

The Challenge of Population Balance

Mapping Scotland's institutional and intervention landscape

January 2025

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Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population, January 2025

Executive Summary

The subject of this report is the complex policy system which characterises Scotland's attempt to foster the geographical balance of population, as set out in the Scottish Government's Population Strategy. In essence, this means mitigating, or adapting to, the negative social and economic effects of either extreme depopulation ("shrinking") or rapid population growth ("overheating"). The range of available policy "levers" is as broad as the variety of processes driving population change across the patchwork of local contexts which constitute twenty-first century Scotland. Both in recognition of the geographic diversity of the process of population change, and as a legacy of a long evolutionary process, the policy response to the challenge of population balance is multi-faceted, involves a wide range of governance actors, and is guided by a number of distinct intervention logics. The objectives of this report are to sketch out the extent and main components of the policy system, to identify the key actors, and to classify their approaches, with a view to providing some reflections on how this complex policy machine might be fine-tuned to become more effective.

A desk-based review of policy documents shows that population balance is included in the objectives of three broad groups of Scottish Government policy:

- I. Those which address built **infrastructure** needs: including the National Infrastructure Plan, the National Transport Strategy, the Housing to 2040 Strategy, and the National Planning Framework.
- II. Those which focus mainly upon the **economy**: including the National Islands Plan, the work of the Regional Development Agencies, and Regional Economic Partnerships. Community land ownership and local community development initiatives are also important.
- III. Those which are concerned with **basic services**: including Community Planning, Health and Social Care, Education (especially school estate), and Digital Infrastructure.

Pilot actions funded by the Addressing Depopulation Action Plan (ADAP) are a very important recent addition whose interventions fall mostly into the third group, but contribute to all three.

In terms of the two extremes of “unbalance” – shrinking and overheating - clearly the former receives much more attention in terms of policy than the latter. There are probably historical/cultural reasons for this. In addition, growth remains the unquestioned underpinning political motivation at all levels of governance. Drawing attention to the downsides of growth is not usually a vote-winner.

In terms of governance, whilst the first of the three groups of policies is mostly delivered through a partnership between the Scottish Government and the 32 councils, the second and third involve a complex network of public sector (government, councils, agencies) and the third sector.

The current governance landscape is a snapshot of a system in flux, with legacies from past events (devolution), periods of centralisation, and more recently partial delocalisation. In this, Scotland is similar to other countries of Northern Europe, although the process of centralisation in pursuit of efficiency and scale economies was probably earlier and more profound here. The Community Planning system can be seen as a response to the “policy silo” effect associated with centralisation at the local level. Place-based partnerships, such as the Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs), and the Health and Social Care Integration Partnerships (HSCIPs) are very much creatures of this context. However, whether they are a part of the solution, or an addition to the problem of the “cluttered and fragmented” governance landscape identified by Campbell Christie in 2011, is a matter of judgement.

More recently the “push back” on centralisation has included the emphasis of the ‘Place Principle’ and ‘Community Wealth Building’. It is against this backdrop that the narrative of the Population Strategy and ADAP should be understood. The establishment of the Ministerial Taskforce on Population, the Convention of the Highlands and Islands (COHI) Repopulation initiative, and the subsequent Verity House Agreement are key events in this story.

A key aspect of the policy system which addresses population balance in Scotland, but which is all too often taken for granted, relates to the intervention logic, or Theory of Change (ToC) which connects the ultimate goal (moderating extreme changes in

population) with the policy actions, via assumed “intermediate outcomes”. Our review of the policy literature suggests that in Scotland, intervention logics are orientated to two broad responses: (i) Direct mitigation of shrinking by attracting or retaining population. (ii) Indirect mitigation, or adaptation to population trends, (either shrinking or overheating) through enhancing the wellbeing of the local population, or by adjusting the capacity of local service provision.

In terms of more detailed practical interventions, we identify seven approaches, which are observed, both singly and in combination, across Scotland’s policy landscape. These are:

1. Enhanced rural-urban connectedness/interaction.
2. Local employment creation.
3. Human capital approaches.
4. Wellbeing and place making.
5. Addressing housing shortages.
6. Community development.
7. Service provision adjustments.

The analytical framework developed in the first three chapters of the report helps us, in the final chapter, to identify a range of strengths and weaknesses associated with the orchestration of multiple policies, towards the single goal of population balance. It highlights gaps in our knowledge and provides a starting point for a more deliberately coherent approach.

Our recommendations relate to the need for the establishment of standard benchmark indicators, and the need for greater clarity regarding the relationship between population balance and other National Performance Framework objectives. In terms of standard indicators, we argue that these should go beyond simple population counts, to measure the effects of more extreme geographic redistribution of population in terms of the ‘liveability’ of places, and the wellbeing of their residents.

We suggest a stronger requirement for strategy documents such as the Local Outcome Improvement Plans to go beyond aspirations and to specify concrete and funded interventions.

A better understanding of the impact of different forms of intervention, and the interactions between them at local community level, should be a goal for Scottish Government research. This form of “place-based community impact assessment” would in a sense reverse the telescope of policy evaluation, replacing a single policy,

value-for-money question, with an interest in the relative effectiveness of multiple policies within a specific local context.

Finally, mindful of the danger of adding to the institutional “clutter”, we suggest that regular and focused communication between the multiplicity of policy actors involved - both at national and local levels - in the form of some kind of “stock-taking” event could improve coherence. This effectiveness of this exercise could be strengthened by the publication of periodic “progress reports” on population balance.

Introduction

This report was commissioned in April 2024. Its ambition was to provide “...an overview of the population and demography policy landscape in Scotland within an international context.”

Its objective is to: “Map the national policy landscape relating to population and demography, paying particular attention to intervention logic, coherence, and highlighting its specificities in comparison with similar European and English speaking contexts.”

The challenge of population balance

The backdrop to this commission is the Scottish Government’s 2021 Population Strategy document, [A Scotland for the future: The opportunities and challenges of Scotland’s changing population](#). For conciseness, we will refer to this as ‘the Population Strategy’.

The Population Strategy is structured around 3 “challenges”, which relate to:

- overall population size,
- age structure,
- “balance”.

The strategy document explores macro-level (national) responses to address the first two of these challenges in three chapters on pro-family, ageing and migration policies. These macro-level policies open up a very broad range of activity, with responsibility mostly taken by the Scottish Government¹. These three ‘macro-policy’ chapters of the Strategy document are followed by one which focuses upon ways to pursue the goal of “balanced population”. Here the cast of institutions is much wider. Local government, the third sector and community organisations are very much involved.

Our analysis and institutional mapping will, for this reason, take the third challenge (balance), as a starting point, venturing into (closely related) issues of total population size and ageing only where these are tackled by local government, the third sector, or community organisations. The concept of population balance is

¹ In the interests of clarity and conciseness, our report will treat the Scottish Government as a single institutional actor. The internal structure of the Scottish Government is not the focus of this report.

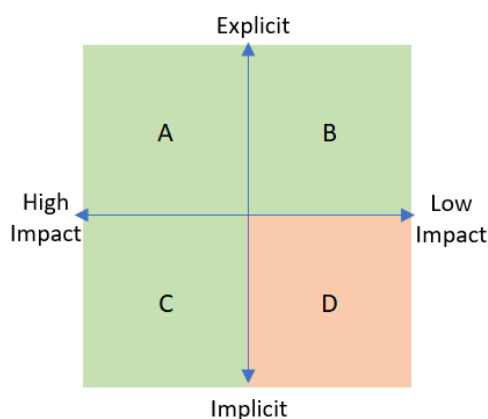
explored in detail in Chapter 3. However, it will be helpful to provide a summary at this point. The notion is essentially spatial – it is about balance between places. It is relative rather than absolute, It is not about equalisation, achieving stasis, or restoring or maintaining historic levels of population. Rather, it is concerned with moderating extreme or rapid change, either positive or negative. It is also underpinned by the inclusion and wellbeing objectives of the National Performance Framework.

Population change is an interwoven issue, driven by many social and economic processes, and, in turn, affecting the outcomes of almost every policy activity. In consequence, the ‘landscape’ of interventions and the associated institutional map are particularly complex. Understanding and describing this complex system is challenging and interesting. However, apart from this intrinsic value, this exercise is intended to help identify potential synergies and conflicts between different elements, and hence opportunities to increase coherence. This is a big ambition for a relatively brief report, although we hope to at least demonstrate the potential of the approach and signpost opportunities for further analysis.

Where to draw the line?

In the context of this report an inclusive concept of population policy is appropriate, incorporating responses to both population growth and shrinking, through both mitigation (seeking to alter the trend) and adaptation (accepting the trend and adjusting to it).

Figure 1: Two axes for assessing the relevance of policies for this report.



It is helpful to be clear and explicit about the criteria for inclusion in our policy overview. One way to discriminate is to require an explicit reference to population goals and/or impacts in policy documentation. Other interventions or policies may have unintended impacts, and where these are significant, they should be noted.

However, minor collateral effects do not justify inclusion in the main analysis of the report. In Figure 1, interventions falling within quadrants A, B or C, are included, those in quadrant D may be referred to, but not studied in detail.

What do we mean by ‘policy’?

It is important, as far as possible, to disambiguate the terminology used in this report:

- ‘Interventions’ or ‘actions’ are basic building blocks of policies or strategies, each directed to a discreet client group, and aiming to deliver (in Theory of Change terminology) a particular kind of ‘intermediate outcome’. Pilots and projects - which are characteristically temporary, experimental or exploratory - are perhaps best considered as a sub-category of interventions.

Interventions may be grouped and coordinated in action plans, such as the Scottish Government’s Addressing Depopulation Action Plan. This describes the orchestration of practical interventions at a range of governance levels and spatial scales, in pursuit of one of the goals (addressing depopulation) set out in the overarching Population Strategy document (see below)².

- Conventionally a ‘policy’³ consists of one or more ‘interventions’ which are initiated and managed by a public body, or a partnership, and which have a dedicated budget. They are often time-limited or updated on a rolling programme basis. Such adjustments may be based upon monitoring and evaluation in relation to their ‘goal(s)’.
- ‘Strategies’ may coordinate several ‘policies’, or be constituted from individual interventions, (including pilots or projects). Their defining characteristic is their emphasis upon longer-term goals, intervention logic, and policy coherence. They

² It is understood that the Rural Delivery Plan will fulfil a similar role.

³ Here we are using the word in a specific sense, i.e. as a level in a hierarchy of forms of intervention. This is different from the more generic sense (where we are distinguishing the action which institutions carry out from the institutions themselves).

do not necessarily have their own funding (except perhaps to cover administrative costs). Strategies are usually embodied in documents, and/or in web pages. The publication of population strategies which bring together a range of existing interventions is characteristic of a number of European countries (Dax and Copus 2022).

What institutions are involved?

The above definitions probably give the impression that this report will rely heavily upon Scottish Government policy documents, describing interventions directly initiated by Holyrood. However, due to the specifics of Scottish governance, there are some responses to population trends which are not devolved, being reserved to the UK Government. Probably more important, in this context, is the fact that Scottish Government policy aspirations are also operationalised locally either by the 32 councils, or by agencies (NHS Scotland, the regional development agencies, the Land Commission etc). In this context statutory guidance documents, and/or contractual relationships play a vital role as ‘levers’, ensuring that outcomes are aligned with both Scottish Government population objectives, and, ideally, with perceived local needs.

In the context of service delivery, particularly at a local level, the third sector, (voluntary or community groups) become important actors.

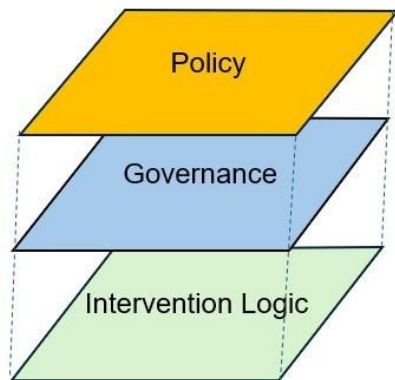
Report structure

Following this introduction, the report is organised in four chapters, the first three representing three distinct perspectives on the landscape – rather like the thematic layers (separately showing relief, drainage systems, communications, settlement patterns etc.) of a GIS system (Figure 2):

Chapter 1: **Policy⁴ landscape**. This chapter will aim to identify interventions and policies which aim to have some influence upon the spatial balance of population change in Scotland. The discussion will be ordered on the basis of a simple threefold classification of policies (infrastructure, economy, and service provision).

⁴ Here used in the generic sense

Figure 2: Thematic layers within the policy landscape



Chapter 2: **Institutional map and evolving governance.** Taking the policies identified in Chapter 1 as a starting point, the next chapter will map out the key institutional actors, - national (UK and Scottish), regional and local, public, private and third sector, - and the nature of the relationships between them.

Chapter 3: **Intervention Logics and Theories of Change (ToC).** The third chapter explores the concepts underlying the policies identified in Chapter 1. Each of the building blocks of policy (interventions, projects, pilots) has population-related objectives, and seeks specific “intermediate outcomes” – even if these are implicit, and even if different institutions perceive these differently. In practice, a limited number of typical ToCs coexist within the policy landscape, and, in terms of their assumptions, and the way in which they tackle the issue of population balance, these can be further grouped into two broad classes. Understanding how these intervention logics are distributed across the institutional map and the policy landscape, and how they evolve over time, is fundamental to improving coherence.

Chapter 4: **Implications for policy coherence and effectiveness.** The institutional maps and policy landscape are complex – In this concluding section we reflect upon the strengths and weaknesses associated with the system and make practical suggestions which could improve coherence and effectiveness.⁵

⁵ The original concept of this report included a set of case studies, focusing upon different parts of Scotland, in order to understand the way in which the policy system was perceived by local actors. It has become evident that this is an ambitious piece of work in itself, worthy of a separate report, which will hopefully follow in 2025. Nevertheless, valuable insights from local government participants in the Population Roundtable (see p26) are incorporated as text boxes.

In a European context Scotland is in some ways an outlier in terms of its governance arrangements, the aim is to present the report with the clarity and in a style accessible to a reader from outside Scotland, or indeed, outside the UK. Thus, the specificities of the devolved governance arrangements, and the ways in which the UK differs from Euro-typical governance and welfare regimes will be articulated, where helpful.

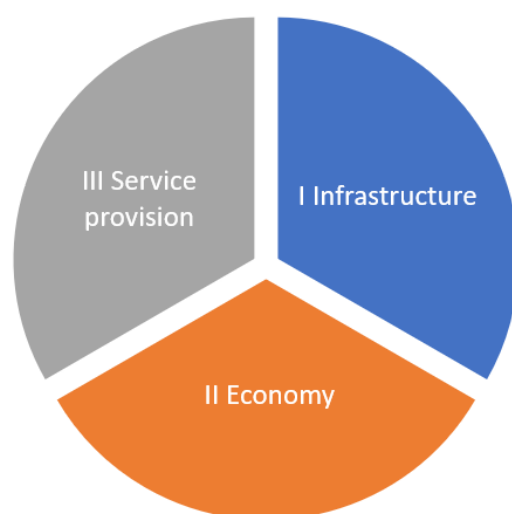
Chapter 1: Policy landscape

In this chapter we attempt to map out the policy landscape, by picking out, and providing a basic description of, policy activities which in some way affect or respond to population change. As explained in the Introduction, it is not easy to draw precise boundaries to this landscape, but our goal is to sketch out its main features. These are predominantly public sector led activities, mostly under the direct or indirect control of the Scottish or UK governments, but also driven by local councils and agencies, which have significant interaction with population trends, whether as cause or response, mitigative or adaptive, explicit or implicit. Third sector organisations and private businesses are often involved in the delivery of such policies.

Mapping the policy landscape is a first step, a necessary foundation for describing (in Chapter 2) the network of key players in the institutional system engaged in the process of delivery in relation to the Scottish Government's overarching goal of balanced population change. This in turn provides the basis for a more in-depth consideration of objectives and intermediate outcomes, from a Theory of Change perspective, in Chapter 3.

The material presented in this chapter has been assembled through a desk-based review of policy documents and webpages. It is important to acknowledge that such an approach to policy mapping has its limitations. A more in-depth and nuanced discussion would require primary research (interviews with key actors). It is hoped that this deficiency may be addressed in a subsequent EAG report.

Figure 3: Three kinds of policy which address (or respond to) population balance.



This chapter is structured according to a pragmatic 3-fold classification of policies which address or respond to population balance (Fig 3). The three types of policy are:

- I. Those which address built infrastructural needs.
- II. Those which focus mainly upon the economy.
- III. Those which are concerned with basic services.

No claims of theoretical or conceptual profundity are made about this classification.

There are, of course overlaps between the categories, and many interventions could be placed in more than one of them. It is simply a device for organising the discussion.

Pilot actions under the ADAP do not fall exclusively within any of the above three types, (although they perhaps contribute most strongly to the third) and will be introduced briefly at the end of the chapter.

I INFRASTRUCTURE

Infrastructure is here conceived as encompassing both transport networks and other physical capital, in other words, policies which deal with the built environment. Whilst the Scottish Government has an overall responsibility to establish guiding principles and has set up a range of national schemes to address particular issues or themes, much of the detailed local activity or oversight falls to the 32 Councils. This explains the prominence of a number of Scottish Government strategy documents designed to disseminate priorities and improve coherence.

National Infrastructure Plan (NIsp)

The [National Infrastructure Plan](#) (2021-26) underpins a number of ‘frontline’ policies, in this case by coordinating and prioritising capital expenditure by the Scottish Government. Published in 2021, the most recent policy document predates an awareness of forecasts of future population decline, although it does acknowledge the issue of ageing, and that even within the assumed context of continued growth overall, some parts of Scotland faced population decline (p17-18). The response to these demographic challenges is wrapped up in a commitment to “build resilient and sustainable places”. It is understandable (given the underpinning nature of the NIsp), that the document provides few clues as to how this will be achieved in practice, instead citing more frontline policies, such as the Islands Plan, and City Region Deals (see below).

National Transport Strategy

Scotland’s [Second National Transport Strategy](#) (2019) acknowledges that the particular challenges and costs of getting around, to and from, some rural and island areas, can drive the outmigration of young people (p18), and that “transport can have an adverse impact on the long-term sustainability of island communities” (p19). In terms of policy response to these challenges, the Strategy states (p47) that it will “adopt targeted approaches that align with local needs” which will “ensure those living in rural, remote or island communities will be well connected and have as equitable access to services as those living in the rest of the country, therefore making a positive contribution to maintaining and growing the populations in these areas.” Further detail on how this will be achieved is not provided, except for references to the National Islands Plan.

Housing to 2040 Strategy

This overarching housing [strategy document](#), published in 2021, clearly acknowledges the role of housing supply in both driving and ameliorating rural and island depopulation (p27), promising (p9) to “take specific action to support housing development in these areas, helping to stem rural depopulation and supporting communities to thrive.” Targeted interventions include the [Affordable Housing Supply Programme](#), and the [Rural and Island Housing Fund](#). A number of specific actions (relating to tenure, land availability, construction standards and so on) are also proposed (p29, p59).

National Planning Framework (NPF4)

The [Fourth National Planning Framework](#) (NPF4) document outlines a spatial plan for Scotland and sets out the principles which are to be followed by the planning departments of the 32 councils responsible for development at a local level.

The spatial plan is orientated around six “overarching spatial principles” (p4):

1. Just transition.
2. Conserving and recycling assets.
3. Local living.
4. Compact urban growth.
5. Rebalanced development.
6. Rural revitalisation.

Clearly the last two are very closely related to the “balanced population” goal of the Population Strategy. The concept of rebalanced development is envisaged in terms of revitalising declining industrial areas, fostering new rural activities based upon renewables, and more generally facilitating dispersed economic activity and the wellbeing economy (p16). The vision for rural revitalisation features dispersed activity and globalisation of rural supply chains through improved connectivity (p16). The importance of balanced population development is underlined in the Regional Spatial priorities of the National Spatial Strategy (p20-35), where issues of either depopulation or ‘overheating’ are mentioned in all four of the regional profiles. In the context of the development of the National Spatial Strategy a number of councils have produced Indicative Regional Spatial Strategies (IRSS) for their areas. Several of these highlight issues relating to population balance. The [Argyll and Bute IRSS](#), for example, states “The major overriding issue for the area is depopulation which needs to be tackled by: i) enabling community wealth building to grow resilience in our communities, creating higher quality jobs and enabling new investment in our

communities, ii) delivering a diverse range of new homes, and iii) by improving our connectivity both in terms of transport and digital connectivity.” The IRSSs for [South of Scotland](#), [Highland](#), and [Shetland](#) all underline the planning system’s awareness of the issue of population balance.

A key element of the National Planning Policy, which is the subject of Part 2 of the NPF4 document, is the requirement for planning authorities in the 32 councils to produce Local Development Plans (LDPs), in consultation with local communities. Balanced population change plays a key role here too: “Greater constraint will be applied in areas of pressure whilst in rural areas with fragile communities, a more enabling approach has been taken to support communities to be sustainable and thrive. LDPs are required to set out an appropriate approach to development in areas of pressure and decline informed by an understanding of population change and settlement characteristics and how these have changed over time as well as an understanding of the local circumstances including housing and travel” (p18).

The development of an LDP is a substantial commitment, taking place on a ten-year revision cycle. Many of the local plans in force were developed under previous guidelines. It has therefore not been possible to carry out a review (as for LOIPS p14 below). However, it will be interesting to see whether the LDPs are equally as effective in promoting balance in depopulating and in overheating areas. Apart from the relatively passive effects of land use zoning, the regulatory levers available to planning authorities are arguably better suited to mitigating overheating than to stimulating repopulation or retention.

II ECONOMY

Policies in this category seek to promote economic growth in the regions and cities of Scotland. Modifying population trends is sometimes an explicit motivation for such activity. This policy area has the added complexity that in addition to the 32 councils, it involves public sector agencies established by the Scottish Government, and the third sector. It also features interventions initiated and co-funded by the UK government.

The National Islands Plan

The [National Islands Plan](#), established in 2019, following the Islands Act of 2018, is a five-year integrated strategy which seeks to address the particular challenges faced by Scotland's 93 inhabited islands. We consider it first in this section because its place in the population policy landscape is firmly and unambiguously established by its first Strategic Objective: "To address population decline and ensure a healthy, balanced population profile" (Scottish Government 2019 p3, 18-20). The primacy of this objective is a response to a long-established concern about the drift of population from many of the islands, its effect upon age structure, wider implications for economic activity, the sustainability of service provision, and community viability. It is also tightly interdependent with the 11 strategic objectives which follow. These address issues of economic development, transport, housing, fuel poverty, digital connectivity, health, social care and wellbeing, environment, climate change, community, culture and education. The implementation of the Plan is documented in a "[Route Map](#)" for 2020-25, and annual progress reports.

The Development Agencies

Scotland has three (regional) development agencies. The oldest, dating back to the 1960s, covers the North and West, and is known today as [Highlands and Islands Enterprise](#) (HIE). The most recently established, [South of Scotland Enterprise](#) (SOSE), covers the mostly rural areas between the central belt and the English border, whilst [Scottish Enterprise](#) focuses on the rest of Scotland. The challenge of population decline in rural and island areas was very much the founding rationale for the Highlands and Islands agency (Copus 2018). Still today it lists "a more balanced population and growing skilled workforce" as the first of its [key outcomes](#). The South of Scotland agency's [vision statement](#) is founded on the need to tackle depopulation: "We will be a region of opportunity and innovation - where natural capital drives

green growth, ambition and quality of life rivals the best in the UK, communities are empowered and cultural identity is cherished, enabling those already here to thrive and attracting a new generation to live, work, visit, learn and invest in the South of Scotland.” One of the six themes which describe its response to this challenge (p36) states its ambition “to be attractive, competitive and to showcase the best of the region – essential if we are to address population decline. To succeed in this, we need to make the South of Scotland exceptional, emphasising quality of life, connectivity, amenity and vibrant neighbourhoods.”

Regional Economic Partnerships

Regional Economic Partnerships (REPs) are key elements of the Scottish Government’s Economic Strategy. They take the form of agreements between the Economic Development Directorate of the Scottish Government and a range of regional economic interests, including councils, community organisations and bodies representing private sector business. Although several of the REPs originated as UK Government-initiated City Region Deals, with ‘trickle down’ concepts in their DNA (Copus et al 2022), the Scottish Government’s [2015 Economic Strategy](#) framed their goals in terms of inclusive growth. More recently, in its 2022 [National Strategy for Economic Transformation](#), the emphasis was shifted to the promotion of a wellbeing economy.

The REPs and City Region Deals are mentioned in Scotland’s Population Strategy document (Scottish Government 2021, p70) as a policy element contributing to the balanced population objective. The presumed link between regional economic development and population patterns and trends is all too often taken for granted. In reality, the connection depends upon the nature of the development, particularly the scale of employment creation, its sustainability, and spatial distribution.

Whether the REPs can be considered a significant element of the population policy landscape requires careful consideration of the implications of the evolution of goals between the 2015 and 2022 economic strategies. Although it has obvious attractions in terms of ethos, inclusive growth is a tricky concept to tie down in practical terms. The official definition (Inclusive growth what does it look like? [Scottish Government 2022](#) p36): “growth that combines increased prosperity with greater equity; that creates opportunities for all; and distributes the dividends of increased prosperity fairly” shares with the Population Strategy its strong emphasis upon regional/local

‘balance’. However, it is clearly expressed in terms of economic outcomes, and assumes growth. The 2022 Strategy with its sights set on wellbeing, implies that outcomes are not measured simply in economic terms, but also in more qualitative social aspects, and environmental sustainability. Whilst the 2015 Strategy’s pursuit of inclusive (economic) growth implies some potential for collateral mitigation of population trends, the shift to wellbeing economy objectives seem to suggest a tacit acknowledgement that adaptation to demographic trends is an acceptable outcome. The links between the objectives of the REPs and the pursuit of “balanced population” are thus quite indirect and contingent on a range of contextual issues.

Community land ownership and community development initiatives

Scotland’s community land ownership and community development interventions do not fit neatly or exclusively into one of our three broad policy types. Arguably some of them straddle all three. However, we consider them here since the way in which they affect population trends is essentially by opening-up new economic opportunities, often community-based, rather than private sector, both in the countryside, and through urban regeneration.

The legal framework is provided by several pieces of land reform legislation, from 2003 onwards⁶. A new Land Reform Act is currently being debated in the Scottish Parliament. Whilst land reform is not officially advocated in policy documents as a direct vehicle for promoting balanced population⁷, it is important to mention it here, because it is widely assumed to be the gateway to community development initiatives (urban as well as rural) which play a very important role in regenerating the local economy, and thereby improving population retention.

⁶ Land Reform Act (Scotland) 2003, 2007, 2016, Community Empowerment Act 2015 ⁷ The justification is usually in terms of human rights, justice and equity.

III SERVICE DELIVERY

The third group of policies is concerned with what is often referred to in a European context as “services of general interest” (SGI). This term covers a wide range of activities, spread across the public, private and third sectors. For obvious reasons policy is most developed in relation to those services which are customarily delivered

by the public sector, such as education, health and social care, public transport, the emergency services, or refuse collection. In recent years there have also been examples of the public sector stepping in to ensure provision of services in “market failure” situations, where commercial providers cannot do so with profit, notably in terms of digital infrastructure.

A comprehensive review of all kinds of SGI is not practicable here. Three key examples are provided, illustrating the way in which the objective of population balance affects the management of school buildings, the provision of health and social care, and the improvement of digital infrastructure.

Community Planning Partnerships

Before focusing in on the three named services, it is important to acknowledge that at least in part, population balance considerations are addressed, in a more holistic way, by the 32 Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) set up under the Community Empowerment Act of 2015, following a review of local service provision by the Christie Commission, published in 2011.

Readers from outside Scotland, especially those familiar with local governance in other parts of Europe, including those (such as the Nordic countries) in which municipalities have relative freedom to act, over a much broader range of service provision responsibilities, will find the concept of Scotland’s Community Planning system unfamiliar. We will consider the governance issues in greater detail in Chapter 2. At this point it is perhaps sufficient to state that, over the past decade or so, there has been considerable debate about how to ensure that the legacy of relatively centralised service provision arrangements - in which much of the decision making is retained by the Scottish Government whilst responsibility for local delivery is shared between the 32 councils and a range of specialist agencies - can on the one hand be more flexible in its response to different local conditions, and at the same time avoid the disadvantages of uncoordinated policy ‘silos’. It is within this

space that we would expect the notion of population balance, as a basis for decisions about service provision, to be worked out in practical terms.

Key elements of the responsibilities of the CPPs are Local Outcome Improvement Plans (LOIPs) covering their area, and at a finer spatial scale, focusing upon places with specific issues and needs, Locality Plans. The Improvement Service, which supports local government in Scotland, carried out an initial review of available LOIPs in 2018 and found them very variable in terms of approach and level of detail. The 2018 review was mainly concerned with the process of local strategy development and says little about thematic focus. In any case, since then most CPP's have issued revised LOIPs.

The Improvement Service has since explored the manner in which councils are responding to demographic change. Their 2024 report '[Navigating Demographic Change](#)' describes Local Outcome Improvement Plans (LOIPs) and Local Development Plans (LDPs) produced by local authorities and their partners as a demonstration of 'how local authorities are understanding and responding to the challenges posed by demographic change' (p.7).

The briefing goes on to note that local authority strategies typically combine strategies to both mitigate and adapt to population change and that LOIPs prioritise actions and interventions under a range of relevant themes including housing; employment; reducing inequalities and providing appropriate services to a changing population. However, whilst the report addresses both the second and third objectives of the Population Strategy, the examples provided mostly relate to age structure implications rather than balance. They provide a number of examples of adaptive approaches, gleaned from CPP LOIPs.

Responses to the informal survey of selected councils which carried out as part of this project⁷ (Box 1) indicate broadly positive views of LOIPs as an exercise in holistic thinking about population balance as a policy issue, tempered by reservations about the practicalities of implementation.

⁷ The broad scope of the work was presented at the Population Roundtable on 26th August. A short questionnaire was subsequently circulated to Councils which expressed interest in supporting the project.

Box 1: Perspectives on LOIPS provided by respondents to our survey of Councils

Text in italics quotes responses.

Amongst local authority responses to our survey LOIPs were described as a useful tool and one which can provide a focus for and coherence across the activities of a number of partners. However, responses also highlighted the difficulty in turning intentions into outcomes in the face of severe financial constraints.

The LOIP's can highlight the issues and ensure a more connected and holistic approach to planning and delivering services is adopted, but the actions and outcomes in the LOIP must be achievable within the budgets and resources available.

Local authorities also commented on an uneven focus on population concerns within and across LOIPs. For some, the LOIP was seen as too blunt a tool with neither sufficient resource, nor sufficient nuance to achieve desired local outcomes.

LOIPs are wide in their scope and outcomes. Complementary, localised, coproduced action plans that can be resourced and delivered are more appropriate and likely to get community buy in.

In preparing this report a quick review of all 32 LOIPs, with a view to an impression of how they address population balance, was carried out. LOIP documents vary considerably in length and level of detail. Most are framed as local responses to the agenda set by the Scottish Government, promoting inclusive growth and wellbeing, and tackling various forms of exclusion, poverty, and disadvantage. Many of the plans reflect an extensive programme of public consultation. In many cases, community perceptions of needs and challenges appear to drive the diagnosis, and the selection of themes to be addressed by the LOIP. In other cases, a more traditional review of published statistics allows objective benchmarking against national averages. It must be observed, however that there is little uniformity in the way published statistics are used, making simple comparisons between LOIPs difficult.

Furthermore, whatever the evidence base, it is important to recognise the tricky mismatch between the concept of population balance, which is intrinsically a comparative (between area) concept, and aspatial/societal concepts of exclusion, poverty and disadvantage. The confusion of concepts within the LOIPs is a microcosm of a wider challenge for Scottish population policy, to which we shall return in Chapters 4 and 5.

The diagnostic part of each LOIP report is generally followed by a detailed presentation of policy aspirations. In our quick review it was not always obvious how these aspirations would, in practice be delivered, i.e. in terms of specific, funded, and targeted interventions, or in terms of adjustments to statutory service provision obligations. Where interventions were specified, it was often a repackaging of existing activities of CPP member organisations. From these impressions of the character of the LOIPS it is perhaps judicious to be cautious in assuming that they will effectively address the issue of population balance.

Table 1: Community Planning Partnership Local Outcome Improvement Plans which feature population balance

Community Planning Partnership		
Council Area	Direct reference in diagnosis to population change/balance	Direct reference to population change/balance in CPP Aspirations
Argyll and Bute	Yes	No
Dumfries and Galloway	Yes	No
Dundee City	Yes	No
East Ayrshire	Yes	No
East Renfrewshire	Yes	No
Inverclyde	Yes	No
Moray	Yes	Yes
Na h-Eileanan Siar	Yes	Yes
North Lanarkshire	Yes	No
Orkney Islands	Yes	Yes
Renfrewshire	Yes	Yes
Scottish Borders	Yes	No

Shetland Islands	Yes	No
South Ayrshire	Yes	No
Stirling	Yes	No
West Dunbartonshire	Yes	No

Most of the LOIPs discuss the challenge of ageing as a ubiquitous issue. Just half of Scotland’s 32 CPPs (Table 1) contain within their diagnosis of the key issues facing them an explicit reference to population trends or population balance. However, only four of these address population issues directly in their policy aspirations. Of course, it is arguable that focusing upon inclusion or well-being may indirectly mitigate negative population trends and could also take the form of adaptation to such trends. Nevertheless, it is clear that the LOIPs’ contribution to the three objectives of the Population Strategy is primarily directed at ageing, rather than at population balance. Specific examples of the way in which population balance is handled by the LOIPs are provided in Box 2.

Box 2: Some examples of how CPP LOIPs address the issue of population balance

The Outer Hebrides CPP LOIP for 2017-27 places a very strong emphasis upon the role of service provision in responding to population change. Its first priority (alongside economic growth and wellbeing) is to “retain and attract people to ensure a sustainable population”. This is to be achieved by increasing housing availability, improving the general attractiveness of the area as a place to live and work, by making young people more aware of local opportunities to deter out-migration, and enhancing digital and transport connectivity. The issue of population balance is thus clearly front and centre of the strategy of the CPP, and mitigation is very much on the agenda.

In the Moray LOIP the challenges associated with population balance relate partly to the presence of armed forces bases, and (as in other areas), to the out-migration of young people. The policy response is incorporated under the heading “Developing a diverse, inclusive and sustainable economy”. It is foreseen to be achieved “through the higher education offer in Moray, alternatives such as apprenticeships, ensuring the right mix and availability of housing and the right environment for people of all ages”.

The LOIP for the Orkney Islands recognises the challenge of balancing population trends in the “Mainland” and “Inner Isles” with those on the “ferry connected” Outer Isles. Locality plans for the latter are in preparation, having the aspiration to “maintain or increase” population. It is anticipated that this will be achieved mainly “through levelling up digital and transport connectivity, widening the availability of services, and improving access to employment opportunities.”

The Renfrewshire LOIP, like many others, sees a shrinking working age population as a challenge. However, unlike other CPPs, Renfrewshire is not solely focused on adaptation, (for instance by addressing the exclusion of older people) but takes a more proactive mitigative approach: “Growing our working age population is a key driver to improving our local economy. We need to attract new people to work, live and settle here, but also incentivise our young people and student population to stay here too. In order to do this, we need to make sure that we have the infrastructure in place to support this, such as the right types of housing, good schools and transport links.”

The Dumfries and Galloway LOIP, also places a strong emphasis upon population trends in its diagnosis of the challenges confronting it. However, its strategy is framed more as an adaptive approach, summarised as “working in partnership to ensure a confident, ambitious, healthy and fairer Dumfries and Galloway for everyone who lives and works here.”

School buildings, restructuring and closure.

Provision of schools of appropriate size, and in locations accessible to shifting populations of children, has become a totemic issue both in rural areas with declining population, and in areas where population growth is putting pressure on the capacity of local services. Management of the schools’ estate is a responsibility devolved to the 32 Councils. However, the way in which they carry out this responsibility is circumscribed by statutory guidelines issued in 2015⁸. This document (paragraph 33) makes it very clear that the overarching objective for making changes to the school

⁸ Schools (Consultation) (Scotland) Act 2010, Scottish Government 2015 [Schools \(Consultation\) \(Scotland\) Act 2010: guidance](#)

estate (building, restructuring, closure) must be the educational interests of the pupils, as manifest in an Educational Benefits Statement. However, in the case of rural schools there is a presumption against closure (paragraph 66). Closure or restructuring plans need to consider educational benefits, community impacts, and the travelling arrangements of pupils. In terms of the likely impact upon the local community, the Council is directed to consider “whether closure of the school will affect the local community’s sustainability and whether the asset of the school’s buildings, facilities and grounds would still be accessible, or lost, to the community. Whilst the quality of educational experience of affected pupils remains the primary consideration, the purpose of this requirement is to ensure that the future of a rural school is also considered in the wider context of rural development planning and the sustainability of rural communities” (paragraph 78). Suggested examples of possible impacts include the changes to local patterns of migration (especially of young families), adjustments to other local services, the loss of the school as a venue for community activities, and associated effects on the local economy.

Health and Social Care

Although local health and social care provision is not infrequently in the news - perhaps because of local opposition to the closure of a rural hospital or other facility, or the difficulty in filling vacancies for doctors or nurses in rural areas – it would also be true to say that there is not a very active popular debate about the role of such issues as drivers of depopulation. At the other extreme, in suburban areas where the population is growing, primary health care services may be overstretched, but this does not seem to reduce the attractiveness of such areas or to dampen growth. Perhaps this is because, unlike school provision, access to health care is not, for the majority of residents or families, a daily issue, and perhaps one that they would rather not anticipate.

Health and social care policy has experienced rapid and profound change over the past decade. This has been driven not only by advances in medical and therapeutic science and technology, but also by policy reforms such as the integration of health and social care delivery (see Chapter 2), and the introduction of a new contract for the General Practitioners (GPs) which deliver primary care. Health and social care

are very much bundles of different specialist services, with multiple professional objectives, and subject to a range of performance monitoring.

Local authorities and Health Boards work together to attract and retain a workforce. Furthermore, Integration Authorities have a duty to strategically plan for the health and social care services their population will need in the future. As a needs-based service there is an expectation that individuals who require social work or social care support can access it from the place they live. Thus social care planning functions predominantly for adaptation, rather than mitigation.

A fascinating example of the potential of health and social care provision to nudge local population trends (either positively or negatively) has been provided by one of the responses to our survey of councils, in which a Regional Health Trust embraced the concept of Community Wealth Building as an Anchor Institution. This was presented by the respondent as a means of enhancing the residential attractiveness of the area, i.e. mitigating population decline (Box 3).

Box 3: Community Wealth Building as a mitigative approach to population balance

NHS Ayrshire and Arran published their first Anchor/ Community Wealth Building Strategy in January 2024 in an attempt to address challenges posed by post-Covid recovery, health inequalities, child poverty and the climate emergency. Their strategy aims to reset the local economy to create a region where wealth is shared fairly, enabling people of all ages to live full and healthy lives. This will be achieved by investing and spending locally, creating fair and meaningful employment, designing and managing NHS buildings, land and assets to maximise local and community benefits, and to reduce health services' environmental impact. NHS Ayrshire and Arran's ambitions align with North Ayrshire Council's, facilitating partnership working and in turn through the ambitions of Community Wealth Building, alleviate pressures on the region's health service, making North Ayrshire a more attractive place to live.

Despite the neglect of health and social care as a means of mitigating population change, there is an awareness of the need to adapt health and social care provision to the differing needs of areas experiencing population change. This is acknowledged by the establishment of a [short life working group](#) on GP services in rural and remote areas, which produced a report on implementing the new GP

contract in rural areas, and more recently the establishment of a [National Centre for Remote and Rural Health and Care](#). The Scottish Parliament's Health, Social Care and Sport Committee recently carried out an [inquiry](#) into health care in rural Scotland, finding that, in a number of ways, health care policy has not been sensitive enough to needs of such areas.

Provision of digital infrastructure

Digital Scotland's 2021 Strategy (A Changing Nation: How Scotland will thrive in a digital world) incorporates a range of dimensions, but the first one "no one left behind..." is directly relevant to the Population Strategy. It is the justification for various initiatives (the best known being the R100 scheme) to extend networks to areas where there is insufficient commercial incentive for provision. Although this is presented as motivated by inclusion, the secondary benefits in terms of population balance are clearly acknowledged:

"Our investment in digital infrastructure will ensure that our rural and island communities share fully in the future economic, social and environmental wellbeing of Scotland. It can help to address population decline by making living and working in a rural setting a more attractive option, and put small rural businesses on a level playing field with their competitors by providing ready access to international markets.... As working from home becomes a new normal for many, there will be new opportunities for people to live and work in every part of Scotland and we want to work with remote and rural communities to ensure that they benefit from this trend." (Digital Scotland p28-9)

The positive population balance benefits of the digital strategy are further affirmed in the text of the mandatory [impact assessment](#) under the terms of the Islands Act.

Pilot actions under the Addressing Depopulation Action Plan (ADAP)

Finally, this overview of the landscape of policy which addresses or responds to the issue of population balance acknowledges the role of a range of local authority pilot actions funded by the Scottish Government under the auspices of the 2024 Addressing Depopulation Action Plan (ADAP). The origins of the ADAP, in the 'repopulation zone' initiatives developed by the Convention of the Highlands and Islands (COHI) were described in the EAG's 2022 report [Place-based policy approaches to population challenges: Lessons for Scotland](#). The key characteristics

of the repopulation zone initiatives were identified as: being intrinsically place-based, bottom up, led by resettlement officers employed by the local councils, and multisectoral – incorporating actions relating to housing, jobs, critical infrastructure access to public services, talent attraction/retention and return migration. Under the ADAP these initiatives are overseen by an “Addressing Depopulation Delivery Group”, and together with other “pathfinder initiatives”, receive financial support from the Addressing Depopulation Fund. As the term “pathfinder” suggests, these initiatives are very much viewed as learning opportunities; they are being monitored and evaluated in order to identify good practice in different contexts.

At present there are six pathfinder initiatives, five of which are mostly rural in character (Argyll and Bute, Highland, Comhairle Nan Eilean Siar (Western Isles), Dumfries and Galloway, East Ayrshire), and one is urban (Inverclyde). The intervention logic of these six initiatives will be discussed in Chapter 3, but it will perhaps be helpful here to note that several are quite narrow in their focus (housing being the key issue), whilst others, notably that of the Western Isles, are much broader in their approach.

Reflection: Which policies make a difference?

Having scanned the policy landscape and identified a set of policies which claim to address population balance, it would be very satisfying to turn to an evaluation literature which might offer some answers to this question, however tentative. Unfortunately, we are not aware of any attempts to assess what effect these policies have on population balance. Indeed, on reflection, this is perhaps not surprising, since for most of the policies we have identified, population balance is a secondary objective, and it is one consciously shared with other interventions. Impact evaluation of the conventional “value-for-money” sense would clearly be very difficult to apply to any single policy area. In addition, the specification of a counterfactual or “policy-off” comparator would be extremely challenging.

Chapter 2: Institutional map and evolving governance

In this chapter we will attempt to provide a description and explanation of the complex system of governance within which the interventions identified in Chapter 1 are implemented. In keeping with the objective, set out in the Introduction, of communicating this in a manner which is accessible to readers from outside Scotland, it will be helpful to set this in the context of the unique but evolving division of responsibility between UK and Scottish Governments, the 32 councils, various public agencies, regional development partnerships, community and third sector organisations, and the private sector.

Whilst some of this may appear obvious or superficial to readers within Scotland, it seems a useful exercise in standing back and “seeing ourselves as others see us”. It is extremely important, both for the reader outside Scotland, who may be unaware of the somewhat “messy” system, and for the reader who is familiar with just their own corner of the structure, to set population policy within its wider governance context. The interaction of the various moving parts of the “balanced population machine” described in Chapter 1 can only be understood against the backdrop of tensions between different levels in the governance hierarchy.

A simple institutional map of interventions to enhance population balance

Bearing in mind the three generic types of policy involved in delivering population Balance, it is possible to cross-reference these with different levels of governance (Fig 4). Most of the ‘actors’ (the pale green boxes) are located within a single “tier” of governance. The main exceptions being the implementation of National Planning Framework (NPF4), the Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) and the Health and Social Care Integration Partnerships (HSCIPs), which straddle two or more levels in the hierarchy. However, most of these actors are influenced by, and have influence over, the activities of other players within governance system.

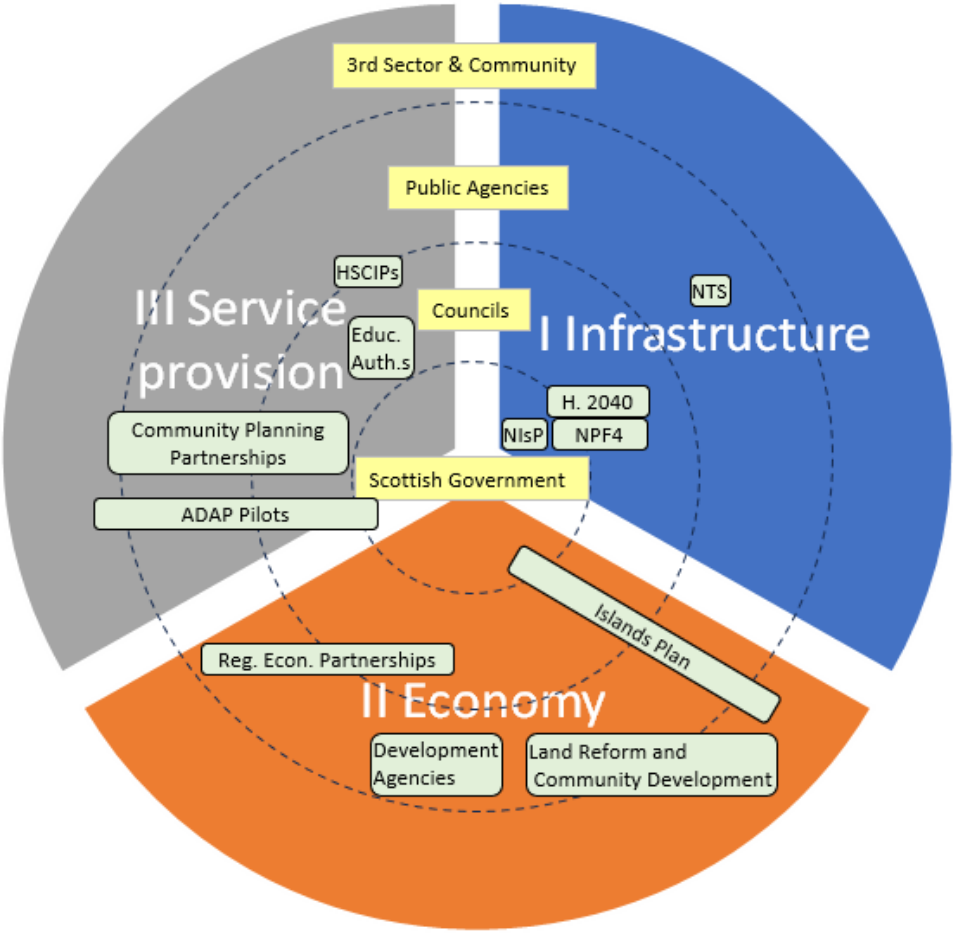
Unfortunately, in the interests of clarity these interactions cannot be shown in the diagram.

The first of the three types of intervention, relating to infrastructure, is dominated by policies managed by the Scottish Government, although the National Infrastructure Plan (NISP) and Housing to 2040 (H. 2040) are to a degree implemented at the local level by the councils. The councils act as local delivery agents for the NPF4, under

the strategic guidance of the Scottish Government. The National Transport Strategy is delivered by a public agency, Transport Scotland.

The segment of the diagram representing policies concerned with the economy feature public agencies (the Regional Development Agencies) and partnerships (the Regional Economic Partnerships). The Islands Plan is shown as having its “home” within the Scottish Government, although it must be acknowledged that local delivery is very much a collaboration with the relevant Councils, and with 3rd sector or community groups. Similarly, the land reform and community asset purchase process are facilitated by a public agency called the Scottish Land Commission, whilst financial support is provided by the Scottish Land Fund. Land or asset purchase is, however, a gateway to community development opportunities which are heavily dependent upon the third sector.

Figure 4: Map of institutions involved in delivering population balance



Abbreviations:
 HSCIP: Health and Social Care Integration Partnerships
 NTS: National Transport Strategy
 NisP: National Infrastructure Plan
 H. 2040: Housing 2040
 NPF4: National Planning Framework 4
 ADAP: Addressing Depopulation Action Plan

Key actors in the local development scene (both under the Islands Plan, and in projects facilitated by community asset purchase) are the over 350 local Development Trusts, and their representative body, the [Development Trust Association](#).

In the service provision segment, there is a more complex pattern of partnership working. The Community Planning Partnerships are collaborations at a local level between the councils and various agencies and partnerships. Similarly, the Health and Social Care Integration Partnerships are collaborations between the relevant (regional) health board, and the one of the 32 councils. The education authorities sit within the council level, although they participate in the Community Planning Partnerships.

Because Figure 4 is structured by the policies shown in Figure 3, governance actors which have a more general remit to support the councils such as the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA), or the Improvement Service are not shown. The former is a representative body for the councils. In recent years, COSLA has invested considerable staff resource in following and contributing to the Scottish Government's development of the Population Strategy and ADAP. It is a key player in the Population Roundtable (see below) and is represented at Expert Advisory Group meetings. The Improvement Service is a Scottish Government funded agency, tasked with supporting the councils. In 2024, it published a [report](#) describing the range of ways in which councils are addressing population challenges, especially demographic ageing.

Box 4: The views of local authorities on the role of the third sector

In our survey of local authorities, we also asked which third sector organisations they viewed as having a significant role to play in determining population trends.

Responses were quite varied, but some local authorities clearly see third sector organisations as important actors in this area.

Views reflect the diversity of the third sector and the kinds of activities and outcomes it can support. Smaller community-based organisations and those focused on sport and leisure have an important role to play in supporting health and wellbeing, combatting isolation and supporting connections, including for newcomers to an area.

Those offering clubs and activities for children can offer an important contribution to childcare provision for working parents.

More established and economically focused organisations such as community development trusts or registered social landlords on the other hand may contribute to skills development and employment opportunities as well as developing locally grounded responses to changing housing needs.

On Arran, the third sector is playing an important role in improving workforce sustainability. From January to March 2023, North Ayrshire Council delivered a 'test of change' pilot with investment from the Scottish Government Island Skills and Repopulation Pilot. The 'North Ayrshire Islands Skills Initiative' (NAISI) provided a dynamic, local response to maximize opportunities and socio-economic benefits, in partnership with relevant stakeholders in order to pilot skills interventions that support island economies and meet local need and demand on the islands of both Arran and Cumbrae, including:

- Providing short-term funded skills and capacity building solutions that ensure islanders are engaged with and participate in activities that meet local needs and employment priorities;
- Identifying priority groups include jobseekers, young people, parents, women, minority groups and individuals who require upskilling/re-skilling to enable and encourage continued employment and/or volunteering by members of the community;
- Supporting skills in childcare and exploring options for increasing available childcare provision on islands; and
- Strengthening links and understanding of need between local, regional and national partner organisations, local schools, colleges, universities, island businesses and organisations and senior phase curriculum options.

As part of this initiative and in recognition of the declining population and workforce on Arran, in February 2023, the Council provided funding to Arran CVS to produce the Arran Skills Initiative Report. The report recognised that the declining population on Arran is having a significant impact on the available workforce, resulting in staff shortages across a range of sectors. Following the conclusion of the pilot, the Council

secured funding to appoint an Arran Skills Coordinator for an initial 12 month period to deliver recommendations of the Arran Skills Report, establish an Arran Skills Group and develop a workplan with actions and key performance outcomes.

A diagram such as Figure 4 can illustrate the basic outline of the institutional landscape and can suggest some differences between policy segments. However, it is inevitably limited in the degree to which it can do justice to the complex interrelationships between the actors. Perhaps even more important in the present context, it can only present a snapshot. It cannot do justice to very interesting, and meaningful, shifts and trends in terms of where decisions are made, and where innovation originates. An understanding of these nuances can only be conveyed by a more narrative, qualitative approach.

The evolving governance context: devolution, centralisation, relocalisation and the role of place

The governance context of Scotland is distinguished from most European neighbours by two unique features: (i) the 1999 devolution settlement, and (ii) relatively early (by European standards) local government reforms in pursuit of economic efficiency and scale economies.

The former is crucial to the pursuit of population balance because the majority of policy areas which are relevant to the pursuit of population balance (education, health, housing, planning etc) are devolved, making it a bit easier (in theory) to achieve policy coherence. Regional economic development is also, prima facie, devolved, but the UK Government has nevertheless in recent years taken initiatives north of the Border (for example in the City Regions programme, Freeports, and Levelling Up).

Local government reform was implemented in Scotland in 1975, replacing historic counties and districts with a two-tier arrangement of 10 regions, and 56 districts. Further rationalisation, creating the 32 unitary authorities, or “councils”, that we know today, came in 1996. These reforms were distinctive not only in that they came much earlier than those of many other European countries, but also in that they brought with them a strong degree of centralisation of power. The 32 councils have comparatively little freedom of manoeuvre, they delivered services according to the

regulations initially set by the Scottish Office, from 1999 by the Scottish Executive, and from 2011 by the Scottish Government.

Responsibility for emergency services and water supply were transferred from local government to regional public sector agencies at various points in the post-war period. These were gradually amalgamated, giving them all a Scotland-wide remit by 2013⁹. The influence of principles of New Public Management (Lapiente and Van der Walle 2020) was very important in driving these changes. By the first decade of this century Scotland's governance, like that of the rest of the UK, was distinctive (a)

in having (according to European standards) relatively large local government units (in terms of area and population), (b) in that some of the functions which in neighbouring countries tended to be associated with municipalities, have been transferred to public sector agencies, and (c) in a rather centralised decision-making arrangement.

The key disadvantages of the service provision structure which emerged from this neo-liberal quest for efficiency were: (i) The creation of what are commonly known as 'policy silos', in which each aspect of service delivery managed itself independently, with little coordination and ignoring opportunities for synergy. (ii) A tendency for services to be offered across Scotland in a 'one size fits all' manner, with few concessions to local characteristics and needs. The risk to local democratic rights and accountability was recognised by the UK Government even before devolution (SPICE 2015) and the concept of Community Planning as a solution to this was picked up by the Scottish Office. Two Community Planning Pilots were carried out before the turn of the century. In 2003, the Devolved Administration enshrined community planning principles in the Local Government in Scotland Act, so that leading Community Planning Partnerships (CPPs) became a duty for councils, and participation a legal obligation for a range of other public sector organisations. In 2011, the Christie Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services recommended further development of the community planning structure and process. This led to the Community Empowerment Bill of 2014, which formalised the

⁹ The Scottish Ambulance Service became a national organisation in 1995; Police Scotland and the Fire Service were established in 2013. Scottish Water was created by amalgamating regional boards in 2002.

community involvement processes, and created the requirement for every CPP to produce a Local Outcome Improvement Plan (LOIP). The CPPs are a very important element of the governance landscape within which the various policies identified in Chapter 1 seek to improve 'population balance', because they are intended to improve both coherence and sensitivity to the different needs and constraints of different parts of Scotland. We explore the issues and challenges associated with this below.

More recently, push-back against centralisation of power from various interest groups favouring stronger local democracy has been recognised by the Scottish Government in a consultative process known as "Democracy Matters". Furthermore, the 2023 Verity House Agreement, between COSLA and the Scottish Government has established the maxim "local by default, national by agreement". This represents a radical change in the distribution of decision-making power in Scotland's local governance. It is probably too early to assess the impact, though the articulation and influence of concepts such as the [Place Principle](#), and [Community Wealth Building](#) would suggest that the "relocalisation" of governance is more than a passing phase or superficial window dressing. The former is described as "a more joined-up, collaborative, and participative approach to services, land and buildings, across all sectors within a place". The latter also has a strong emphasis upon "place", but this time in an economic context, aiming to retain wealth and benefits within local communities.

It is very interesting to compare Scotland's local governance journey - from early reform 'rationalisation' and centralisation, to some extent at the expense of local democratic control, followed by a turn towards various forms of relocalisation - with the experience of countries (such as the Nordics) where municipalities have retained a greater degree of independence, but where there have also been fierce national debates about municipal reforms and experiments with two-tier regional/municipal arrangements. Similar challenges (in terms of service viability and economic pressures) but different historical legacies and traditions have resulted in very different restructuring responses.

The governance narrative of Scotland's Population Strategy

Having described the evolving governance backdrop we now consider the specific focus on demographic patterns and change which produced Scotland's Population Strategy and ADAP.

Concern about population issues, especially depopulation of rural areas, is nothing new, the antecedents of the current Population Strategy could be traced back over decades, if not centuries. However, in governance terms a very significant event was the establishment of the Scottish Government's Ministerial Population Taskforce in June 2019. Taskforce membership comprises 10-15 cabinet secretaries and ministers (composition varies according to the subject under discussion), representing a very broad spectrum of policy areas. The Taskforce's [Terms of Reference](#) state that its role is "to ensure population supports the needs of communities and sustainable economic growth". It does this by (a) providing a forum for discussion and prioritisation of population issues at the highest level, and (b) promoting pro-active and coherent policy responses. In so doing, the Taskforce has the ambition to render the impact of population policy "greater than the sum of its parts".

A number of specific responsibilities are also placed upon the Taskforce, relating to:

- Exploring geographic (West-East, rural, island) shifts in population.
- Investigating implications of population change for the public sector workforce.
- Encouraging EU and international migration into Scotland, including of international students, and skilled workers.
- Identifying "policies of place" which encourage in-migration of families to shrinking communities.
- Ensuring that skills development supports population retention and/or repopulation.
- Developing population-related indicators for the National Performance Framework.

The Taskforce is supported by a Secretariat, and by a Programme Board – whose membership is comprised of senior civil servants from relevant parts of the Scottish Government, together with COSLA, the statistics agency (National Records

Scotland), the regional development agencies (HIE, SE, SOSE), Skills Development Scotland, and the tourism agency (Visit Scotland). Another forum for discussion with local government is provided in the form of a quarterly 'Population Roundtable' (online) meeting, organised by COSLA and the Scottish Government, to which representatives of all 32 councils are invited.

As described in the EAG's previous report on Place Based Policy Approaches to Population Challenges, the "top-down" decision to promote coherent population policy, by setting up the Taskforce in 2019, was closely followed by a bottom up "Repopulation Zone" initiative by COHI in 2020. The Convention meets twice a year, facilitated by the Scottish Government, and involves the councils of the Highlands and Islands region, together with its regional development agency HIE.

Responsibility for the repopulation initiative has recently been transferred to the Highlands and Islands Regional Economic Partnership (REP).

As implied by the title the COHI programme was distinctive in targeting a number of bounded geographical 'zones' which were considered particularly problematic in terms of population trends. Without wishing to stray into the topic covered by Chapter 3 it will be helpful to note that the activities of the 'repopulation officers' employed by the scheme focused upon housing and supporting in-migration. In terms of the narrative of governance of population policy the significance of the COHI initiative is that it served to underline the commitment of the councils and HIE, to repopulation, and provided a means of testing territorial approaches, based upon the diagnoses and expertise by locally embedded public servants.

The next chapter of the narrative is marked by the publication of the Scottish Government's Population Strategy in 2021. In governance terms, the significance of the strategy was not in creating any new delivery structures, new institutional arrangements, or new policy instruments. Its purpose was to raise awareness of population issues of concern (age structure, balance, longer term decline), to express the ambitions of the Scottish Government in response, to describe the range of ongoing policy commitments, and the actors responsible, and to set out detailed, and in part measurable, commitments for future enhancement, with the goal of increased effectiveness of this complex policy system. Like comparable strategy documents in several EU member states (Dax and Copus 2023), the Strategy seeks

to 'set the tone' for greater coherence and common purpose across a wide-ranging, and often silo-structured, governance network. In respect to many parts of this policy machine the Scottish Government has direct (statutory) levers through which it can, if it wishes, further its objectives in terms of population balance. However, in the context of the increasing appetite for 'relocalisation' of governance noted above, the strategy also acknowledges the value, and capacity for impact, of harnessing local innovation, commitment, and energy.

Finally, the Addressing Depopulation Action Plan of 2024 differs from the Population Strategy in focussing only on areas experiencing population decline. Although like the Strategy it reviews existing interventions, in detail it has a stronger emphasis upon specific interventions. Although many of the 83 'actions' listed at the end of the report are pre-existing commitments, the ADAP goes beyond the Strategy in that it announces a new funding scheme, the Addressing Depopulation Fund, which supports 'pathfinder' initiatives by councils. That this funding is channelled through local government reflects a strong emphasis upon 'bottom up' and place-based approaches, which is justified by references to Verity House Agreement principles.

Partnerships – the key to coherence and relocalisation, or “clutter”?

CPPs deserve special consideration, because there is a temptation to assume that they make a strong contribution to the pursuit of population balance, by “tweaking” the delivery of key services in order to discourage outmigration from shrinking rural areas and responding to new and anticipated demand in areas which are 'overheating'. We have already reported that local population trends feature in a number of LOIPs. Considerable time, effort and expense are absorbed by the CPP system. There have been several evaluations of the governance processes involved in running CPPs, identifying issues such as the balance between the Councils (who have a statutory obligation as conveners), and other actors, and the difficulties associated with third sector participation. However, there is so far very little evidence of the extent to which the interventions of participant public sector actors are adjusted in response to priorities identified in LOIPs. Many of the service provision responsibilities are statutory, tightly specified and closely monitored at a national level, and perhaps inevitably, within silos which do not interact. The effectiveness of the CPPs in responding to population balance issues (or any other local priority)

must therefore be determined, at least in part, by the availability of funds and capacity to implement interventions which go beyond statutory responsibilities.

These are probably modest in scale in the current straightened public expenditure situation¹⁰.

Another form of partnership which is implemented across Scotland is the Health and Social Care Integration Partnership (HSCIP). Scotland differs from the rest of the UK in that the delivery of Health Care and of Social Care are integrated, under the terms of Public Bodies (Joint Working) (Scotland) Act 2014. However, integration is at a regional level, local delivery is probably perceived by many users as still through independent health and social care components. As in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, in Scotland health care (both local ‘primary care’ and ‘secondary care’ in hospitals and other treatment centres) is provided by 14 regional National Health Service boards, whilst social care (a wide range of mental health services, care for children and the elderly, including ‘care homes’) is the responsibility of the 32 councils. Across Scotland these services are coordinated by 31¹¹ umbrella ‘Health and Social Care Integration Partnerships’ (HSCIPs)¹⁴.

The ways in which these HSCIPs take account of, or affect, the balanced population objectives of the Population Strategy probably depend to a large extent upon the statutory guidance which is set for them by the Scottish Government. Both the health service and the care system are extremely complex, with multiple and diverse objectives, priorities, and statutory targets. These seem (understandably) to be exclusively within the primary focus of health and social care, with outcomes measured in terms of treatment timing, medical outcomes, public health indicators and so on. Combining these and producing common goals for local partnerships is already extremely challenging, and it is hardly surprising that it is not yet possible to observe any consideration of secondary impacts of decisions on facilities planning and the ‘estate’ upon local population trends.

However, this should not be taken to imply that there is no awareness of the specific health and social care challenges facing rural and remote areas. In 2022, the

¹⁰ [Local government in Scotland: Overview 2023](#)

¹¹ Stirling and Clackmannanshire form a single partnership with NHS Forth Valley.

¹⁴ See [About Health and Social Care Integration in Scotland](#)

Scottish Government announced funding for a [National Centre for Remote and Rural Healthcare](#). This was launched in the summer of 2024. Meanwhile, during the summer of 2023 the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee of the Scottish Parliament carried out a consultation on Healthcare in Remote and Rural Areas, with a view to identifying key priorities for the new centre. The final report of the Committee's finding is due to be published within the coming months. Meantime, the information office of the Parliament (SPICE) has published a summary of responses to the consultation. Interestingly, very few of the responses focused on health or social care challenges per se, instead highlighting issues, such as recruitment and retention, day to day implications of small team working, national funding formulae, and GP contracts, which they perceive to be drivers of rural depopulation. One respondent summed this up by stating that the NHS Scotland Resource Allocation Committee formula is "inappropriate for rural communities and fails to recognise the importance of healthcare provision in making communities sustainable and attractive places to live, work and stay in" (SPICE 2023 p8-9). Clearly there is scope for rural healthcare policy, and its funding framework to more explicitly and deliberately address population concerns. The Arran initiative described in Box 3 above provides one example of how this could be approached.

More than a decade ago Campbell Christie wrote "we believe that Scotland's public service landscape is unduly cluttered and fragmented, and that further streamlining of public service structures is likely to be required" (Christie Report 2011). The CPPs were, of course, already in existence when he wrote, and indeed he made recommendations for improving them. However, their effectiveness in promoting population balance is largely contingent on their capacity to inject "tweaks" into the policy silos within which their members operate. It is understood that discussions involving COSLA and Audit Scotland, and focused on increasing the effectiveness of the CPPs are ongoing.

Turning to HSCIPs, it seems that their flexibility and ability to respond to local challenges has already been judged inadequate, requiring the support of an additional organisation. Again, whether this just adds to the "clutter" will depend on whether the new National Centre can bring about concrete changes in rural and remote health and social care delivery which have a positive effect upon population balance.

Chapter 3: Intervention Logics and Theories of Change

In this chapter, we describe the different ways in which the policies and actors identified in Chapters 1 and 2 are intended to work, how they are expected to deliver an improved balance of population. In the policy evaluation literature this is often referred to as “intervention logic”, whilst in more complex multi-actor situations the term “Theory of Change” (ToC) is sometimes preferred (Annex 1). The attraction of the latter, in the context of the present report, lies not only in the fact that it is usually qualitative in application, but it conveys the idea of actions being driven by a mental picture of an ultimate goal, and a series of stepping stone actions/outcomes which constitute a journey towards that goal. Sometimes (ideally) that journey is described in policy documentation, often it is left implicit, perhaps because it is felt to be obvious, and in such cases it has to be reconstructed on the basis of available evidence. This underlines the fact that ToCs may often share with the psychological notion of ‘theories of mind’ the nature of being something in the subconscious, influencing choices whilst not always being thought through in a rational calculating way.

Previous applications of the ToC approach to policies addressing rural shrinking across Europe suggested that although every context and policy story is unique, it is not difficult to find common elements, and to define generic types (Copus et al. 2020, Dax and Copus 2022). The generic types of ToC proposed by Dax and Copus (Compensation, Relocalisation, Global Reconnection, and Smart Shrinking) are probably too conceptual to be used in this report, and instead we suggest a set of more contextually grounded ToC types which seem to play a role in the design of Scottish policy to address population balance.

Before we do that, however, it is important to acknowledge the role of the concept of “population balance” which, according to the Population Strategy, is the high-level goal to which the various initiatives described in Chapter 1 should aspire.

What is ‘population balance’?

It is of course important to establish a clear and unambiguous understanding of the concept of “population balance”. The obvious starting point for this is the explanation provided by the Population Strategy itself:

P66: “Our focus in this programme is on population balance and the sustainable distribution of our population in a way that works with the characteristics of our places and local ambitions for change. We recognise that both rapid population growth and depopulation can bring challenges.”

P74: “Ensuring that Scotland’s population is more balanced across the country means exploring the significant structural changes that are needed to support attraction and retention in those areas that are losing people and thereby reduce the pressure on areas dealing with a significant growth in population.”

P8: “Place must be at the centre of the answer to our demographic challenge. The economy, infrastructure, housing and public services are all driven by taking a placebased whole-system approach.”

P6: “The Scottish Government’s aim is to make communities across Scotland attractive places to live, work, bring up families and to move to; so that Scotland’s population profile provides a platform for sustainable and inclusive economic growth and wellbeing.”

The concept of population balance which presented in Scotland’s Population Strategy is thus:

- Essentially spatial – it is about balance between places.
- Relative rather than absolute – (there is no underlying spatial plan or targets), and is not about equalisation, achieving stasis, or restoring or maintaining historic levels of population. Rather it is about moderating extreme or rapid change, either positive or negative.
- Motivated by the inclusion and wellbeing objectives of National Performance Framework. More specifically, it seeks to ameliorate the adjustment costs to providers of public services, and the wellbeing impacts to residents, associated with extreme or rapid local population changes.

However, it is important to be aware that the term “balanced” has in the past not always been used in a way which is compatible with the apparent intentions of the Scottish Strategy. Within a more focused debate about demographic change, especially before the past decade or so, ‘balance’ was sometimes associated with replacement rates of total fertility, or with age structure. However, as Lutz (2008, 2014) points out, replacement fertility rates are now so far beyond the reach of most

developed countries, it would be very misleading if the goal of “balanced population” were to imply that the Scottish population could ever be stabilised through positive rates of natural increase. What may instead be technically achievable, at a national level, given a supportive UK political context, is a balance between negative natural change and positive net migration. Even this would be much more difficult at a local level.

The term “balanced” has a history of association with various perspectives on regional and rural development, and its use in Scotland’s Population Strategy document is therefore, for some readers, freighted with a range of implicit nuances.

The most obvious of these are:

- Various notions of balanced spatial development in terms of urban-rural or coreperiphery growth, exemplified by the [European Spatial Development Perspective’s](#) concept of “polycentricity”¹². Since the ESDP, polycentricity has been consistently advocated by a succession of updates, culminating in [Territorial Agenda 2030](#). The term “balanced regional development” has also featured prominently in a debate about Ireland’s National Spatial Strategy¹³ (NSS). Scotland’s population strategy is very far from the explicit spatial planning approach of the ESDP, or Ireland’s NSS, but nevertheless hints at the need to avoid a disproportionate concentration of population and economic activity in the Central Belt, especially in and around Edinburgh, using the term “overheating”.
- The term “balanced regional development” has also been employed by the [EU](#) to justify rural development interventions which address the wider needs of remoter rural areas, beyond sectoral support for agriculture.
- The sustainability literature’s concept of a balance between human population and the natural ecosystem – derived from some estimate of ecological or biological “carrying capacity”.

¹² “With past enlargements, and the prospect of future extensions, the EU is now of a size and diversity which demands a spatial development strategy. The concept of polycentric development has to be pursued, to ensure regionally balanced development, because the EU is becoming fully integrated in the global economy. Pursuit of this concept will help to avoid further excessive economic and demographic concentration in the core area of the EU. The economic potential of all regions of the EU can only be utilised through the further development of a more polycentric European settlement structure.” (ESDP p20)

¹³ See for example: [Balanced Regional Development - Meaning](#) and [National Planning Fiction](#)

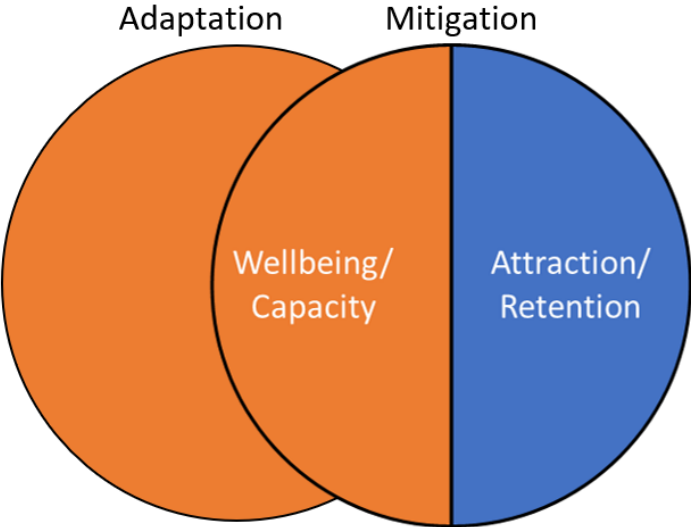
Dax and Copus, in their 2022 review of national population strategies of Germany, France, Italy, Spain and Scotland (Dax and Copus 2022), identified a common shift away from neo-liberal intervention logics, driven by economic development and employment, towards a 'softer', more qualitative emphasis upon geographic equalisation human rights and wellbeing, achieved through local development processes, driven by social as well as economic goals. We shall reflect upon the future potential implications of this in Scotland in Chapter 4. Before doing so we will explore in more detail the intervention logics which are associated with the current population balance policy landscape.

ToC Types currently associated with population balance

A full ToC analysis (see Annex 1) traces the pathway of logical steps backwards from the goal, through final outcomes, and intermediate outcomes, linked by interventions, back to the starting point, which is the problem to be solved. Internal and external contexts should also be described. It is neither feasible nor necessary to carry out a full analysis here. Ultimately what distinguishes different ToCs as responses to a common policy challenge (in this case population balance) are the intermediate outcomes, which occupy a central position between a common challenge (depopulation or overheating) and an assumed final outcome (i.e. balance). The rest of this chapter describes seven ToC narratives which are associated with the various policies featured in Chapter 1.

Before describing the individual policy approaches, however, it will be helpful to distinguish two overarching groups (Figure 5). The first of these may be termed "attraction and retention". These types of approach, as their name implies, act directly upon migration flows. They are by nature mitigative. The other broad group address local wellbeing and service provision capacity, either as an indirect route to mitigation, or as simple adaptation to acknowledged shifts in population distribution.

Figure 5: Broad categories of policy to address population balance



1. Rural-urban connectedness/interaction. Planners and economists have long assumed that negative population trends in rural areas may be ameliorated by improving accessibility and increased interaction with cities and towns. There is a substantial academic literature which discusses and models such effects (Copus et al. 2022). Various spatial planning approaches, including City Regions, have this ToC as a foundation. In the past ‘key settlements’ have been designated as ‘growth poles’. More neo-liberal versions of this approach have assumed that investing in cities will automatically deliver benefits to rural hinterlands through spontaneous ‘spread effects’.

The Scottish Government’s [2016 Agenda for Cities](#) document summarised this view of regional development as follows: “Good transport connections, affordable housing and local amenities make the regions outside the cities attractive to many city workers, who also enjoy being near to the social and cultural hubs that thrive in cities. Scotland’s cities and their regions gain from their easy access to the varied beauty of rural Scotland and in turn, Scotland’s cities provide a natural home for research and development, education and international connections that support businesses in rural Scotland. When our cities thrive, the rest of Scotland shares the benefit.”

In practical terms this ToC often inspires transport infrastructure improvements, including roads and ferries (as illustrated by the quotation from the National Transport Strategy on p8) and, more recently, installation of faster digital networks.

This intervention logic is very pervasive in regional and rural development circles, and although evidence of effectiveness is mixed, and is rarely challenged despite scattered indications of perverse outcomes sometimes referred to as ‘pump effects’ (Copus et al. 2022). This term describes a situation in which improving access between a major centre and its rural periphery results in the former ‘siphoning off’ economic activity and service provision, and so actually increasing the risk of depletion in the outer rural areas.

2. Local employment creation – On the basis of a review of NPF4 Local Development Plans and CPP LOIPs, the Improvement Service states (2024 p7) that “Local authorities highlight their role in improving job opportunities through identifying land for business use, supporting key growth sectors and investing in skills and education opportunities”. However, it is questionable whether this activity is driven by a concern for balance, rather than the ubiquitous quest for growth, even in overheating areas.

Both these first two approaches fall into the ‘attraction and retention’ group, and are intrinsically mitigative. However, in both cases the causal links to population balance are somewhat indirect. Economic development is generally assumed to be good for local/regional population trends, but in practise it is a blunt tool - many increases in economic activity bring negligible local employment, and therefore insignificant repopulation.

3. Human capital approaches: This ToC focuses directly upon the age-specific character of rural depopulation. Such approaches thus address both the second (ageing) and third (balance) objectives of the Scottish Government’s Population Strategy. Although they usually have ambitions with respect to mitigation, they may also be adaptive. Neither do they fit exclusively into the ‘attraction and retention’ group, often having wellbeing objectives too.

Several critical points in the population age profile, at which the proclivity to outmigrate peaks¹⁴, form the basis of different human capital approaches.

Perhaps the best-established version of the logic is manifest in the statutory guidelines to education authorities regarding school closure (p14). This builds upon the often-observed cause and effect relationship between school provision and the attractiveness of an area to young migrant families. This applies not only in a rural context, where the closure of a small primary school can have a significant impact upon migration patterns, but also in more densely populated areas, where a secondary school with a strong reputation among parents can affect the housing market within its catchment area. More recently the availability of nursery and preschool childcare has been identified as a key issue in rural areas, leading to various initiatives to ensure provision. Highland Council is, for example, currently carrying out a Rural Childcare Practitioner Feasibility Study as part of their ADAP pathfinder initiative.

A second “pinch point” in the age profile of the population is in the late teens, with the well-known phenomenon of the attraction of young people towards higher/further education, training or employment in Scotland’s cities and university towns. The establishment of the University of the Highlands and Islands was very much an example of a ToC for restoring population balance by retaining young people within their home region.

The third peak in migration is associated with approach of old age, when increasing health and care requirements coincide with mobility (car ownership) issues, to encourage migration into larger villages or regional centres. Awareness of this situation, combined with that for childcare has led Highland Council to explore the feasibility of an innovative “single care model” combining both types of care within a single service.

4. Wellbeing and place-making approaches – This family of intervention logics reflects the assumption that more positive perceptions of the lifestyle and

¹⁴ For detailed discussion of life course approaches to migration see the forthcoming EAG report “Migration and Mobilities - Trajectories of Young People and Young Adults in Rural Scotland” to be published Spring 2025.

environmental advantages of areas affected by population decline will lead to increased rates of in-migration. Targeted advertising may be accompanied by incentives in the form of advice, and even financial assistance with removal costs. These forms of intervention are often combined in a package, with others based on different ToCs; an example being the 2016-18 Argyll and Bute Rural Resettlement Fund, as described in the EAG's 2020 report on [Internal Migration](#). This ToC falls within the Wellbeing and Capacity Group, and is usually aimed at mitigation rather than adaptation.

5. Addressing housing shortages - The Improvement Service, through their analysis of NPF4 Local Development Plans in their [2024 report](#), identify housing strategies as a key mitigation approach. It is recognised as a key issue in many parts of Scotland, but in different ways, leading to different policy responses.

In more accessible scenic and coastal areas local housing markets are (as in other parts of the UK) affected by second home ownership and holiday letting, which inflates prices beyond the means of local people. Seasonal occupancy and transient populations change communities and affect the viability of local services. In response, some councils have increased the Council Tax charged on homes which are not permanently occupied. Councils across Scotland are actively developing proposals for visitor levies, which may cover holiday lets. Both the Argyll and Bute and Dumfries and Galloway ADAP pathfinder initiatives are experimenting with a wide range of guidance and advice to increase the availability of privately rented homes for local people, and to discourage the transfer to second home status.

In other areas, often rural, the challenge is the availability of housing of an acceptable quality and size (starter or family homes). There is a close link with employment; business development often being hampered by difficulty recruiting staff due to non-availability of suitable accommodation. The three Community Settlement Officers established by the Convention of the Highlands and Islands Repopulation Zone initiative, and based in Highland, the Western Isles, and Argyll and Bute, provide a range of support and advice relating to housing issues. At a national level the Housing to 2040 Strategy, incorporating the Affordable Housing Supply Programme, and the Rural and Island Housing Fund supports house construction in areas where the stock is insufficient to meet demand. In crofting

areas, the Croft House Grant scheme is a long-established response to the need for better rural housing. It “[provides grants for crofters to improve and maintain the standards of crofter housing, with the aim of attracting and retaining people within the crofting areas of Scotland](#)”.

Housing supply interventions belong to the ‘wellbeing and capacity’ group, and may be either mitigative or (in the case of overheating areas) adaptive.

6. Community Development - In an international context a very important approach to addressing issues of population balance, over the last couple of decades has been termed ‘endogenous’ or ‘neo-endogenous’ development¹⁵. The former term is intended to convey the idea that development is locally rooted driven by initiative and capital (physical, financial, human, social and environmental), originating within the locality/community, rather than injected ‘top-down’ by central government. The prefix ‘neo’ reflects the subsequent realisation that ‘bottom up’ initiatives invariably require external inputs of expertise or finance in order to thrive. Within the EU such approaches are exemplified by the various reincarnations of the LEADER programme, and latterly by CLLD (Community Led Local Development). The [European Network for Rural Development](#) (now part of the [EU CAP Network](#)) has promoted neo-endogenous approaches through the concept of [Smart Villages](#).

In Scotland, because of its distinctive economic, legal and cultural history, particularly the highly skewed distribution of land ownership, community development approaches have often been strongly associated with land reform, and community purchase of land or other assets. In sparsely populated rural areas, without community purchase, the resident population has only a “toehold” in terms of control of local resources. Land for building is (in theory) abundant, but only a tiny proportion is bought and sold on the open market, constraining housebuilding, and business development. The lack of local control extends, of course, to resources associated with the land, such as energy resources, forestry, grazing, fishing and mineral rights and so on. Added complexity, in terms of the cultural implications, comes from the fact that historically (especially before the late nineteenth century) many owners of land in these areas of Scotland viewed the local residents as an encumbrance, rather than an asset, and actively sought to encourage out-migration. It is this

¹⁵ See the EAG’s 2022 Report on place-based policy approaches to population challenges.

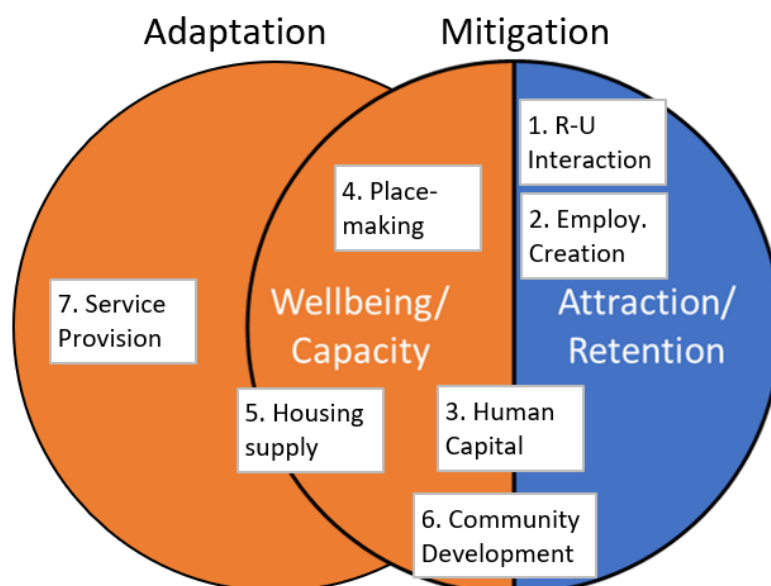
backdrop which constitutes a challenging context for neo-endogenous development and explains why state-assisted community land purchase has become a necessary (and headline-grabbing) precursor. The Island of Eigg is often cited as an example (Creaney and Niewiadomski 2016).

Thus, from an international comparative perspective, it is probably correct to see land reform and community asset purchase not as a direct policy response to population decline, but as a (Scotland specific) gateway to processes of neoendogenous development, which are comparable to those observed in mainland Europe, and elsewhere in the developed world.

Community development is very variable in terms of its activities and may fall into either the Attraction/Retention or Wellbeing/Capacity groups. It is usually, though not always, mitigative in its goals.

7. Service provision adjustments – Unlike the preceding ToCs this is predominantly an adaptive response to population change (whether positive or negative). Decisions to adjust service provision levels are usually seen in the (adaptive) context of sound financial management, rather than in the context of population balance. However, as we have seen in the example of school estate above, certain services have become “totemic” and some form of mitigative compromise is sought.

Figure 6: Seven policy approaches to population balance



A reflection on impact evaluation

Having delved a bit deeper into the various intervention logics a partial solution to the evaluation conundrum, noted at the end of Chapter 1, presents itself. Each of the ToCs described above has associated “intermediate outcomes”, which are seen as stepping stones on the way to enhancing population balance. These tend to be relatively tangible/measurable and could be taken as surrogates for impact.

However, this implies a strong causal link between intermediate outcomes and final (population balance) impacts, which would need to be tested by objective research. We will return to this in our recommendations.

Geographic coherence

Policy coherence is customarily conceived in terms of interactions, overlaps and gaps between policy silos. Geographic coherence between locally devolved policy actors is less often considered.

The Improvement Service in their Navigating Demographic Change report (2024 p19) ponder the compatibility of balance with locally devolved policy responsibilities, under the heading “competitive migration”: “Within Scottish local authority plans, population growth, particularly amongst working age groups, features prominently as the means to achieving a thriving economy and sustainability of public services. This is true across local authorities seeking to reverse population decline, but also in areas where the working age population is already growing...If all local authorities across Scotland aim to grow their population through migration, this could create competition between local authorities trying to attract the same people...local authorities should continue to explore where collaborative approaches can maximise benefit across the whole country, building on each area’s strengths...”

Top-down spatial planning approaches have never been favoured in a UK context, nor by the devolved administrations. Within the Scottish policy context the NPF4 National Spatial Strategy arguably could be described as a “light touch” form of spatial planning. It is still in a transitional phase in terms of implementation. Whether within the context of the complex web of statutory and non-statutory responsibilities, the link between NPF4 priorities and those of individual councils (as expressed in their LDPs), will be sufficiently strong to effectively promote “balance” is very difficult to say.

Chapter 4: Implications for policy coherence and effectiveness

In the preceding chapters we have attempted to map out a systematic overview of the policy “machine” through which the Scottish Government, together with a range of public and third sector actors seek to address the issue of the geographic balance of population development. It has been helpful to separately consider three “layers”, or subsystems, interventions, actors and intervention logic. This careful disaggregation has helped us to identify a range of strengths and weaknesses associated with the orchestration of multiple policies towards the goal of population balance. The analytical framework raises questions about gaps in our knowledge regarding existing interventions and has potential as a starting point for a more systematic approach to policy coherence. It is to these that we turn in this final section of our report.

Establishing a Baseline

One aspect of the review of policy literature relating to population balance provided in chapters 1-3, which is particularly evident in the comparison of LOIPs, is the absence of standardised indicators and statistical definitions. There is no standard benchmark equivalent to – for example- the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation. Each policy actor tends to pick out the statistical indicator and definition of population balance which seems appropriate to the context. The distinction of the Population Strategy’s second and third challenges (ageing and balance) often becomes blurred.

It is proposed that a standardised definition and a limited number of statistical indicators should be agreed (perhaps) by the Population Roundtable in consultation with NRS, and that such indicators be regularly published at a council area level. Consideration should be given to the potential to develop indicators which go beyond simple demographic counts, by assessing intermediate outcomes which contribute to the wellbeing and ‘liveability rights’ as experienced by local populations. To some extent this implies a need to temper our reliance on ‘hard data’ with perspectives from more qualitative forms of information.

However, there are also opportunities to explore quantified approaches based on GIS analysis. Given that the majority of policy levers relate to service provision, measurements of service accessibility - such as those which already form the basis

of the [SIMD's](#) Geographic Access to Services domain¹⁶ - or comparisons with critical population thresholds for various kinds of service delivery points, should be explored. Guidance on the production of CPP LOIPs¹⁷ could recommend the use of these standard comparable indicators.

In addition, careful consideration should be given, informed by inputs from local third sector organisations, to the development of appropriate indicators for smaller areas, especially for councils such as Highland, within which there is much diversity. In terms of geographic units, an updated version of travel-to-work areas, with their functional area rationale, would make sense from a local economic development perspective, having the advantage of minimising commuting across boundaries. Intermediate areas or wards might also be candidates.

Buzzwords and equifinality

The fact that the Scottish Government has a Population Strategy, and that it contains three clearly stated challenges, is a strong starting point for policy. The Government has rightly sought to give the Strategy an influential profile, underlining its wide ranging implications across many elements of the policy landscape. However, in the perceived priorities at a local government level, “balance” jostles with a range of other objectives (inclusion, wellbeing, the place principle, community wealth building). Sometimes it is misunderstood. Often the interrelationships between these very different concepts are difficult to operationalise in real world local contexts, and there is always a danger that they will be reduced to buzzwords, without the capacity to deliver real change.

Population balance presents particular challenges as a policy goal, because as an outcome it should be relatively simple to measure, but it can be delivered or enhanced by a wide range of socio-economic processes. In systems theory this characteristic is termed “equifinality”. This opens up a very extensive and potentially confusing menu of possible interventions. Different policy actors select approaches as best suits their area of expertise, the local or regional context and so on. We have sought to provide a simple analytical framework for these approaches, distinguishing

¹⁶ Services included in 2020: Service stations, GP, Post Office, primary school, secondary school, retail centre. Travel times by car and by public transport are available. The indicators are available at data-zone level.

¹⁷ Such as that provided by the Improvement Service [Local Outcomes Improvement Plans\(LOIPs\)](#)

mitigation from adaptation, and attraction/retention from wellbeing and capacity building.

Application of the Verity House Agreement subsidiarity principle (“local by default, national by agreement”) to policy in support of population balance, would seem to imply a national agreement on baselines and goals, but local discretion on choice of response.

Words and deeds

The straightened public expenditure context of recent years perhaps explains the tendency (across Europe, not just in Scotland) to repackage existing interventions and expenditure in the support of new, or revised, priorities. The importance of aspirational planning and goal setting is not in question. However, their value may be compromised if they are not accompanied by proportionate activity, and inevitably, adequate expenditure. Strategy-writing is just the beginning, not an ‘end in itself’. It is wasted if not followed by carefully calibrated, evidence-based, and appropriately funded interventions. In particular guidance could be issued to CPPs (by the Improvement Service) to include in their LOIPs more specific detail on policy responses and how they are to be resourced.

Understanding impact

As we have already argued, it is an inevitable consequence of equifinality that it is very difficult to attribute impact to individual interventions. Hard quantitative neoliberal value-for-money exercises are not appropriate in this context. A softer, qualitative but objective approach, informed by a holistic awareness of the interrelationships between the various individual policy elements, but “tracking” their separate contributions to population balance, would be a very powerful tool.

Such routine impact monitoring would only be feasible and effective, if some of the key knowledge gaps were addressed. For example, it would be very helpful to have some understanding of the relative effectiveness of interventions derived from the different ToCs described in Chapter 3. We know very little about how the activities of different governance actors (public and third sector) interact – whether they reinforce, compete, or even undermine each other. It is even potentially feasible that adaptive approaches negate mitigative interventions within the same area.

Valuable research is already being funded by the Scottish Government through programmes such as RESAS (Rural and Environment Science and Analytical Services). Direct lines of communication to those responsible for devising and managing policy in all parts of the policy landscape are crucial to ensuring that lessons are learned.

However, given the multiplicity of interrelated policy interventions, the impacts of which are impossible to disentangle, the conventional linear approach, plotting a simple path from expenditure to impact is probably not appropriate. Instead, we would suggest that the evaluation question (“what impact does this intervention have?”) should be reframed as “which of the multiple interventions has the most robust and strongly evidenced chain of intermediate outcomes, supporting the goal of population balance?” This question can only be answered through an investigation at a local community level. Ideally this investigation would involve both policy professionals and individual citizens.

Complexity of Governance

The sheer complexity of the institutional machine which is tasked with implementing the goals of the Population Strategy generally, and population balance in particular, is daunting. It is hard to escape the conclusion that there is a risk of “the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing”, and of confusion in terms of impact attribution. However, given the “equifinality” characteristic of population balance, a degree of complexity is inevitable.

The potential for simplification of the institutional landscape is probably limited – it is much easier to create new actors than to merge or close them. The creation of an umbrella organisation tasked with improving coherence would in this context probably be a backward step. A more modest and achievable goal could be to improve communication between relevant actors, particularly at the national level. Regular meetings (perhaps on a two- or three-year cycle), to exchange information on efforts to address population balance, involving as many as possible of the key national actors identified in Chapter 3 would encourage coherence. A concise progress report document would be both a means of structuring, and a valuable tangible outcome, of such events.

At the local level, consideration could be given to introducing a specific responsibility for Community Planning Partnerships to include in their LOIP documents a clear analysis of population balance issues, based upon standard indicators (see above), together with a practical and resourced strategy to address it. At regular intervals (35 years) the outcomes of these strategies should be evaluated, following the approach proposed above. LOIP analyses, strategies and evaluations should periodically be summarised (across Scotland) to provide a clear “map” of challenges, CPP responses, and their impact. Findings would be a valuable element in the national progress report proposed above.

Reiteration of key action points:

- (i) To establish objective baseline indicators of population balance, and relative measures of policy impact, as a basis for more comparable policy documents.
- (ii) To clarify the distinctions and overlaps between seeking population balance, and other goals in the National Performance Framework.
- (iii) To inform the above, the Scottish Government should use its various research programmes to fund work seeking a better understanding of the relative impact of different forms of intervention in pursuit of population balance at the community-level.
- (iv) The initiation of a regular series of “stock-taking” conferences to pool knowledge of policy relating to population balance, from across Government, Public and Third Sectors. These to be marked by the publication of progress reports.
- (v) CPP LOIPs should be enhanced by the use of comparable baseline indicators, and descriptions of specific and funded interventions to promote population balance, with targets expressed in terms of measurable impacts. These to form the basis of a periodic comparative national progress report.

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Annex 1: The Theory of Change Approach

Policy development is often weakened by implicit (and frequently unrealistic) assumptions. The ToC approach aims to “surface and articulate” (Connell and Kubisch 1998) the chains of logic, and associated contextual assumptions, which occupy the space between inputs/interventions and final goals. ToC belongs to a wider family of methods of studying intervention logic, which includes:

- Intervention/Implementation/Mechanism Mapping (Corbie-Smith et al. 2010, Kok et al. 2011, Cherrington et al. 2012, Oconnor et al. 2021, Geng et al. 2022, Fernandez et al. 2023)
- Logic Modelling and Logic Frameworks (MacLeod 2016)
- Results Based Management (Wauters, 2012)
- Realistic Evaluation (Tilley and Pawson 2000)

The functions which can be carried out by ToC, are not confined to policy design, but also include monitoring/management, and evaluation. Since it is essentially collaborative, it can also play a powerful role in establishing consensus and building community capacity. ToC methods can be used at any point in the policy process, from ex ante, right through to ex post.

The term Theory of Change was first used by Carol Hirschon Weiss in 1995, in a paper which set out to improve the effectiveness of “Comprehensive Community Initiatives” carried out by third sector and philanthropic organisations, aimed at improving the lives of individuals and households in the most deprived communities of the US.

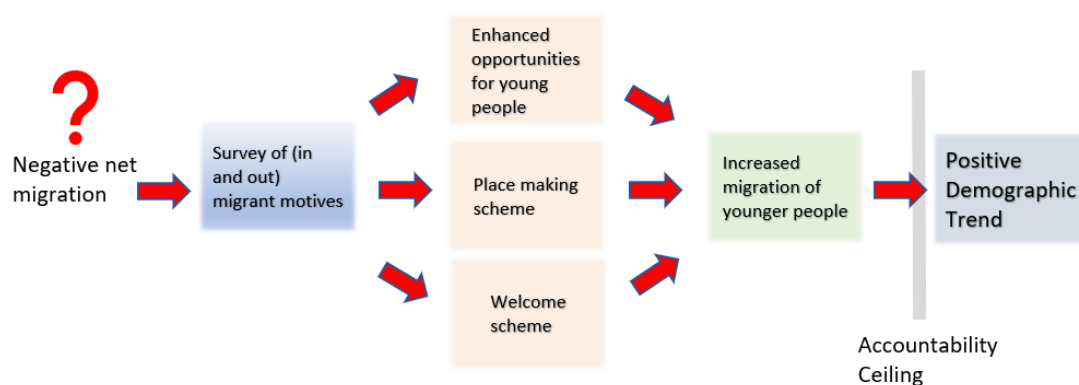
The original motivation for the ToC approach was the pursuit of clarity of purpose and more effective orchestration of multiple activities by a plurality of actors towards a common (but often difficult to specify) long-term goal. Such initiatives often tackled complex social problems, characterised by intricate and recursive networks of cause and effect, which were also very much affected by place-based contextual constraints. Simple linear models of impact (involving policy inputs, stand-alone processes, and outputs) were considered unrealistic. The solution suggested by Weiss and her colleagues was a collaborative exercise, involving all relevant actors, beginning with a careful articulation of the ultimate goal, and then working backwards through a causal chain from outcomes, and intermediate outcomes, taking account of constraints and feedback effects, in order to “reverse engineer” the intervention(s) required.

In recent years ToC has been promoted by the [Centre for Theory of Change](#), a notfor-profit organisation based at the City University of New York. A recent EU Horizon project ([RELOCAL](#)) devised a graphical format adapted from the work of the Centre for ToC (Copus et al. 2019, Piras et al 2022) as a basis for systematic comparative analyses of 33 European interventions promoting different forms of spatial justice.

Reverse engineering begins from the final product and works backwards. The ToC approach emphasises the need to always keep in view the final goal. In terms of RUSTIK, this means a better handling of one or more of the three transitions.

For example, (Figure 2) the rural demographic challenge is often driven by net outmigration and associated ageing. Realistically, mitigation of this process can only be achieved through discouraging outmigration of young people, and encouraging the in-migration of younger families. So, working backwards from the nature of the challenge, local policy makers might identify a set of policy actions which might include (i) providing more opportunities for local youngsters, (ii) increasing the attractiveness of the area as a destination for young families from elsewhere, and (iii) supporting in-migrant families to help them settle in. Within each of these actions there would be a set of “stepping-stone” intermediate outcomes, which could be monitored to provide an assessment of their effectiveness. The impact of each of these policy actions could be enhanced if more was known about the motivation of in and out migrants. So, a good initial link in the chain of intermediate outcomes would be some kind of data experiment to collect such information.

Figure A1: An example of the ToC perspective



All of this makes sense in theory. However, in some rural areas demographic shrinking is so strongly established that, realistically, any policy can only hope to slow it down. Absolute growth is not likely to be achievable. In ToC terms this is represented by the concept of an “accountability ceiling”.

A final aspect of the ToC perspective is transferability between contexts. A logical chain of intermediate outcomes may, or may not, hold good if applied to a different region, a different policy context, with different administrative structures, institutional history and welfare system. All of these contextual “assumptions” need to be clarified if “external validity” (Williams 2017, 2018) is to be achieved.

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