demographic patterns and trends and their drivers in different rural and island communities in relation to policy development. Contrasts in size and settlement patterns, recent patterns of growth/decline, age profiles, ease of access to services, opportunities for, or restrictions on day-commuting to school or work, and local economies and culture vary significantly and have an impact on patterns of mobilities at all ages in rural and island communities.

The development of recent regional studies focusing on young people's mobility intentions amongst other issues have included smaller areas in Dumfries and Galloway and the Highlands and Islands (Youth Work Dumfries and Galloway 2023; Highlands and Islands Enterprise, 2018). This development suggests a move towards reflecting the diversity of rural and island geographies with the potential to develop initiatives that can be tailored to particular local needs, but much of the data presented in these studies combine together what we have shown are age groups with very different mobility patterns and prospects, thus making their results difficult to use. Despite clear evidence of male-female differences in aspirations and outcomes, too little of their analyses are also broken down by gender. In general, there is a lack of disaggregated data on age and gender in relation to understanding the life course mobilities of young people and adults, this should be a minimum requirement of research on life course mobilities. Going beyond this starting point, an intersectional lens across the life course would allow for the development of policy interventions that take better note of complex identities (e.g. disability, ethnicity, race, social class and sexuality, etc) that intersect in different ways with varying impacts on young people's/adults' mobilities. This could help to inform more targeted and/or more nuanced policies.

5.2 Conflicting policy goals? Facilitating and supporting young people's/adults' choices related to staying, leaving, returning decisions for young

There has been a long-standing focus on rural youth outmigration in Scotland. In the context of growing concerns about the sustainability of rural communities associated with population aging and decline, recent policy interest in rural young people and adults has included significant focus on 'outmigration' as a problem to be addressed. Despite a policy rhetoric emphasising both 'retention and attraction' of young people/adults, retention has tended to dominate in Scottish policy discourses.

This focus on retention conflates young people's/adults' priorities and welfare with that of rural communities and contradicts notions of individual freedom. 'What is good for the community may not be good for the individual' (Foster and Main, 2028, p.3) and it may well be in the interests of young people/adults to leave. The question is how can the tensions between these two goals be resolved? There also appears to be little or no explicit recognition in policy discourses that in the case of those who leave and return, exposure to

different ideas, ways of living and connections made whilst away may benefit the communities and that appropriate policies may help to facilitate this transfer of knowledge.

Over the last decades researchers have highlighted a plethora of possibilities for addressing rural youth mobility issues including: supporting their decisions whether they choose to stay or leave based on realistic options; participation in rural development programmes; funding and supporting youth development and mainstreaming youth issues across policy sectors along the lines of gender mainstreaming (Jentsch, 2006); targeting those who feel they have to leave, ('reluctant' migrants) (Jones and Jamieson, 1997) and a clearer and explicit policy on attracting and supporting those with no previous connections/newcomers.

It would make sense to move away from emphasising 'retention' in the policy discourse and focus on resourcing and creating the conditions and support mechanisms that would facilitate returners as well new movers (with all their diversities) who may not have the same social connections to move to rural areas. The lack of voice and lack of potential for affecting change has been a recurring theme identified by rural young people/adult respondents in recent Scottish/regional studies as well as in the case of Nordic countries. Current mechanisms for supporting and involving young people and adults in deciding the types of support they would find helpful in their mobility decisions as well as other aspects of their lives need more consideration and action.

5.3 Young people's and adult mobilities are dynamic, flexible and evolve over their life course

The mobility aspirations, needs and decisions of young people and adults are likely to change as they transition from school to tertiary education/training to household formation or singlehood and beyond, as well as responding to experiences and events over time. Most of the studies reviewed have been one-off studies at particular stages of the life course which focus on current and future aspirations and intentions which may or may not eventually play out as envisaged. Although robust longitudinal studies are expensive, they can be more effective in capturing the dynamic nature of mobility decision-making over the life course as well as being more effective in taking into account the broader context of local, regional, national and international events and trends, in which mobility decisions are made.

5.4 Mobility decisions - moving/staying/leaving/returning are more than an individual decision.

Mobility decisions whether to leave, stay or return, have to be understood as embedded in socio-ecological processes encompassing a range of interacting factors. These include social relations involving family, peers/friendship groups; physical, social, economic and cultural environments; emotions; local structural opportunities and constraints. Mobility decisions are influenced by gender, social class/educational background, age, sex, ethnicity and migration history.

It is also important to recognise that not all young people/adults can exercise choice over decisions to stay, leave, return or move. Issues such as caring responsibilities, socio-economic background, lack of job/career progression opportunities, lack of social and emotional support, issues of stigmatisation related to sexuality and mental health, experiences of racism, and preference for particular landscapes amongst other factors have varying impacts on young people's and adults' mobilities choices. Quality of life is also important across the board but it tends to be predominant amongst those who choose to move to rural areas ('newcomers'). There are fewer studies that have explored the

experiences, role and contribution of ‘newcomers’ - those without previous connections to place - in sustaining rural communities and more research is needed here.

5.5 No panacea – no single rural youth overarching strategy

Economic factors are not the only drivers of rural young people/adult mobilities. The argument on creating the appropriate conditions to ensure the wellbeing of young people and adults whether they stay/leave/return, rather than focusing on policies emphasising retention and stemming the outmigration of rural youth, has been made consistently. Young people leaving home to move on to post-school education is a feature of life across all parts of Scotland, not just rural areas - as highlighted in Chapter 2.

The outmigration of young people and adults in rural areas is shaped by a constellation of interrelated factors beyond limited educational and employment opportunities. These include exploring the world and new experiences, as well as lack of availability and affordability of housing and public transport, poor access to services and difficulties in accessing culture and leisure activities at different stages of the life course. There can be no panacea or single overarching rural youth strategy; the issues that need to be addressed involve many sectors and policy domains. This is acknowledged in the Scottish Government’s Addressing Depopulation Action Plan (2024) as well as in structures (e.g. the Population Programme Board) established to encourage cohesion across policy areas; see Appendix 1. Furthermore, given fiscal constraints and the emphasis on economies of scale in funding decisions related to provision of social and cultural infrastructures, the question about what is feasible in policy and delivery terms given the diversity of rural areas and groups needs to be clarified. The question of the extent to which young people and adults from diverse rural and island communities with diverse social and cultural interests and backgrounds can or ought to have the same access to the same services as their urban counterparts is something that must be more clearly addressed.

The importance of local bottom-up context-specific policies and strategies is critical in addressing some of the issues highlighted in this report. This needs to be based on the relevant agencies working with young people and adults as active partners to improve their wellbeing as well as that of the whole community. Building on the unique qualities and cultures of places whilst also ensuring the inclusion of the diversities that young people and adults embody will be critical. The recent regional surveys of young people undertaken in Dumfries and Galloway, the Highlands and Islands and the work of organisations such as the Young Islanders and Rural Youth Project are a clear possible starting point in identifying the issues that concern young people.³³ But the question remains - what next?

5.6 Diversity of experiences

The review of literature, reports, and inclusion of selected views of YIN participants, all support the importance of considering the diverse geographies of rural and island areas to ensure appropriate policy sensitivity to local differences within and between rural areas. Within this context it is also important that the voices of youth from diverse backgrounds (by gender, socio-economic background, LGBTQ+, ethnicity, culture, migration background, etc.) are heard.

Despite an increase in positive perceptions of staying among young people and adults in rural and island areas highlighted by recent reports, the discourse of rural areas as

³³ But only if they are carefully broken down by gender and age/life course stage.

'lagging' behind urban areas and the 'symbolic capital' associated with moving to urban areas as places of opportunities appears to persist. Within this context, understanding the roles that rural schools play in influencing young people's mobility choices seems scarce, an issue that has received much attention in the North American context (Corbett, 2006; Schafft, 2006).

5.7 Young people/adults as active agents – mainstreaming youth issues

One of the major barriers to address in policy making and implementation is the existing power imbalance based on age where the active participation of young people and adults is not mainstreamed across all sectors and layers of governance. Young people and younger adults continue to feel excluded from decisions on issues and policies (e.g. education, housing, transport, etc.) that impact on their lives.

The exclusion of children and young people as active agents is also reflected in research on children and young people/adults in rural areas. There is a lack of meaningful and sustained involvement of children and young people in rural areas in the co-design and research of the issues that impact on their lives. These trends reflect not only a lack of recognition of young people/adults as potential allies capable of exercising agency and effecting change across all domains, but it is also a missed opportunity to develop more intergenerational collaboration by drawing on their insights and facilitate opportunities for young people to feel they can make a difference on the issues that impact on their lives in the context of an aging population.

Appendix 1

Overview of Scottish policy actors, strategies and interventions

This appendix to the report presents a brief overview of Scottish policy actors, strategies and interventions relevant to our focus on mobilities amongst people aged 16-45. The appendix is organised around a number of themes and discusses interventions which either implicitly or explicitly seek to support outcomes relevant to the mobility of this age cohort in Scotland's rural communities.³⁴

In preparing this appendix, a broad range of relevant Scottish Government policy publications were reviewed. In a reflection of the wider definition of youth and young adults used throughout this report, the policy documents scoped for inclusion went beyond those focusing specifically on youth mobility, i.e up to age 25. In an initial scoping exercise over 200 documents were sourced from across the Scottish Government.³⁵ Following a rapid review, 28 documents were identified as having either implicit or explicit implications for the mobilities of young people and young adults in Scotland. The majority of these were concerned with interventions focused on **regeneration of rural areas** and made explicit links between this and the mobilities of young working age people, and attracting them to, or retaining them within, communities.

The review also attempted to capture some of the activity ongoing in this area which is led by local and regional actors. The Addressing Depopulation Action Plan (ADAP) was published by the Scottish Government in February 2024 to establish a strategic policy position with regards to depopulation. The Plan includes a mapping of a range of new and existing activity which aims to support population retention and attraction, and which is, or has been, undertaken across government and by local and regional delivery partners. Pathfinder interventions commenced in 2024/25, funded by Scottish Government, in six local authority areas across Scotland (Highland, Argyll and Bute, Inverclyde, East Ayrshire, Dumfries and Galloway and Comhairle Nan Eilean Siar). These pathfinders reflect locally-identified priorities deemed to be significant drivers of population decline in affected communities, where intervention may support population attraction and retention. For example, Highland's project focuses on childcare provision in north-west Sutherland, and Argyll and Bute's focuses on addressing local housing challenges. These pathfinders are overseen by an Addressing Depopulation Delivery Group, which contains membership from the Scottish Government, COSLA, local authorities, and the EAG. Many of the policies and interventions discussed below which have been initiated by local and regional actors are included in the ADAP. Some other examples from national, regional and local actors were identified in an informal scoping exercise undertaken by COSLA in early 2023.

³⁴ Policies are considered to seek explicitly to support relevant outcomes where they make direct reference to the mobility of youth and young adults. Where outcomes with a different focus or intent may produce 'knock-on' effects with relevance to attraction or retention, this is described as implicit support.

³⁵ Policy areas: Agriculture, Marine, Economy, Digital, Population, Skills, Social Justice, Housing, Health and Social Care, Environment, Climate Change, Transport, Culture.

As part of a wider attempt to ensure better cohesion across policy areas and between levels of governance the Scottish Government facilitates a joined-up policy approach to addressing population challenges through its Population Programme Board, which brings together a range of policy areas, governmental structures and delivery partners including Transport Scotland, COSLA and the enterprise agencies. Ministerial-level oversight is provided by the Ministerial Population Taskforce which brings together ministers from across a range of Scottish Government portfolios with links to population policy. A Population Roundtable co-chaired by COSLA and Scottish Government provides a forum for all local authorities to discuss unique local challenges and share best practice. Although these fora do not focus solely, nor even sometimes explicitly, on addressing mobility of rural young people, they do present an opportunity to address relevant issues and to connect policy development and delivery to locally-identified needs and barriers.

Key themes and interventions

Youth-based engagement / representation

The **Young Islanders Network**,³⁶ was created in 2021 as a collaboration between Scottish Government and Youth Scotland, to provide a space for young people (aged 12 to 25) to discuss matters relating to the implementation of the National Islands Plan (2019) – a framework for action to improve outcomes for island communities. The network involves representatives of the community working with Scottish Government officials, and where there is scope, additionally working with cohorts of young people across Scotland who are affected by challenges relating to population decline. The intention of this engagement is to understand young peoples' experiences better in the context of population decline, and for this to inform subsequent policy development. Work by the Young Islanders Network on their Transport Challenge³⁷ and Housing Challenge³⁸, for example, has been submitted for consideration by relevant Ministers. There are also pathways for such considerations to inform the next phase of delivery of the Action Plan to Address Depopulation.

The **Scottish Rural & Islands Youth Parliament**³⁹ helps to mobilise young people (aged 16 to 30) living in rural and island communities across Scotland. The parliament aims to amplify their diverse voices, and to create space for strengthening connections between communities, organisations and decision-makers in Scotland, the UK and Europe.

As vehicles for youth engagement and representation, both the Network and the Parliament seek to provide opportunities for young people to discuss issues relating to mobility, to reflect on the impacts of policy interventions, and to feedback their perspectives and experiences. These initiatives have been supported by the Scottish Government and are included within the ADAP as a demonstration of partnership working between government and community-led, third sector organisations.

Community delivery

³⁶ [Young Islanders Network](#)

³⁷ [Young islanders have their say on transport](#)

³⁸ [Young Islanders Network housing challenge](#)

³⁹ [The Scottish Rural & Islands Youth Parliament](#)

Beyond direct engagement with young people in Scotland's rural and island communities, a broad range of activity occurs within, or in support of community-led initiatives with an aim to support the attraction and retention of populations in rural and island areas. All of the activities and organisations discussed below either receive funding from the Scottish Government, or act as a direct conduit for ongoing policy engagement with local communities. There has also been interaction between regional and local actors, sometimes coming together into regional structures such as regional enterprise agencies, or the Convention of the Highlands and Islands (CoHI), to consider both shared and distinct challenges relative to their localities. This work has often spanned a range of policy areas and sought to develop joined-up approaches considering various factors of relevance to rural mobility.

Community Councils are the most local tier of statutory representation in Scotland. They serve to bridge the gap between local authorities and communities and help to make public bodies aware of the opinions and needs of the communities that they represent. In recognition of this, the Scottish Government has been working to support Community Councils to increase rural youth participation to empower young people to inform improvements to services in their area, making rural communities more attractive places to live and work.

The Uist Beò platform⁴⁰ is an example of a community-based and led project which has been developed with the aim to improve population attraction and retention outcomes. Created and managed by Uist residents it has been designed to showcase Uist and to encourage relocation and settlement as well as connecting residents to resources and promoting available opportunities. HIE, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (CnES), the Scottish Rural Network and Bòrd na Gàidhlig have contributed to maintaining this platform, which seeks to support a community-based approach to attraction and retention within this region.

Within a number of local authorities **Community Settlement Officer** posts have been created to support a place-based approach to attraction and retention. The first three, in Argyll and Bute, Uist and North-West Sunderland, were funded in collaboration between HIE local authorities and Scottish Government. As part of the Action Plan to Address Depopulation pathways funding, these posts have been extended and three further posts created in East Ayrshire, Dumfries and Galloway and Inverclyde. The purpose of these roles is to understand better and address distinct population attraction and retention challenges within the area. A focus on youth mobility and the retention and/or attraction of economically active individuals is central to much of this work.

At a regional level, the **Convention of Highlands and Islands (CoHI) Working Group on Population** has met regularly over the last two years and aims to provide a platform to discuss population issues and to pilot approaches to address population decline within the region. The group have identified five areas of focus: jobs, housing, critical infrastructure (including transport and broadband), the provision of and accessibility to public services, and the retention and attraction of young people. In 2024, the group moved under the structures of the Highlands and Islands Regional Economic Partnership, demonstrating the need for strategic

⁴⁰ [Uist Beò](#)

coherence when harnessing economic levers across the region and their role in addressing population challenges.

Investment and enterprise

A range of activity delivered at local and regional level to support inward investment and local enterprise can produce outcomes with implicit impacts for young people's mobility. Some of this is explicitly recognised and supported through policies and strategies at national level, for example within the ADAP, where the Scottish Government is exploring opportunities to support local enterprise to enable healthy local economies and sustainable populations. The Scottish Government has provided investment through a number of Growth Deals.⁴¹ These are agreements between Scottish, UK, and local governments, designed to bring about long-term strategic approaches to improving regional economies. The Scottish Government has given a commitment to cover all regions of Scotland and has agreed a level of investment for each region, supporting authorities to deliver on locally-identified needs.

At regional level **Highlands and Islands Enterprise** has funded the development of businesses and community enterprises and states its aim to enhance the skills of people working within the region. At local authority level, some authorities have developed bespoke websites focused on attracting investment into their area to enhance local employment opportunities and wider regeneration.

Development Trusts Association Scotland (DTAS) is an umbrella body for member-led organisations providing support to communities across Scotland to set up, develop and grow local development trusts. Some development trusts focus specifically on supporting community regeneration and seek to develop a strong community infrastructure to meet the needs of people and place.

Education and skills development

Scottish Government funding through the No One Left Behind employability strategy (2020) has supported locally based organisations to provide services and support aimed at increasing economic growth and improving employment outcomes. In Argyll and Bute for example, Inspiralba provides services aiming to support employability and learning pathways for local people and to support the development rural social enterprise.

Recognising that access to Higher Education is a key driver in the attraction and retention of young people, HIE has invested in its regional university. In its Strategic Plan 2030 the **University of the Highlands and Islands** (2023) sets out a vision to “attract, nurture and retain talent in communities, supporting innovation and social and economic prosperity [...] through the innovative delivery of flexible lifelong learning focused on employability and skills and impactful research”. The University has offered specialist courses seeking to attract young people to the region through skills-based learning that aligns with distinct rural needs and opportunities. These include, for example, courses in adventure tourism, textiles, and archaeology. In

⁴¹ [Regional Growth Deals](#)

addition to skills-based learning, UHI also provide work-based learning pathways into further and higher education, linked to local employment opportunities.

The **Island Skills and Repopulation Project** was delivered in 2023, in partnership with the CoHI Population Working Group. This includes Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Skills Development Scotland, and local authority partners. The pilot focussed on addressing key challenges within the skills sector as well as local recruitment challenges across the islands. Following delivery of the Island Skills and Repopulation Pilot, which sought to create an ‘on-island’ employment infrastructure to address local recruitment challenges and support new entrants and career changers to explore opportunities across a range of sectors, the Scottish Government worked with partners to commission an analysis of the three pilot areas in Argyll and Bute, Arran and Cumbrae, and Uist. This was undertaken with a view to better understand the impact of developing a more bespoke, place-based approach to matching locally-identified need with relevant skills development and delivery. Future publication of this analysis will aim to help to inform future skills delivery across rural and island areas.

Decisions taken around the provision of education services consider less explicitly the impact on the mobility of young working age people and their families. The Scottish Government’s **Learning Estate Strategy (2019)** sets out its strategic vision for the learning estate in Scotland. In addition, the Scottish Government, in partnership with local authorities, is responsible for the £2bn **Learning Estate Investment Programme (LEIP)** which prioritises schools in need of updating, as identified by local authorities. When considering where to build new schools or refurbish existing buildings, a range of factors are considered such as the condition and suitability of existing buildings. LEIP projects complement local authorities’ activities in relation to their learning estate and local authorities oversee and fund their own school building/refurbishment projects. Decisions taken by local authorities to build, retain or close schools could have significant repercussions for the mobility choices of young people, especially those with younger children or planning to start a family, however the issue of the impact on mobility is not usually explicitly considered in the planning process.

Housing

The Scottish Government’s **Housing to 2040 Strategy** (2021) included engagement with 350 young people from over 12 communities across Scotland during its development. The strategy recognises the significant role that local housing availability and cost play in young people’s decisions and choices regarding mobility and the impacts this can have for depopulation in rural areas. The strategy makes a commitment to scale up opportunities for self-provided housing to aid young people staying in rural areas if they wish to, in addition to ‘considering the wider factors that make a house a home’. This latter point emerged directly from consultation with young adults as important to both retaining and attracting young families. Within this Strategy, Scottish Government committed to putting more focus on ‘place’ within housing programmes, in addition to planning funding carefully alongside other investment being made in local areas. This includes developing a Place Investment

Framework to help support more affordable homes in existing communities, town centres, and 20-minute neighbourhoods.⁴²

The Scottish Government's **Rural and Islands Housing Action Plan** (2023) sets out steps to explicitly address the attraction and retention of young people. Both the Young Islanders Network and Rural Youth Project⁴³ were included in a consultation process underpinning the development of the Action Plan as a way of ensuring that locally identified needs and young people's perspectives were included. The plan includes a commitment of £5 million as part of the Highland City Region Deal to deliver high quality affordable houses across rural locations within the Highlands. Nonetheless, housing remains a difficult issue in many localities and one that local authorities are struggling to address, some seeing it as the primary focus of the work of their settlement officers and pathway funding through the ADAP.

Transport

Population and Household Location Research undertaken by Scottish Government in 2023, found that both digital and transport connectivity were pre-requisite to (re)location decisions. Improved connectivity was seen to expand the search area of people considering a change of residence.

Population concerns and mobility of rural young people are not generally at the forefront of transport policies. Nonetheless the outcomes of policy choices in this area can have implicit impacts for mobility choices. Recognising the distinct needs of communities from both national and regional perspectives, Transport Scotland's **National Transport Strategy 2** (2020) sets out a vision to build an accessible, available and affordable transport system which supports and sustains people to locate themselves where they wish. The publication of the **Strategic Transport Projects Review 2** (STPR2; Transport Scotland, 2022) sets out a consideration of the needs of both national and regional communities, to reflect differing geographies, patterns, and demands. Delivery of this national-level strategy is to be supported by working groups such as those within the structures of the Convention of the Highlands and Islands, who have set out transport and connectivity as a priority area for consideration.

Land, land use and crofting

The Scottish Government has developed a **National Development Plan for Crofting** (2021), which recognises the crucial significance of crofting to maintaining populations in rural and island areas. The **Scottish Land Commission** works with a wide range of stakeholders across sectors including public, private and social enterprise. Their work spans four key areas, which include promoting and supporting change and good practice in the way land is owned and used in both rural and urban areas. In addition, they seek to modernise the pattern of land ownership in Scotland to address the concentration of power, as well as to safeguard the public interest and improve the accountability of land-use decision making. They aim to help deliver well-planned, sustainable communities in places people want to live at prices they

⁴² [Local living and 20 minute neighbourhoods impact assessment](#)

⁴³ [Rural Youth Project](#)

can afford, to improve relationships between landowners and tenant farmers and increase access to land for those who want to farm.

Gaelic

The Scottish Government recognises that a lack of support for Gaelic language in areas of low population can be linked to infrastructural and economic challenges, as set out within the ADAP. As such, **Bòrd na Gàidhlig** has developed a National Gaelic Language Plan 2023-28 (2022) which sets out where action is needed to strengthen the Gaelic language. This is underpinned by the Scottish Government's ambition to see an increase in the number of people speaking, learning, using, and supporting Gaelic in Scotland. However, there have been criticisms from within rural and island communities concerning the balance of support for indigenous Gaelic speakers and communities versus encouragement of Gaelic as a second language for urban populations.

In 2016 the **Western Isles** developed a national e-learning service, **E-Sgoil**⁴⁴, with the aim of supporting a combination of live and interactive online learning. The service supports children and young people who live in rural and island communities through their offer of Gaelic beginner and intermediate courses, in addition to other subjects, allowing schools and settings to offer their learners an equitable curriculum despite their geography. Additionally, the service employs teachers from island and rural communities across Scotland, addressing recruitment local need. It is however not clear the extent to which this e-learning is used within local communities, and the extent to which this may result in attraction or retention of young and working age adults to the area.

⁴⁴ [e-sgoil](#)

References

- Alexander, R. (2023). Understanding experiences of graduate return to rural Island communities *Journal of Rural Studies*. doi: 103(2023)1031.
- Alexander, R. (2021). [The Impact of Island Location on Students' Higher Education Choices and Subsequent Career Narratives: A Case Study of the Orkney and Shetland Islands](#). PhD Thesis.
- Alexander, R. A. (2016). Migration, education and employment: sociocultural factors in shaping individual decisions and economic outcomes in Orkney and Shetland. *Island Studies Journal*, 11, pp.177-92.
- Alexander, R. (2013). 'Here you have to be a bit more fluid and willing to do different things': Graduate career development in rural communities. *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling*, 31, pp. 36-42. doi: 10.20856/jnicec.3107.
- Anderson, M. and Wright, N. (2007). 'Scottish Demography – Local Perspectives', *Scotland's Population: 2006. The Registrar General's Annual Review of Demographic Trends*, pp. 50-83.
- Anderson, M. and Roughley, C. (2018). *Scotland's Populations from the 1850s to Today*. Oxford University Press.
- Alonso – Pardo, P., Oso, L. and Santaballa, L. (2023). Migrations and the Revitalization of Rural Shrinking Areas in Spain. *Journal of International Migration and Integration*. 24. doi: 10. 1007/s12134-023-01036-6.
- Aragondigital.com: [New call for Rural Erasmus: working and living in Aragonese villages with expenses covered](#).
- Barcus, H. and Brunn, S. (2010). Place Elasticity: Exploring a New Conceptualization of Mobility and Place Attachment in Rural America. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*. 92, pp. 281-295. doi:10.1111/j.1468-0467.2010.00353.x.
- Bòrd na Gàidhlig. (2022). [National Gaelic Language Plan 2023-2028](#). A
- Bjarnason, T. and Edvardsson, I. (2017). University pathways of urban and rural migration in Iceland. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 54, pp. 244-254. doi: 10.1016/j.jrurstud.2017.07.001.
- Bjarnason, T., Haartsen, T., Arnarsson, A. M. and Sigurgeirsdottir, V. (2021) The impact of school bullying on adolescent migration expectations in Iceland. *Population, Space and Place*, 27:4, e2422.
- Brandth, B. and Haugen, M. (2010). Doing Farm Tourism: The Intertwining Practices of Gender and Work, 35:2, pp. 425-446. doi:10.1086/605480.

Bruzelius, C. and Shutes, I. (2022). Towards an understanding of mobility in social policy research. *Global Social Policy*, 22:3, pp. 503-520. doi: 10.1177/14680181221085477.

Budge, H. and Shortall, S. (2022). Sustainable rural communities and patriarchal structures. In Attorp, A., Heron, S. and McAreavey, R. (ed) (2023). *Rural Governance in the UK Towards a Sustainable and Equitable Society*. Routledge.

Butler, R. (2020). Young people's rural multicultures: researching social relationships among youth in rural contexts, *Journal of Youth Studies*, 23:9, pp.1178-1194. doi: 10.1080/13676261.2019.1657564.

Cejudo, G. M. and Trein, P. (2023). Policy integration as a political process. *Policy Sci*, 56, pp.3–8. doi: 10.1007/s11077-023-09494-6.

Close the Gap. (2023). [Briefing for Scottish Government debate: Ensuring Scotland's Skills System is Fit for the Future](#).

Close Your Pay Gap (2020). [Women's Jobs, Men's jobs? Job Segregation and what it means for the Gender Pay Gap](#). Briefing 5.

Corbett, M. (2016). Rural Futures: Development, Aspirations, Mobilities, Place, and Education. *Peabody Journal of Education*. doi: 91.00-00.10.1080/0161956X.2016.1151750.

Corbett, M. (2007). [Learning to leave: The irony of schooling in a coastal community](#). University of Tasmania.

Crow, H. (2010). [Factors Affecting Migration Decisions in Rural Scotland: An Analysis of the Evidence](#). Scottish Government Social Research.

Culliney, M. (2014). The rural pay penalty: earnings and social capital in Britain. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17:2, pp. 148-165. doi: 10.1080/13676261.2013.793788.

D' Agueli B., Celardo G., Esposito, C., Arcidiacono C., Procentese F., Carbone A. and Di Napoli, I. (2022). Well-Being of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Youth: The Influence of Rural and Urban Contexts on the Process of Building Identity and Disclosure. *Front Psychol*, 12:787211. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2021.787211.

De Lima, P. (2021). Dis-connected lives? [COVID-19's impact on rural Scottish communities – and what the future may hold for them](#).

Dey, I. and Jentsch, B. (2001). [Rural youth in Scotland -The policy agenda](#). *Youth Policy*, 70, Winter 2000-2001. pp11-24.

Elder, G.H., Kirkpatrick Johnson, M. and Crosnoe, R. (2003). [The emergence and development of life course theory](#). *Handbook of the Life Course*, pp. 8.

Evans, C. (2016). Moving away or staying local: the role of locality in young people's 'spatial horizons' and career aspirations, *Journal of Youth Studies*, 19:4, pp. 501-516. doi: 10.1080/13676261.2015.1083955.

Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population. (2025). [The challenge of population balance: mapping Scotland's institutional and intervention landscape.](#)

Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population. (2022). [Place-based policy approaches to population challenges: lessons for Scotland.](#)

Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population. (2021). [Designing a pilot remote and rural migration scheme: analysis and policy options.](#)

Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population. (2020). [Internal migration in Scotland and the UK: trends and policy lessons.](#)

Farrugia, D. (2015). The mobility imperative for rural youth: the structural, symbolic and non-representational dimensions rural youth mobilities. *Journal of Youth Studies*. 19, pp. 1-16. doi: 10.1080/13676261.2015.1112886.

Farrugia D. (2013). Towards a spatialised youth sociology: The rural and the urban in times of change. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 16:3, pp. 293-307. doi: 10.1080/13676261.2013.830700.

Findlay, A., McCollum, D., Coulter, R. and Gayle, V. (2015a). New mobilities across the life course: A framework for analysing demographically inked drivers of migration. *Population, Space and Place*, 21:4, pp. 390–402.

Findlay, A., McCollum, D., Coulter, R., and Gayle, V. (2015b). [New mobilities across the lifecourse: A framework for analysing demographically linked drivers of migration.](#) ESRC Centre for Population Change, Working Paper 59, January 2015.

Forster, K. and Main, H. (2018). [Finding a Place in the World Understanding Youth Outmigration from Shrinking Rural Communities. Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council \(SSHRC\): Imagining Canada's Future Initiative: Knowledge Synthesis Grant: Final Report.](#)

Glass, J. and Atterton, J. (2022). [Improving our understanding of child poverty in rural and island Scotland.](#)

Glass, J., Bynner, C. and Chapman, C. (2020). [Children and young people and rural poverty and social exclusion: A review of evidence.](#) Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland.

Haartsen, T. and Stockdale, A. (2017). S/elective belonging: How rural newcomer families with children become stayers. *Population, Space and Place*. 24. e2137. doi: 10.1002/psp.2137.

Hannam, K., Sheller, M. and Urry, J. (2006). 'Editorial: Mobilities, Immobilities and Moorings'. *Mobilities*, 1:1, pp. 1–22. doi: 10. 1080/17450100500489189.

Haslam McKenzie, F. (2010). Fly-In Fly-Out: The Challenges of Transient Populations in Rural Landscapes. In: Luck, G. , Black, R. , Race, D. (eds) *Demographic Change in Australia's Rural Landscapes*. Landscape Series, vol 12. Springer, Dordrecht. doi: 10.1007/978-90-481-9654-815.

Hedberg, C. and do Carmo, R.(eds) (2010). *Translocal Ruralism Mobility and Connectivity in European Rural Spaces*. Springer.

Highlands and Islands Enterprise. (2022). [My Life in the Highlands and Islands](#).

Highlands and Islands Enterprise. (2018). [Enabling Our Next Generation](#).

Highlands and Islands Enterprise. (2017). [Occupational Segregation in Highland](#).

Hill, B. (2006). [The New Rural Economy](#). Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA)

Hopkins, J and Copus, A. (2018). [A demographic profile of sparsely populated areas \(SPA\) 1991-2037](#). James Hutton Institute Working Paper.

Jamieson, L and Groves, L. (2008). [Drivers of Youth Out-Migration from Rural Scotland: Key Issues and Annotated Bibliography](#). Scottish Government.

Jamieson, L. (2000) Migration, Place and Class. *Youth in a Rural Area*. *The Sociological Review* 48:2. pp.203–223.

Jentsch, B. (2006). 'Youth Migration from Rural Areas: Moral Principles to Support Youth and Rural Communities in Policy Debates'. Oxford: European Society for Rural Sociology. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9523.2006.00412.x.

Jones, G. (1999). 'The Same People in the Same Places'? Socio-Spatial Identities and Migration in Youth. *Sociology*, 33:1, pp.1-22. doi: 10.1177/S0038038599000012.

Jones, G. and Jamieson, L. (1997). [Young People in Rural Scotland: Getting Out and Staying On](#).

Kerrigan, N. and de Lima, P. (eds). (2023). *The Rural-Migration Nexus: Global Problems, Rural Issues*. Palgrave Macmillan.

LGBT Youth Scotland. (2023). [Rural Report](#).

LGBT Youth Scotland. (2019). [Life for LGBT Youth in Dumfries and Galloway](#).

Little, J. and Panelli, R. (2010). Gender research in rural geography. *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, 10:3, pp. 281-289. doi:10. 1080/0966369032000114046.

Little, J. and Panelli, R. (2003). Gender research in rural geography. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 10:3, pp. 281–289. doi: 10.1080/0966369032000114046.

Looker, E., and Naylor, T. (2009). 'At Risk' of Being Rural? The Experience of Rural Youth in a Risk Society. *Journal of Rural and Community Development*, 4:2, pp. 39–64.

Maclaren, A.S., Locock, L., Skea Z., Skåtun, D. and Wilson, P. (2024). Rurality, healthcare and crises: Investigating experiences, differences, and changes to medical care for people living in rural areas. *Health & Place*, 87.

Mærsk, E. (2022). There and Back Again: the intertwining of educationally related (im)mobility choices of young adults from peripheral regions with contemporary identity and place narratives. [Thesis fully internal (DIV), University of Groningen]. University of Groningen. doi: 10.33612/diss.232625632.

Mærsk, E., Thuesen, A. and Haartsen, T. (2021): Symbolic mobility capital to fight the social stigma of staying: how young adults re-imagine narratives of 'leaving' during higher education, *Journal of Youth Studies*. doi: 10.1080/13676261.2021.1986624.

Mayhew, K., Deer, C. and Dua, M. (2004). The move to mass higher education in the UK: many questions and some answers. *Oxford Review of Education*, 30:1, pp. 65–82. doi: 10.1080/0305498042000190069.

Meijer, M, Cedergren, E. and Guðmundsdótti, H. (2023). [Rooting for the Rural: Changing narratives and creating opportunities for Nordic rural youth](#). Nordregio Policy Brief, 2023:5.

National Records of Scotland. (2024). [Mid-2023 population estimates](#).

National Records of Scotland. (2022). [Small area population estimates: mid-2021](#).

Ní Laoire, C. and Stockdale, A. (2016). Migration and the Life Course in Rural Settings in Shucksmith, M. and Brown, D. (ed) (2016). *Routledge International Handbook of Rural Studies*.

Ní Laoire, C. (2008). 'Settling back'? A biographical and life-course perspective on Ireland's recent return migration. *Irish Geography* 41:2, pp. 195–210.

Ní Laoire, C. (2007). The 'green green grass of home'? Return migration to rural Ireland. *Journal of Rural Studies* 23, pp. 332–344.

Ní Laoire, C. (1999) *Gender issues in Irish rural out-migration*, London: Routledge.

Nordregio (2023). [From Fields to Futures: 40 action points for rural revitalisation](#). Nordregio report, 2023:13.

Office for National Statistics. (2019). [Milestones: Journeying into adulthood](#).

Ó Giollagáin, C., Caimbeul, I., Ó Curnáin, B., Camshron, G. and Moireach, P. (2022). Including the Threatened First-language Gaelic Vernacular Community in Gaelic Promotion and Protection: A Rebuttal to McLeod et al. *Scottish Affairs*. 31, pp. 122-132. doi: 10.3366/scot.2022.0402.

Ó Giollagáin C., Gòrdan Camshron, G., Moireach, P., Ó Curnáin, B., Caimbeul, I., MacDonald, B. and Petrary, T. (2020). *The Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Community: A Comprehensive Sociolinguistic Survey of Scottish Gaelic*. Aberdeen University Press.

Olsen, W., Bayliss, D. and Zhang, M. (2018). [The Gender Penalty](#). Close the Gap

Pavis, S., Hubbard, G. and Platt, S. (2000). '[Young People in Rural Scotland: Pathways To social inclusion and exclusion](#)'. Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

Pavis, S. Hubbard, G. and Platt, S. (2001). 'Young People in Rural Areas: Socially Excluded or Not?' *Work, Employment and Society*, 15, pp. 291-309.

Pavlidis, A. (2009). [The Diverse Logics of Risk: Young People's Negotiations of the Risk Society](#).

Pedersen, Helle. (2018). Is Out of Sight out of Mind? Place Attachment among Rural Youth Out-Migrants. *Sociologia Ruralis*. 58. doi: 10.1111/soru.12214.

Pietka-Nykaza, E. (2024). Social relations among diverse rural residents in the Scottish Highlands. *Social Inclusion*, 12, 1-16.

Pini, B. and Leach, B. (2011). (Editors). *Reshaping Gender and Class in Rural Spaces*. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing.

R´erat, P. (2014a). Highly qualified rural youth: why do young graduates return to their home region? *Child Geogr.* 12:1, pp. 70–86. doi: 10.1080/14733285.2013.850849.

R´erat, P. (2014b). [The selective migration of young graduates: which of them return to their rural home region and which do not?](#) *Journal of Rural Studies*. 35, pp.123–132.

Rogers, A. (1990). Requiem for the Net Migrant. *Geographical Analysis*, 22:4, pp. 283-300.

Rural Youth Project. (2020). [Qualitative Results](#).

Rural Youth Project. (2018). [2018 Survey Report](#).

Ryan, A. (2005). New Labour and higher education. *Oxford Review of Education*, 31:1, pp. 87–100. doi: 10.1080/0305498042000337200.

Ryser, L. and Halseth, G. (2010). Rural Economic Development: A Review of the Literature from Industrialized Economies. *Geography Compass*, 4, pp. 510-531. doi: 10.1111/j.1749-8198.2010.00321.x.

Schafft, K. (2016). Rural Education as Rural Development: Understanding the Rural School–Community Well-Being Linkage in a 21st-Century Policy Context. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 91:2, pp.137-154. doi: 10.1080/0161956X.2016.1151734.

Scott, M., Murphy, E. and Gkartzios, M. (2017). Placing 'Home' and 'Family' in Rural Residential Mobilities. *Sociologia Ruralis*. 57. doi: 10.1111/soru.12165.

Scottish Government. (2024). [Supporting and Enabling Sustainable Communities: An Action Plan to Address Depopulation](#).

Scottish Government. (2024). [No one left behind: employability strategic plan 2024 to 2027](#).

Scottish Government. (2023). [Rural and islands housing: action plan](#).

Scottish Government. (2022). [Accessing school age childcare in rural and island areas](#).

Scottish Government. (2021a). [Poverty in rural Scotland: evidence review](#).

Scottish Government. (2021b). [The cost of remoteness - reflecting higher living costs in remote rural Scotland when measuring fuel poverty: research report](#).

Scottish Government. (2021c). [Housing to 2040](#).

Scottish Government. (2021). [Crofting: National development plan](#).

Scottish Government. (2020). [No one left behind: delivery plan](#).

Scottish Government. (2019). [A Fairer Scotland For Women: Gender Pay Action Plan](#).

Scottish Government. (2019). [The National Plan for Scotland's Islands](#).

Scottish Government. (2019). [Learning Estate Strategy](#).

Scottish Government. (2018). [Rural Scotland Key Facts 2018](#).

Scottish Government. (2018). [Understanding the Scottish Rural Economy](#).

Scottish Rural and Islands Parliament. (2023). [Rural & Island Women in Enterprise](#).

Scottish Rural Medicine Collaborative: [Scottish Rural Medicine Collaborative](#).

Shucksmith, M. (2012). [Future Directions in Rural Development](#). Carnegie UK Trust.

Shucksmith, M. (2004). Young People and Social Exclusion in Rural Areas. Social Research in Transport (SORT). Clearinghouse. 44. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9523.2004.00261.x.

Shucksmith M. (1996). Rural Scotland Today: the Best of Both Worlds? Aldershot: Avebury.

Shucksmith M., Chapman P. and Clark G. (1994). [Disadvantage in Rural Scotland: How is it experienced and how can it be tackled?](#) Perth: Rural Forum Scotland.

Silva, S.Silva, A., Cortés-González, P. and Braziene, R. (2021). Learning to Leave and to Return: Mobility, Place, and Sense of Belonging amongst Young People Growing up in Border and Rural Regions of Mainland Portugal. Sustainability, 13, 9432. doi: 10. 3390/su13169432.

Simões, F., Rocca, A., Rocha, R., Mateus, C., Marta, E. and Jale. T. (2021). Time to Get Emotional: Determinants of University Students' Intention to Return to Rural Areas. Sustainability. doi: 10. 3390/su13095135.

Sleeping Giants. (2022). [Opening Doors: A Consultation on Employability Services, Employers' Experiences and Young People's Goals in Dumfries and Galloway. Draft Report.](#)

Stockdale, A., Theunissen, N. and Haartsen, T. (2018). Staying in a state of flux: A life course perspective on the diverse staying processes of rural young adults. Population, Space and Place. 24. e2139. doi: 10. 1002/psp. 2139.

Stockdale, A., Findlay, A. and Short, D. (2000). The repopulation of rural Scotland: opportunity and threat. The Journal of Rural Studies. 16:2, pp. 243-257. doi: 10. 1016/S0743-0167(99)00045-5.

Taylor, R. (2023). Growing a University: A Personal History of the University of Glasgow's Crichton Campus in Dumfries Scottish Affairs. 32:1 pp. 55-77 Edinburgh University Press. doi: 10.3366/scot.2023.0442.

Taylor, Y. (2011). Not all Bright Lights, Big City? Classed Intersections in Urban and Rural Sexual Geographies in B. Pini and B. Leach (2011). (edited). Reshaping Gender and Class in Rural Spaces. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing. pp. 179-198. ISBN: 978 1 4094 0292 3 (ebook).

Terman, A. R. (2020). Social identities, place, mobility, and belonging: Intersectional experiences of college-educated youth. Journal of Rural Studies, 77, pp. 21-32.

The Indigo House Group. (2022). [Rural and Regional Disadvantage in the Highlands and Islands.](#) HIE.

The Indigo House Group in association with IBP Strategy and Research. (2019). [Research into the impact of short-term lets on communities across Scotland](#). Scottish Government.

Transport Scotland. (2022). [Strategic Transport Projects Review 2](#).

Transport Scotland. (2020). [National Transport Strategy 2](#).

University of the Highlands and Islands. (2023). [Strategic Plan 2030](#).

University of Zaragoza: [Euromontana: The Desafio programme, a rural Erasmus to fight depopulation in rural and mountain areas](#).

UNICEF. [Brief on the Social Ecological Model](#).

Ward, N. (2006). Rural development and the economies of rural areas, in Jane Midgley. (ed.) [A New Rural Agenda](#). IPPR, pp. 46-67.

Wyn, J. (2020). Introduction in Wyn, J., Cahill, H., Woodman, D., Cuervo, H., Leccardi, C., and Chesters, J. (Eds). (2020). Youth and the New Adulthood. Springer, p. 2.

Wyn, J., Cahill, H., Woodman, D., Cuervo, H., Leccardi, C. and Chesters, J. (Eds). (2020). Youth and the New Adulthood. Springer.

YouGov. (2018). [How young are “young people”? And at what age does a person become “old”?](#)

Young Islanders Network (YIN). (2024). [The Housing Challenge Report](#).

Youth Work Dumfries and Galloway. (2023). [10,000 Voices Consultation 2023](#).



© Crown copyright 2025



This publication is licensed under the terms of the Open Government Licence v3.0 except where otherwise stated. To view this licence, visit nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3 or write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

Where we have identified any third party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.

This publication is available at www.gov.scot

Any enquiries regarding this publication should be sent to us at

The Scottish Government
St Andrew's House
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

ISBN: 978-1-83691-402-0 (web only)

Published by The Scottish Government, March 2025

Produced for The Scottish Government by APS Group Scotland, 21 Tennant Street, Edinburgh EH6 5NA
PPDAS1522990 (03/25)

W W W . g o v . s c o t