

# **Approaches to island depopulation in Japan and lessons for Scotland**

## **Final Report**

**Prepared for the Scottish Government**

**September 2022**



**Scottish Government**  
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**15 September 2022**



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We would like to note that this was a small scoping project with limited resources. While every attempt has been made to be as thorough as possible, this work represents a starting point and a basis for further comparative research and engagement in future.

## Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	3
Glossaries .....	5
Executive Summary .....	6
1. Introduction.....	9
1.1 Project background and rationale .....	9
1.2 Understanding key terms and potential policy tensions .....	10
1.3 Report structure .....	12
2. Research Aims and Methodological Approach .....	13
3. Scotland’s Islands – Overview and Policy Context .....	16
3.1 General overview of Scotland’s islands.....	16
3.2 Population and Island Policy Context.....	18
4. Japan’s Islands - Overview and Policy Context .....	23
4.1 General overview of Japan’s islands.....	23
4.1.1 Definition of islands and their importance .....	23
4.1.2 Diversity .....	24
4.1.3 Demographic Transitions .....	24
4.1.4 Economy, Industry and Tourism .....	26
4.1.3 Transportation.....	27
4.1.4 Culture .....	28
4.2 Revitalisation: A Realistic Prospect?.....	28
4.3 Japanese Policy Context.....	30
4.3.1 National Level Policies.....	30
4.3.2 Island Specific Policies .....	40
4.3.3 Local Policies and Initiatives .....	42
4.4 Summary: Island Overview and Policy Context .....	43
5. Japanese Case Studies.....	46
5.1 Case Study One: Ama Town (Nakanoshima Island).....	46
Ama Town Key Initiative: High School Project (高校魅力化プロジェクト) .....	47
Ama Town Key Lessons .....	49

Education-related Scottish Examples .....	50
5.2 Case Study Two: Sado Island.....	51
Sado Island Key Initiatives.....	52
Sado Key Lessons.....	55
Arts-related Scottish Examples.....	55
5.3 Case Study Three: Amami Island .....	57
Amami Key Initiatives: ICT and Flexible Work .....	57
Amami Key Lessons .....	58
Employment-related Scottish Examples .....	58
5.4 Case Study Four: Gotō Islands .....	60
Gotō Key Initiatives: Renewable Energy.....	60
Gotō Key Lessons .....	61
Renewable Energy-related Scottish Examples .....	62
6 Lessons for Scotland .....	64
7 Suggestions for further research.....	73
8 References .....	76
Appendix 1: Interview Guide (English translation) .....	84

## Glossaries

### Simple English Glossary

<b>Term</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Bubble Economy	Period of inflated asset prices in Japan (1980s – early 1990s)
Community Cooperative Support (CCS) initiative	An initiative started in 2009 by the Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications providing support for people moving from urban to rural areas.
Depopulated Area	Officially designated area in Japan. Often rural, these areas have experienced significant population ageing and decline.
Empty House Bank	A list of properties that are underutilised in rural areas in Japan. Often managed by local government, the goal is to make it easier for prospective migrants to find properties.
Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)	Area of sea where a nation state maintains certain rights related to the utilisation of resources.
Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System (GIAHS)	A designation by the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations.
Relationship Population	A term popularised by journalist Terumi Tanaka which describes people or persons who make frequent visits to rural areas.
Remote Island	Japanese islands which are not one of the five main islands.

### English and Japanese Glossary

<b>Translated Term</b>	<b>Japanese Roman Script (where applicable)</b>	<b>Japanese Script (where applicable)</b>
Empty House Bank	<i>Akiya banku</i>	空き家バンク
Bubble Economy	<i>Baburu keizai</i>	バブル経済
Community Cooperative Support (CCS) initiative	<i>Chiiki okoshi kyōryokutai</i>	地域おこし協力隊
Depopulated Area	<i>Kaso chiiki</i>	過疎地域
Empty House Bank	<i>Akiya banku</i>	空き家バンク
Relationship Population	<i>Kankeijinkō</i>	関係人口
Remote Island	<i>Ritō</i>	離島

## Executive Summary

This project aimed to explore, understand and compare approaches to island depopulation in Japan and Scotland to help inform policy and best practice and lay the foundations for further research.

The international research team undertook detailed literature and policy reviews in Japan and Scotland to understand the island contexts and the evolution of national policies relating to islands and to depopulation. In addition, the researchers undertook desk study on four islands in Japan (the Gotō islands, Nakanoshima [Ama Town], Sado Island and the Amami Islands), where different approaches have been taken to tackling depopulation across the themes of Net Zero, Tourism, Education and Teleworking. Short case study examples of depopulation challenges and initiatives in Scotland are also briefly highlighted in the report to provide comparative context. Based on the evidence collected, the research team suggested some ‘lessons learned’ to inform future policy focussed work and international engagement relating to island depopulation in Scotland.

There is a great diversity of island communities in both Japan (which has 7,000 islands) and Scotland (which has 790). Islands vary by their physical features (such as distance from the mainland, climate and topographical features); socio-economic and demographic profiles; governance (for example, whether they have dedicated island authorities or are they part of mainland-based local government structures); and cultural characteristics and significance. This diversity can be observed within as well as between island groups. Evidence from Scotland suggests that experience of island life varies with demographic age groups and location – with lack of education opportunities for young people, limited employment opportunities, and a lack of affordable housing often cited as key challenges. In Japan, there are considerable differences in circumstance between islands located closer to the Japanese mainland island (in the Inner Sea) and those further away in the Outer Seas. The latter have often experienced more significant population decline and demographic ageing, and are remote, with limited and expensive transport connections, more expensive goods and services, and poorer access to infrastructure. In both countries, on at least some islands, there has been a trend away from a dependence on primary production (including agriculture and fisheries) as service sector employment has grown. In Japan, island residents often rely on multiple income sources, and while this has been assumed to be the case in Scotland too, the recent National Islands Plan Survey (Scottish Government 2021) suggests that only one in five island residents works in more than one paid job or business.

Japan has a long history of national level policies and related funding packages focused on tackling demographic decline on its island and in remote rural areas, but the focus of

these policies has shifted over time from an emphasis on infrastructure investments (which have brought both positive and negative impacts for island communities) to a recognition of the need for ‘softer’ development projects, including tourism-led and culture-based projects building on local resources. This shift in focus has taken place in the context of changes in the patterns of depopulation in different locations and wider economic processes and trends. More recently, debates have emerged in Japan around the extent to which the revitalisation of remote rural communities is possible or desirable in the context of important net zero and climate-change related targets and given Japan’s continuing low birth rate, out-migration and population ageing.

There are many national and local level policy and funding initiatives reviewed in this report from which there may be useful learning for Scotland, including programmes to: provide support for people settling in island communities; encourage those who regularly visit island communities to contribute more to their sustainability, and indeed vibrancy; make empty buildings available for re-use; develop teleworking and ‘parallel work’ opportunities, and; launch education-focused programmes to encourage more young people to remain in island communities for their education.

Based on the evidence gathered, the research team proposes a set of 15 areas of learning for future island depopulation policies in Scotland. This learning is set out in section 6, and is summarised here:

1. Acknowledging the importance and diversity of islands.
2. Understanding the demographic contexts and trends in islands.
3. Ensuring clarity about the goals of demographic-focused policy interventions.
4. Providing a flexible policy framework to enable locally tailored interventions and initiatives.
5. Incorporating ‘hard’ and ‘soft’: taking a holistic approach to depopulation challenges.
6. Engaging with island communities in co-designing policy interventions.
7. Exploring the ‘positives’ of demographic ageing as well as retaining/re-attracting young people.
8. Building on shifts in values, lifestyles and practical work and living preferences relating to the Covid-19 pandemic.
9. Appropriately using islands as test-beds for innovative policy responses.
10. Recognising and building on the resources and positive benefits of depopulated/depopulating areas.
11. Providing a range of support for in-migrants.
12. ‘Translating’ the Japanese concept of *Kankeijinkō* to island Scotland.
13. ‘Translating’ Japan’s Community Co-operative Support initiative (*chiiki okoshi kyōryokutai*) to island Scotland.
14. Incorporating renewable energy and digital investment considerations into demographic initiatives.

15. 'Translating' the *Akiya* bank concept to island Scotland.

The report concludes with some suggestions for further research which include exploring: individuals' values in relation to island migration decisions; different techniques that have been used to engage local island communities in shaping depopulation initiatives; changing work and livelihood strategies in island communities; the success of older- and young-people focused interventions; ways to encourage new residents to stay long-term; and the impacts of having an unbalanced population profile and, conversely, the benefits and outcomes of having a balanced profile.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Project background and rationale

Scotland has over 790 offshore islands, 93 of which are inhabited. Population decline has been a serious threat to the sustainability of many of Scotland's island communities for decades, and this continues to be the case for some – though by no means all – of them. Indeed, over the last 10 years, almost twice as many islands in Scotland have experienced population loss as have gained population. The National Records of Scotland (NRS) is forecasting population reductions for all of Scotland's island local authorities over the next 20 years (SPICe 2022). Future population decline is predicted to be particularly severe in the Western Isles (Scottish Government 2019; Hopkins and Copus 2018).

Population decline, which is often accompanied by ageing of the population structure, can lead to a number of inter-related challenges for communities, including: skills shortages; public service pressures; economic contraction; loss of culture, language and traditions; and weakened community capacity, all of which can further exacerbate population loss and create a vicious cycle of decline (Margaras 2016).

In recognition of the particular characteristics and challenges facing Scotland's island communities, the Scottish Government passed the [Islands \(Scotland\) Act 2018](#). In 2019, the [National Islands Plan](#) was published, which focussed on a range of issues including the strategic objective to 'address population decline and ensure a healthy balanced population profile.' This was followed in March 2021 when the Scottish Government's Ministerial [Population Taskforce](#) published its Population Strategy '[A Scotland for the Future: the Opportunities and Challenges of Scotland's Changing Population](#)'. Both the National Islands Plan and the Population Strategy set out clear ambitions to ensure a robust and up-to-date evidence base to inform future policy approaches on depopulation trends. This includes engaging with international countries to share learning and best practice as and where appropriate.

As part of those aims, this project seeks to contribute to this international evidence base by exploring responses to island depopulation trends in Japan, both in terms of national policy initiatives and local-level interventions in specific island communities, and distilling appropriate learning to inform future approaches in Scotland.

Japan is made up of five main islands and almost 7,000 smaller islands, 90% of which are uninhabited (Kuwahara 2012). Many of Japan's islands (and remote rural areas) are experiencing a 'double negative population disequilibrium' (Matanle and Rausch 2011: 20) – both net negative migration and death rates exceeding birth rates – and this has

led to acute depopulation in some areas. Population decline and ageing has resulted in challenges for such communities, including difficulties in maintaining services and businesses, increased social isolation, and an inability to maintain common resources and spaces (Matanle and Rausch 2011). Japanese rural and island policy has increasingly focused on the issue of population decline including the Remote Islands Development Act, first enacted in 1953, which has more recently sought to promote the cultural and natural resources of remote islands in Japan with the aim of developing tourism and related economic activity (Nagashima 2012; see also: Favell 2017, Funck 2020). Other more recent initiatives and policies have also placed emphasis on encouraging increased urban to rural migration with promotion and support from central and local government (see: Klien 2020; Lewerich 2020; Gaini 2017; Murakami et al. 2008, 2009; Dilley et al. 2022).

By reviewing the policy approaches taken in Japan at a national level and interventions in four case study islands, this project informs: the delivery of the 'more balanced population' pillar of the Scottish Government's Population Strategy; the development of policy to support sustainable population profiles in Scotland's island communities; and future international engagement with Japan on shared challenges.

## **1.2 Understanding key terms and potential policy tensions**

It is important to acknowledge that the key terms in this study, including depopulation, are not necessarily understood in the same way by all. Definitions of depopulation vary with some dictionaries defining it as the *condition* of having reduced numbers of inhabitants in a region or country while others refer to it as the *action* of causing a country or area to have fewer people living in it. Conversely, repopulation is usually used to refer to the return or reintroduction of people into an area, i.e., the *action* or process of repopulating. While depopulation is often used interchangeably with population or demographic decline, repopulation is used interchangeably with population increase or growth.

It is also important to acknowledge that demographic trends, including migration, may vary substantially across small geographies. Indeed, we recognise that multiple relocations can take place simultaneously in a given settlement pattern, which means that mobilities can be 'messy' and not necessarily follow a one-directional repopulation/depopulation taxonomy (Stockdale 2016). Furthermore, in academic research there are many different approaches and definitions to describe the relocation of new residents particularly in rural contexts, which might (or might not) lead to demographic repopulation or population revival (see for example a breadth of research on counterurbanisation; Mitchell 2004; Gkartzios 2013; Smith et al. 2015; Dilley et al. 2022).

Depopulation is shaped by a range of complex, interdependent factors, including migration patterns (themselves the result of a combination of different economic, social and environmental factors) and birth and death rates. This research has particularly focused on exploring policy approaches that aim to attract or retain people or focus on job creation, and the provision of critical infrastructure.

The policy outcomes desired in relation to population, and the approaches to be taken to achieve them, are not without tension. Depending on context, approaches to support local population growth can have both positive and negative effects (see: Stockdale et al. 2000; Dilley et al. 2022). For example, key concerns in many rural and island communities in Scotland include the gentrification impacts of in-migration in raising local house prices beyond the reach of local people, especially those reliant on lower paid jobs in the local labour market, and the potential damage to community cohesion and local traditions (Stockdale 2010; Sutherland 2019). There may also be tensions about the ‘level’ of repopulation deemed to be desirable or appropriate for a particular area – is the aim of policy intervention to reduce, slow or stop or reverse depopulation so that an area experiences population growth? Who decides on the aim? Who are the new entrants and do they share broadly similar values, expectations and ambitions about the future of these island places with other new entrants and with the in-situ population? What new politics and identities do they bring, and is there the potential for tension and conflict? And what are the implications of different policy outcomes in terms of infrastructure and service provision and land use and management, and the mechanisms required to achieve them? Some of these questions have been explored in recent academic work (see for example: Dilley et al. 2022; Gkartzios et al. 2022a; McManus 2022).

Finally, it should be acknowledged that population policy objectives inter-relate very closely with other policy objectives and strategies. For example, there are strong links between population change, environmental and land use objective and the aim for greater local involvement and community-led, bottom-up activities.<sup>1</sup> The inter-relationships between people and different growth objectives, including degrowth, green growth and [community wealth-building](#) – which is a particularly important current policy driver for Scottish Government – are strong. People are crucial in achieving sustainable, resilient communities and in realising the huge potential of rural and island communities in delivering climate change and net zero targets, including in terms of peatland restoration, natural flood management and renewable energy generation.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, as seen in debates around the issues of ‘rewilding’ and ‘repeopling’ in relation to some of the large Highland estates in Scotland (see for example, [Repeopling.pdf \(reforestingscotland.org\)](#) and work by Community Land Scotland on this topic: [Renewal and repopulation \(communitylandscotland.org.uk\)](#)).

### 1.3 Report structure

This remainder of this report is structured as follows:

[Section 2](#) summarises the project aim and objectives and describes the methods used in this study. [Sections 3 and 4](#) provide some contextual information on islands along with detail on the evolution of island and population policies in Scotland and Japan (the latter being the focus).

[Section 5](#) reports the results of the case study explorations undertaken by the research team in four locations in Japan. This work involved a combination of desk-based information gathering and a small number of targeted interviews (seven) with individuals involved in different ways in these specific island initiatives and individuals with national level intelligence and experience.

[Section 6](#) summarises the key learning for Scotland that can be distilled from the evidence gathered in Japan, acknowledging the different island and policy contexts.

[Section 7](#) outlines some areas where further research would be useful to inform policies and initiatives relating to depopulation in Scotland, Japan and indeed beyond.

## 2. Research Aim and Methodological Approach

The **aim** of this project was:

*‘To explore, understand and compare approaches to reverse island depopulation in Japan and Scotland to help inform policy and best practice and lay the foundations for further research’.*

### **Methodological Approach**

To meet the aim and objectives of this project, a staged methodological approach was taken. The first stage was an in-depth review of literature which included academic publications, policy and other grey literature in English and Japanese. The review of the literature was focused on both applied and academic work that addressed the issues of rural development and population decline particularly with regards to islands in both Japan and Scotland. Given the resource constraints in this project, the review was neither structured nor exhaustive, but drew on the significant relevant research experience of the authors to give an overview of some of the key academic and policy literature available. In reviewing the academic literature, special attention was paid to the current and historic conditions of islands in both nations, issues and challenges with regard to development and depopulation as well as the key academic approaches and areas of interest in island research.

In parallel with the literature review, the research team undertook a desk-based review of population and island policies in Scotland and Japan, with a particular focus on the latter. The policy review explored the aims of policies that have been introduced to address rural and island development and depopulation, and the ways in which policy aims have shifted and changed as new challenges and opportunities emerged. Given the focus on learning lessons from Japan, the review of Japanese policy was more detailed and explored its evolution post-Second World War.

The third stage of the project involved the identification of appropriate case studies of depopulation initiatives in Japan’s islands from which to draw out lessons for similar interventions in Scotland. The research team initially created a ‘long list’ of potential case studies identified from existing literature and their own experience, knowledge and contacts. In identifying the potential case studies, a broad range of different approaches to island economic challenges and depopulation were sought. From this long list, the research team proposed four case studies on which to focus, which covered a range of differentiated approaches of relevance to the Scottish context and four key themes: net zero, education, art-heritage-agriculture, and teleworking/the changing nature of work (see Table 1 for an overview of the case studies). The proposed case studies were approved by the Scottish Government.

Table 1: Overview of four Japanese case studies

Island	Key theme	Key Information
Nakanoshima (Ama Town), Japan	Education	There is an education scheme to improve schooling provision. This appears to have been a factor in encouraging net positive in-migration (although overall population fall).
Sado Island, Japan	Tourism (art, heritage, agriculture)	Characterised by tourism-based interventions. Sado Gold and Silver Mine is now aiming to be included on the UNESCO World Heritage List. This case also features agriculture (certified as a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems (GIAHS), in 2011 and art projects (さどの島銀河芸術祭).
Amami islands, Japan	Teleworking/changing nature of work	The island has taken steps to encourage teleworking and remote work.
Gotō islands (11 islands), Japan	Net zero (community action)	The city formulated a Renewable Energy Plan in 2014 and a community energy company was founded in 2018 with investment from local enterprises, organisations and individuals based in Gotō islands. Approximately 50% of the local municipality's demand is already met by renewable energy sources.

In addition to the case study work in Japan, the research team identified examples of local-level depopulation initiatives in Scotland that are similar in terms of their focus. These are briefly included in our analysis as the project scope did not permit a more detailed exploration of these initiatives.

The case study work involved desk-based information gathering from websites, academic papers (where available) and other publicly available web and published information sources in both English and Japanese. Additionally, a small number of online interviews were conducted with key individuals involved in the initiatives at local level to understand more about their rationale, delivery (including barriers and challenges encountered and stakeholders involved), their impacts and how 'success' is measured, and any unintended consequences or policy tensions encountered. These stakeholder interviews (seven in total) included individuals from island-related research organisations, local government officials and representatives of NGOs and community/third sector groups in the case study island communities.

Ethical approval for the interviews was obtained via SRUC's Social Science Ethics Committee. An interview guide was developed to provide some structure to the

interviews (see English translation of this in Appendix 1). All interviewees were asked to complete a consent form in advance, and all were provided with a project information sheet containing more information about the project. The interviewees were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality and the names of individuals and organisations are not used in this report.

The national and local level interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 30 minutes and 1.5 hours. Interviews were conducted in Japanese and recorded and partially transcribed in Japanese and subsequently translated into English. The interview data was analysed by the research team in a thematic way, in order to ensure that we gained in-depth knowledge about individual interventions, but also identified commonalities; for example, in terms of the approaches used, successes achieved and ways of measuring them, and challenges and barriers experienced.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that we recognise power asymmetries and challenges in the production of knowledge in international research projects like this one (Hantrais 2009), particularly because of the differences in culture, language and context that we seek to present in this report. To ensure local context is understood and appreciated, and in the wider spirit of decolonising the academy, the team purposely included a symmetric approach of both Japan-based and UK-based researchers. More specifically, the team consists of: two researchers who are Japanese nationals and have research experience in the UK (Fukushima and Shinzato); two researchers who have working and research experience in Japan and are (or have been) affiliated with Japanese Universities (Dilley and Gkartzios); and two researchers who have worked and published in Japanese research projects (Atterton and Lamont). Furthermore, we pay particular attention to how terms have been translated into English and used in this report. For this reason, we also offer the original terms in Japanese script recognising that there are translation politics in how terms are used, translated and replicated in the anglosphere and beyond (see also Gkartzios et al. 2020).

### **3. Scotland's Islands – Overview and Policy Context**

#### **3.1 General overview of Scotland's islands**

Scotland has over 790 offshore islands, with 93 of those inhabited. Most of Scotland's islands are found in four main island groups, each of which consists of a number of smaller and larger islands: Shetland, Orkney and the Hebrides, divided into the Inner and Outer Hebrides, and there are also smaller island groupings, such as the Small Isles. A large proportion of the population can be found on a small number of islands, and there are many islands with very low population levels.

Many of Scotland's islands (and remoter rural areas) have a long history of out-migration and depopulation dating back to the clearances in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries when the land was cleared of people to make way for sheep. This period in history is very much part of the national consciousness and popular culture in Scotland (McMorran and Glendinning 2022). For some islands, this depopulation trend has continued, whilst in other islands the depopulation is more recent. For others, the trend is one of an overall population increase, although this is most often the case in small localities within islands, or island groupings, rather than for island groupings as a whole.

Taken together, population estimates show that in 2020 there were 2,800 more people living on Scotland's islands than in 2001. The population of Scotland as a whole grew at a much faster rate than this over this period (7.9%), with some parts of the mainland experiencing particularly significant growth, including Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire in the North East, and the Highlands (SPICe 2022).

However, the differences between Scotland's islands are significant, with most population growth since 2001 taking place in the Orkney (which saw the largest population growth), Highland and Shetland Islands local authority areas. In contrast, Argyll and Bute and North Ayrshire saw significant reductions in their populations (Argyll and Bute in particular), with the population of Na h-Eileanan an Iar (the Western Isles), the most populated islands-only local authority, remaining relatively stable between 2001 and 2020. It is important to also note that there are significant differences in population trends within islands and island groups. For example, even in Orkney which saw the largest population growth between 2001 and 2020, some communities experienced population decline. The same is true of the Shetland Isles, Na h-Eileanan an Iar and Argyll and Bute (SPICe 2022).

As is the case for Scotland as a whole, the population of Scotland's islands has also aged during the last 20 years. The proportion of people aged 65 and over on Scotland's islands rose from 18% in 2001 to 26% in 2020, whilst the proportion of the island population under the age of 25 fell from 28% to 24%. The islands have also seen a

bigger decrease in the younger age populations than Scotland as a whole between 2001 and 2020, and so the majority of people living on Scotland's islands are now in the over-45 age group. In mainland Scotland, the under-45 age group is still in the majority (although this is only just the case). Despite the many benefits older people bring to the communities in which they live, population ageing can place pressure on public services and threaten the long-term sustainability of communities if there are few families living locally with young children. For example, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (the Western Isles Council area) could see a 20% decline in the working-age population and a similar level of decline in the proportion of children over the next 20 years. Scotland's islands and remote rural areas are not unique in experiencing depopulation, as this has been a trend experienced in many remote rural regions of Europe since the 1950s (ESPON 2019), in both northern and southern Europe. Research has demonstrated that depopulation resulting from the out-migration of young people may be a result of a number of different factors, including a movement out to access improved education and employment opportunities and land abandonment. As argued by Valdiva (2018), this rural exodus has resulted in parts of Europe facing the threat of 'demographic desertification', with rapidly ageing and dependent populations, limited employment opportunities and declining services.

Despite these (in many cases long-standing) challenges, there are also opportunities for some regions that have been experiencing depopulation to reverse this decline. These opportunities relate to a variety of factors, including improving the speed, reliability and adoption of digital technology and communications, the use of cultural, arts and heritage assets to build growth, specific initiatives to attract in-migrants, including international migrants, such as improving education and housing provision, and supporting innovation and smart specialisation based on local assets. [The results of the National Islands Plan Survey](#) undertaken in 2020 provide further detailed information on a range of economic, employment and social characteristics of Scotland's islands.

[Recent work by the James Hutton Institute](#), as part of the Scottish Government's Strategic Research Programme 2016-22, explored population trends in Scotland's Sparsely Populated Areas (SPAs). Accompanying this work, SRUC researchers have explored trends in Scotland's SPAs compared to SPAs elsewhere in two recent pieces of work - [international responses to depopulation and demographic change in remote rural areas](#) and [case studies of repopulation initiatives in island contexts](#).

It is important to note that not all rural and island communities in Scotland (or in Japan, or in other countries in Northern Europe) are experiencing depopulation. Recent work led by the James Hutton Institute, and reported on the [Islands Revival website](#), notes that some island and remote rural locations are experiencing population growth, even if this is at the level of individual villages and communities. In many instances, this population turnaround has been achieved through locally driven, 'bottom-up' initiatives,

often involving the community taking over the ownership and/or management of local assets including housing, land or renewable energy installations (the Isle of Eigg is often cited as an example of successfully reversing a prolonged period of population decline on the island). In some instances, population growth has been prompted by arts or music related initiatives or by improved digital connectivity. These positive population trends in Scotland and beyond are also explored in more detail in a recent CoDel-led Northern Periphery and Arctic Programme funded [project exploring the impacts of Covid-19 on island and rural communities](#).

### **3.2 Population and Island Policy Context**

The Scottish Government's first Population Strategy '[A Scotland for the Future: the Opportunities and Challenges of Scotland's Changing Population](#)' was published in March 2021 by the Government's Ministerial Population Taskforce. The Strategy frames Scotland's demographic trends, their future implications and 36 cross-Government actions to be delivered across four thematic pillars: an attractive and welcoming country; a family friendly nation; a healthy living society; and a more balanced population. The vision set out in the Strategy forms the building blocks for a cross-cutting programme of work focused on demographic change and population sustainability across Scotland. One of the key trends framed in the Population Strategy is local depopulation.

As mentioned earlier in the report, the Population Strategy sets out an ambition to ensure there is a robust and up-to-date evidence base to inform future policy approaches to achieving a sustainable population. This evidence building is supported by the independent [Expert Advisory Group for Migration and Population \(EAG\)](#), which provides advice and analysis to the Scottish Government in relation to population and demography, as well as NRS.

Appraising the evolution of policies and strategies for rural Scotland since devolution, the Scottish Government has advocated a holistic and place-based approach to strengthening the resilience and sustainability of Scotland's rural communities.<sup>2</sup> Such an approach includes ensuring that local communities have a sustainable population, with a particular focus on retaining or attracting back young people by tackling housing, employment, poverty and infrastructure-related challenges in a holistic way. The diversity of rural Scotland has been recognised with the resultant need for locally tailored policy approaches to be taken which are shaped by local circumstances. This is in the wider context of a move towards reflecting the specific issues faced by rural

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<sup>2</sup> The population of rural Scotland makes up approximately 17% of Scotland's total population (with 6% in remote rural areas and 11% in accessible rural areas) and 98% of its landmass (with 70% remote rural and 28% accessible rural).

Scotland in mainstream policy development in the areas of housing, transport, economic development, rather than having a dedicated rural policy or strategy.

Islands are key to Scotland's identity and central to external images and perceptions of the country, helping to drive its tourism sector. Those people living on islands tend to have a strong sense of community and there are very positive and innovative examples of vibrant 'bottom-up' community-led activities on many of Scotland's islands, including relating to the ownership and management of assets such as land. Islands also tend to have important cultural and heritage resources and high-quality natural environments.

However, living and working on Scotland's islands brings particular challenges due to their locations and remoteness; additionally, island residents have often felt detached from public policy in Scotland, which resulted in the passing of the historic place-based Islands (Scotland) Act in 2018 to improve island governance and policy.

### **The Islands (Scotland) Act 2018**

The [Island \(Scotland\) Act 2018](#) was designed to ensure that the challenges and opportunities facing Scotland's islands are high up the policy and political agenda, and was granted Royal Assent on 6<sup>th</sup> July 2018. According to the Act, 'island' in Scotland means a naturally formed area of land which is: *"(a) surrounded on all sides by the sea (ignoring artificial structures such as bridges), and (b) above water at high tide."* According to this definition there are 93 inhabited islands in Scotland.

The Act introduces a number of measures to underpin the Scottish Government's key objective of ensuring that there is a sustained focus across Government and the public sector to meet the needs of island communities, now and in the future. Most of the provisions of the Act came into force on 4<sup>th</sup> October 2018, including the development of a National Islands Plan, a Shetland mapping requirement, a duty to consult island communities, and the development of a scheme under which requests by local authorities for devolution of functions and additional powers may be made.

As part of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, the Scottish Government also committed to introduce [Islands Community Impact Assessments](#). This is a duty to ensure that relevant authorities must have regard to island communities when carrying out their functions.

### **National Islands Plan 2019**

The Scottish Government's first [National Islands Plan](#) was published in December 2019. The Plan sets out 13 Strategic Objectives critical to improving the quality of life for island communities over the next five years. Strategic Objective 1 relates to population:

*To address population decline and ensure a healthy, balanced population profile.* During the consultation for the Plan, depopulation was the top priority issue identified by respondents as a real threat to the sustainability of many of Scotland's island communities.

Other Plan Objectives address a range of issues, including improving and promoting sustainable economic development, environmental wellbeing, health and wellbeing, and community empowerment; improving transport services and digital connectivity; reducing fuel poverty; and enhancing biosecurity.

The commitment to address population decline and ensure a healthy, balanced population is underpinned by a range of actions, including:

- Developing an Action Plan to support repopulation of rural and island communities and working with partners to test approaches using small-scale pilots;
- Identifying islands where population decline is becoming a critical issue in order to ensure that these islands have their needs addressed;
- Work with young islanders to identify actions to encourage them to stay on or return to islands;
- Ensure that policies aim to retain and attract Gaelic speakers to live and work in Gaelic speaking communities.

In Autumn 2020, a [National Islands Plan Survey](#) was sent to 20,000 residents across Scotland's (permanently inhabited) islands (Scottish Government 2021). The objective of the Survey was to improve understanding about living on Scotland's islands and to gather baseline data against which to measure the success of the Plan. Over 4,300 people responded to the survey from 59 islands (a response rate of 22%) and a range of issues were raised including a lack of support for young people to remain in, move or return to the islands; a lack of employment, training, higher education and appropriate childcare; a lack of affordable housing and a poor variety of housing types, sizes and tenure to meet peoples' needs; mixed experiences with accessing healthcare services; the speed and reliability of internet connections; and inadequate infrastructure provision to meet tourism demand. The Survey also highlighted the need to challenge some traditional assumptions about Scotland's islands. For example, in contrast to the common assumption that many people rely on more than one job in the islands, the survey found that this was only the case for one in five respondents. The survey also found that the majority of respondents planned to stay on their island for at least the next five years.

The data from the Survey confirmed the need for future recommendations or policies to recognise that life is considerably different in each island group and that different age

groups have distinct experiences of island life. Therefore, tailoring to each island group and different age groups is appropriate.

In March 2022, the second annual report on the National Islands Plan was published and the four-year report on the Islands (Scotland) Act will be published later in 2022. During the 20212-22 session in the Scottish Parliament, the Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee has been scrutinising the effectiveness of the Scottish Government's islands policies and the (draft) report of the Committee's debate on the [National Islands Plan Annual report](#) has been published online.

### **Other island related policy initiatives**

A range of other related policies and initiatives are under development or have been introduced by the Scottish Government which link closely to the National Islands Plan and further focus on addressing issues facing island communities.

The Scottish Government is working with Youth Scotland to create the [Young Islanders Network](#), building on the earlier Young Islanders Challenge. The aim is to build a network and community of young people who will play a meaningful part in making the National Islands Plan work for young people on Scotland's islands. It includes:

- Young Islanders Champions to keep learning together and take part in activities.
- Supporting young people to increase their understanding of the National Islands Plan so that they can offer genuine and meaningful contributions to its delivery.
- Bringing young people together to implement change through community challenges and social action funding opportunities in their local areas.
- Young Islanders Champions 'providing the youth voice' to implement changes in policies and outcomes, working with Youth Scotland and Scottish Government.
- Improving the confidence, skills and knowledge of young people across the islands to support their mental health and wellbeing through training opportunities and youth awards.

Young people on Scotland's islands often say (see for example the findings of the [National Islands Plan Survey](#)) that they feel safe and enjoy a life that is rooted in their communities with access to the outdoors and beautiful scenery. However, challenges include a lack of things to do; the higher cost of living (including travel on/off/around the islands and in terms of housing); poor connectivity (online and in person) and fewer opportunities and specialism in terms of local education.

The Scottish Government has also launched a number of island-specific funding initiatives. For example, the community strand of the [Islands Green Recovery Programme](#) (managed by Inspiring Scotland) provided green funding for 21 initiatives

including businesses, charities and community groups across island communities. The funding was for capital expenditure projects that contribute to green recovery, reduce carbon emissions as well as improve the resilience, health and wellbeing of island communities. Wider funding was also available for low carbon transport, food sustainability and zero waste projects.

The [Island Communities Fund](#) launched in July 2021 and 35 projects across 55 islands have been funded. The projects support employment and community resilience through activities that deliver green economic recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic and a transition to net zero and to climate-resilient living on the islands. They are also linked to the National Islands Plan and to wider policy goals around inclusive growth and Community Wealth Building approaches. Finally, in line with its ambitious climate change targets, the Scottish Government will shortly announce six new Carbon Neutral Islands, which will help to deliver key commitments in the National Islands Plan, create jobs and protect island environments from climate change, and contribute to the Government's ambitious 2045 net zero commitment.

In summary, in recent years, the issues, challenges and opportunities facing Scotland's island communities have been brought into sharper focus through the passing of legislation in 2018 and the subsequent National Islands Plan, and related survey and review work. These island communities are incredibly diverse in terms of their geographical location and distance from the mainland, transport and digital connections, economic, employment and social circumstances, and their environmental characteristics. While some islands, and areas within islands have been experiencing population growth in recent years, this is not the case for all areas, with some experiencing long-term population decline and ageing, putting pressure on services and the local economy. Initiatives and funding have been provided to Scotland's islands to tackle some of these challenges and build on the opportunities, but there is scope to usefully learn lessons from approaches tried elsewhere, including Japan.

## 4. Japan's Islands - Overview and Policy Context

### 4.1 General overview of Japan's islands

Japan consists of around 7,000 islands, including five large islands called the 'mainland' (*hondo*).<sup>3</sup> Their biogeographical features vary considerably, and only around 400 out of the 7,000 small islands are permanently inhabited or inhabited on a semi/seasonal basis. These islands account for 0.5% of the total Japanese population and occupy 2% of the total land surface. The majority (70%) of the islands have less than 500 people, and the populations are often elderly with low birth rates (see: [Japanese Remote Islands Centre 2020](#))

Most of the populated islands with 500 or more residents are located in the Inland Sea situated between Shikoku and the mainland, which generally have better access to the mainland and more vibrant economies than the islands in the Outer Seas. The isles in the Outer Seas are widely scattered and relatively isolated, and this large geographical spread means that Japan has the sixth largest Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the world.

The remoteness and small size of many of Japan's islands means that transportation is often limited, with many islands only accessible by ferry. Additionally, as population decline has increased in some locations, transportation services have either reduced or become more expensive. Moreover, transportation on the islands is also limited, with the [Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport](#) (2012) reporting that in 2012 only 22% of Japan's remote islands had a bus service. Remoteness also means that daily staple goods and other supplies are often more expensive in comparison to the rest of Japan, while other services are also limited, with, for example, 40% of people on remote islands lacking access to mains sewage (compared with 20% for the rest of Japan) in 2007. The [Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport](#) (2021) has also reported that internet is limited on some islands with around 10% of the islands unable to access fibreoptic broadband in comparison to less than 1% nationally.

#### 4.1.1 Definition of islands and their importance

There is international debate over the interpretation of the [UN's Regime of Islands](#) and what constitutes an island (see: Miyoshi, 2021). Kuwahara (2012) reports that there is no clear definition of term 'Remote island' (*ritō* 離島) in Japan, but often describes

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<sup>3</sup> The count is 6,852 islands according to the definition of Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (Japanese Remote Island Centre 2017). However, the numbers of 'islands' are different depending on definition employed at the time of measurement (e.g., policy, regulation, weather condition, volcano action etc.). The five main islands include Honshu, Kyushu, Shikoku, Hokkaido and Okinawa main island.

islands which are not part of the five main islands and have a shoreline greater than 100m in circumference. Historically, some of the remote islands which are part of Japan's Exclusive Economic Zone were integrated, returned, colonised and/or are still disputed. For Japan, the coastlines of some of the most remote islands physically mark-out the border of international territorial waters and the Exclusive Economic Zone, and thus the classification and recognition of these remote islands plays an important part in claims to spatial sovereignty (Suzuki 2019).

Islands are not only politically important but also culturally valued in Japan, as they are in Scotland. The classification of Japanese islands in lay and policy discourse is often linked to their differentiated but culturally important histories, activities and roles in fishing and agriculture, nautical navigation, religion and commerce (Hendry 1997). Further, there are a diverse range of classifications used to describe the size, material composition, shape, location and the many other traits of Japanese islands (Kakazu 2014).

#### **4.1.2 Diversity**

There is a wide diversity of physical environments amongst the Japanese islands (for more information see: Royle 2016; Baldacchio 2018; Kakazu 2014; Ogata 2021; Okuno 1998, Hiraoka et al. 2018). The biogeography of the islands varies and creates a range of diverse ecosystems that are home to humans, animals and plants including a number of rare and endangered species. The climate varies from the sub-arctic north to sub-tropical south due to the long and narrow nature of the Japanese archipelago (see: [Japan Meteorological Agency](#)). The islands are prone to severe weather events including typhoons and heavy rain in the southern islands, and heavy snow in the north. Volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and tsunamis also pose a very real risk. At the same time, the rich biogeography of different minerals in the soil and seabed provides a fertile environment and forms the basis for diverse primary sector activity (Royle 2016).

Reflecting the diversity of island biogeography, the culture and social make-up of islands also varies greatly (Ogata 2021). Baldacchino (2018) argues that islands in Japan contain a range of social groups, from more hierarchical to more egalitarian, which are layered and tied to different degrees and for different purposes. However, the lives of many islanders and island societies are radically different even in comparison to a few years ago due to advances in information technology.

#### **4.1.3 Demographic Transitions**

Demographic change is one of the most notable aspects of many islands in Japan. Overall, the [Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport](#) (2018) report that Japan's remote islands have had one of the highest rates of population decline, with the

population of remote islands covered by the Remote Island Development Act (see section 4.3 below) falling by almost 60% between 1955 and 2010. Further, not only has the population of the islands decreased, but the numbers of those aged over 65 has increased to just over 35% by 2010 (see: [Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport Report 2012](#)). Research has sought to understand the drivers of this demographic change and has included: topological case studies; descriptive analysis of economic factors and labour; and analysis of social aspects, including shifts in social networks and community relations through time. Among these, economic factors have been put forward as one of the main drivers of demographic change, particularly for those islands that are least agriculturally fertile and most deprived (Tagami and Furomoto 2016; Futagami 1959). Post-war, the more peripheral islands were characterised as exhibiting ‘backwardness’ and being in need of infrastructural and cultural modernisation (Kuwahara 2012: 42) (see section 4.3 for an overview of Japanese rural and island development policy).<sup>4</sup> During the 1950s and 1960s, following investment and the general development trajectory of Japan at the time, many islands saw infrastructural development, but also experienced out-migration of younger generations, which consequently impacted on birth rate and demographic profile. This was the first notable phase of change where the ‘baby boom’ drove population increase during the post-war recovery (i.e., in the 1950s and 1960s), followed by labour migration to the cities during the period of rapid economic growth and expansion of island leisure tourism (in the 1960s and 1970s).

Before the economic boom of the mid-1980s to early-1990s, the mid-1970s and early-1980s, in contrast, were characterised by a period of slow economic growth after the oil crises. Once the economy slowed and Japanese manufacturing and heavy industry stagnated, out-migration also slowed (see: [Cabinet Office Report 2019](#)). However, very few of the young population who had migrated returned even though historically younger generations would have looked after elderly family members and/or taken over family businesses.

With continued out-migration and extended life expectancy, island populations have become skewed towards older age groups and many islands have experienced significant population decline. Although more sparsely populated areas of Japan often have higher birth rates than more urban areas (Kato 2018), outmigration, birth rates below the rate of replacement and ageing, followed by a natural decline of the population (more deaths than births), has been a consistent pattern that has characterised much of the peripheries of Japan over the last 40 years. However, much like during the oil shocks, in the last 40 years, there have been periods where out-migration from rural areas has apparently slowed or even reversed (notably the collapse

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<sup>4</sup> Kuwahara (2012) reports that the term “backwardness” was used in the Remote Island Development Act (see below for overview of the Act).

of the ‘bubble economy’ (バブル経済) in the mid-1990s; the global financial crisis in 2008; and the Tōhoku Earthquake in 2011) (see: [Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport Website](#)). More recently evidence suggests that Covid-19 has also driven increased out-migration from Tokyo (Fielding and Ishikawa 2021). These trends and policy responses are explored in more detail in Section 4.3 below.

#### **4.1.4 Economy, Industry and Tourism**

Historically, primary industries, particularly fishing, played an important role in the economies of the remote islands of Japan. However, between 1990 and 2008 the value of output from the primary sector fell by almost half. Further, the numbers of people working in the primary sector has also fallen by over half, with the tertiary sector the dominant sector in terms of numbers of people employed. However, in comparison to the rest of Japan, the numbers working in the primary industries remain high (remote islands 21.2%; whole of Japan 4.2%) ([Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport Report 2014](#); Ozawa 2017).

A key aspect of many of Japan’s islands are their remoteness and relative economic disadvantage due to limited access to markets and social, political and capital networks. There are three distinctive points made by Miyauchi (2008) with regard to island industries. First, island industries tend to make use of the natural environment in which the island is situated. Consequentially, due to the diversity of natural resources, industries often developed along their own particular trajectory within the context of differentiated climates and geographies. In this way, the islands form their own small niche economic system. Second, very few islanders make sufficient living on single income sources, and many individual households manage to secure their livelihoods by combining several income sources.

Commercial island food production is mostly based on small-scale family businesses whose marketing depends on personal and businesses networks as well as the availability of transportation. Unless transportation and business networks are reliable, investment in production is a risk, and businesses often opt-out of investment. Furthermore, fishery-related activity is even riskier due to the nature of the product. One approach to manage risk is to circumvent competition in the market through either food producer’s associations, or by diversifying products or moving away from mono-cropping, and/or overlapping products with other producers (Okuno 1998).

Another important source of income for many island inhabitants is tourism. Islands tourism was in high demand during the 1960s and 1970s when living standards in Japan were improving and people had more income to spend on leisure activities. Until foreign tourism was fully liberalised in Japan in the 1970s, the islands had been holiday destinations for economically affluent mainland inhabitants. Many fishing families

started running seasonal inns, which purchased local agricultural surpluses and led to the growth of local industries providing some local jobs. However, partly due to the increase in foreign tourism following liberalisation, tourism to the remote islands has fallen since 1975 ([Island Futures Research Group Report](#) 2010).

More recently cultural and eco-tourism, where people seek remoteness and a respite from urban crowds, has become more popular. This form of tourism offers the potential for enhanced natural environment management as well as the opportunity to maintain traditional cultural practices by commodifying them. While sensitivity is needed during the commercialisation of cultural practices and ecological resources, it is argued that appropriately designed tourism initiatives could offer an important source of income (see [OECD 2009](#); Asano 2002; Tsuruta 1994). Indeed, tour planners and creators have expanded into various eco/cultural tourist schemes such as farm stays, festival participation (Yamazaki 2014), community field research by university students and flexible telework experience on the tropical islands (Miyauchi 2014). While the long-term impact of eco/cultural tourism is unclear due to its recent popularity, it has the potential to be more sustainable than large resort type developments and can raise awareness of diverse cultures (Miyauchi 2007; Yamazaki 2014).

Tourism, primary industries and, more recently, the tertiary sector are important sources of income on Japanese islands. Previous research has highlighted how many island residents engage in multiple activities to secure their livelihood (see above). Ethnographic research has highlighted a range of other important adaptive livelihood strategies and social forms including migration and household/family ties (Okuyama 1986; Goto 1984); traditional producers' associations (Umeda 1997; Yagi 1980) and communal land-holdings/fishing-rights/funding bodies (Tanaka 1954; Ohro 2000); extended exchange networks; and high mobility patterns (Nakamatsu 1964; Kosaka 2002; Miyamoto 1969). Understanding such livelihood strategies in remote and peripheral areas is critical for political interventions, as inappropriate development strategies can lead to deleterious outcomes (Miyauchi 2011; Nagashima 2000).

#### **4.1.3 Transportation**

Investment in transportation has been one of the main tools for mobilising and connecting Japan's remote island economies. The development of basic transport infrastructure on many Japanese islands sought to improve access to and connections between islands, mostly with the main islands, by building bridges, ports and road networks. The building of bridges has arguably led to the largest change in terms of economic and human interconnectivity with the mainland, and bridge building has transformed the Japanese Inland Sea. However, most of the islands in the Outer Seas have not experienced the same level of change (Hiraoka et al. 2018). Here, residents continue to rely on water surface transport and air travel, but these modes of transport

are costly for businesses to export to the mainland and hence restrict the extent to which businesses can become dependent on mainland retail networks (Miyagi 1979; Maehata 2011).

It is important to note that bridge building can have differential affects. For instance, in some cases, it has increased overall emigration, while in others it has increased only female emigration (Maehata 2011). Further, while bridge building can have positive impacts in term of accessibility and access to public services, it can also negatively affect independent and small-scale retailers and fishers / farmers (Shiotani 2000). Another key issue is that bridge travel fundamentally relies on cars and lorries and hence is vulnerable to fluctuating oil prices. This awareness, particularly after the 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami, drove some businesses to work towards more sustainable energy generation and transportation.

#### **4.1.4 Culture**

Due to their liminal nature and mobile population, islands can experience an influx and melding of cultures. At the same time, trade or movement prohibitions coupled with remoteness can restrict outside influence and encourage the development of island specific culture and identity (Baldacchio 2018; Royle 2001). As indicated above, Japanese islands often embed particular social structures and systems which support livelihoods and act as financial safeguards. Cultural events, such as traditional festivals, can be sources of tourist revenue (see above) but are also important for maintaining social relations and structures. Through cultural events, community members confirm their communal solidarity and identity, and they provide an opportunity to meet and communicate with other social groups. In some communities, out-migrants do return to their native islands for the festival seasons, and are involved in community activities, confirming and recreating local identity and belonging (Miyamoto 1969; Yamazaki et al. 2007; Yamazaki 2014). Although an active population is important for the continuity of cultural practices, many cultural events also require support from tourism and revitalisation funds (see below) or other forms of support, for example volunteers from outside the island.

#### **4.2 Revitalisation: A Realistic Prospect?**

There is a debate within academic work as to how best to respond to the moribund state of many peripheral areas of Japan (Dilley et al. 2022). Population decline and ageing fundamentally stem from a low birth rate in Japan, and the apparent difficulty in turning this around has led some to ask whether the concept of rural 'revitalisation', a common term in Japanese policy documents (see Section 4 below), is misplaced. Wirth *et al.* (2016: p. 66), for example, argue that discourse of revitalisation is based on the

‘erroneous assumptions’ that the impacts of population decline and ageing can be mitigated or even reversed.

For Matanle and Sato (2010), continued shrinkage of the peripheries is inevitable and hence there is a need to both move ‘beyond growth’ as a policy objective and to accept and manage inevitable decline. Matanle and Sato (2010) suggest that population shrinkage should not be conceptualised in negative terms, but rather as an opportunity to reconsider societal goals and values and re-orientate the current regime away from growth towards ‘socio-environmental stability and, even, sustainability’ (p. 208). Odagiri (2015), however, argues that it is too early to begin to accept the disappearance of rural communities, and raises the question as to whether discussions grounded on an assumption of the inevitability of population decline potentially serve as a form of self-fulfilling prophecy. Others have put forward a more differentiated approach, suggesting that the most viable communities be the focus of revitalisation efforts, while those at the limit of viability receive assistance to ensure the welfare of the remaining residents in preparation for the gradual closure of the community (Kudo and Yarime 2013; Hashimoto *et al.* 2020).

From a Scottish (or wider UK and European) perspective, there may be similar questions asked about the ‘sustainability’ of those rural and island communities that have long experienced population decline and associated service withdrawal and economic stagnation, and the funding arrangements to support them, particularly at times when there is pressure on public sector budgets. Examples of communities that have reversed demographic, economic and social decline based on bottom-up initiative and local ownership and management of resources, such as the Isles of Eigg, Rum and Gigha and parts of the Western Isles (e.g. West Harris), certainly demonstrate how much can be achieved through community-led activities, often in combination with external, public and private sector funding and other support.<sup>5</sup>

There are current policy and other drivers in Scotland which may lead to further questions about the sustainability of rural and island communities where population numbers are low. For example, ambitious net zero and climate emergency-related targets in Scotland may require revisiting in rural and island areas where residents are more reliant on private cars to travel longer distances and on more ‘environmentally unfriendly’ fuels for heating their (often larger, older and poorly insulated) homes. These concerns may be especially acute as we experience the current cost of living crisis,

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<sup>5</sup> The work of Community Land Scotland on community land ownership and repopulation may be worth exploring here: [Renewal and repopulation \(communitylandscotland.org.uk\)](https://www.communitylandscotland.org.uk).

which evidence suggests is being experienced more severely by rural residents.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, rural and island areas have substantial roles to play in providing solutions to climate challenges, in terms of the need to increase renewable energy generation, the potential of peatlands in terms of carbon sequestration, the potential for afforestation and the production of local, fresh food, and the increasing use of digital technology to deliver and access services (thereby reducing the need to travel). These activities all require the presence of people and will therefore contribute to the sustainability of communities in future. Linked to this are questions about: 1) the future use of land and the balance between rewilding and re-peopling goals (see earlier references); 2) alternative future growth pathways (such as green growth and de-growth and community wealth building) which link fundamentally with demographic goals; and 3) the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on urban versus rural living and the potential for new ways of working in different locations in future.

The notion of the unsustainability of human habitation on some Scottish islands is not new. Uninhabited islands in the Outer Hebrides (Mingulay, Cara, The Monachs and North Rona), in the Inner Hebrides (Scarba, Inch Kenneth), Orkney (Fara) and off the Scottish mainland (Eilean na Ron, Handa) were populated in the past. Many were deserted in response to severe storms. The risk from the rise in sea levels to island populations was presented to the Scottish Government recently by climate change experts and the debate about sustainability is likely to intensify in future years.

### **4.3 Japanese Policy Context**

#### **4.3.1 National Level Policies**

Historically, there has been a broad range of policies that have both recognised and sought to address the issue of regional decline in Japan. Examples of these include the Mountain Village Promotion Act (1965) (山村振興法); Temporary Act for the Promotion of Coal Producing Areas (1961) (産炭地域振興臨時措置法); and Special Policy for Heavy Snow Areas (1962) (豪雪地帯対策特別措置法). These policies primarily sought to develop regional infrastructure and increase employment opportunities in rural areas and signalled a growing concern for and desire to tackle the issues of poverty and lack of opportunities in rural areas (Feldhoff 2013).

These policies are comparable to the early modernist European rural development model where supporting infrastructural development in the more peripheral regions was understood to be both a key goal and means of rural development in Japan (Matanle

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<sup>6</sup> For more information on this, please see: [Blog: Is the government doing enough to stave off the cost-of-living crisis in rural areas? - ACRE and Cost of living crisis: 'People heating one room with firewood' - Rural Services Network \(rsnonline.org.uk\).](#)

and Rausch 2011). However, as in Europe, such ‘exogenous’ development policies (see: Gkartzios and Lowe 2019; Ward et al. 2005) were critiqued for being top-down and environmentally and culturally destructive (Kerr 2001), for fostering dependency, and for not engaging with the differentiated and regional specific problems associated with regional depopulation and decline. Later policies in Japan did however begin to directly engage with the issue of depopulating or shrinking regions while trying to embrace place-based and differentiated local responses. Starting with one of the laws that specifically recognised ‘depopulated areas’ or ‘*kasō chiiki*’ (過疎地域) (Feldhoff 2013), this section explores national-level policies and initiatives aimed at addressing the issues of population ageing, decline and regional disparity.

### **Kasō Chiiki Acts**

*Kasō chiiki* or ‘depopulated areas’ are designated according to a number of criteria including percentage of population decline, percentage of old and young people and financial strength (see [Ministry for Internal Affairs and Communications Summary](#) for overview). As of April 2022, 885 municipalities out of 1,718 were designated as depopulation-related municipalities, of which 713 are ‘fully depopulated’, 158 are ‘partially depopulated’ and 14 are ‘deemed depopulated’ (see report by [Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2022](#)). These municipalities represent the lowest level of government in Japan and are classified in three ways: cities, towns and villages. However, due to a process of municipal mergers that have occurred periodically in Japan (the last called the *heisei dai gappei* 1999 – 2006) an area designated as a city might not be predominantly urban in nature. In terms of population, roughly 11 million people live in areas designated *kasō*, out of a total population in Japan of roughly 127 million. Yet, while *kasō* areas make up only around 8% of the total Japanese population, *kasō* areas cover almost 60% of the total area of Japan (see report by [Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2016](#)) (this compares to 17% of Scotland’s population being rural and 98% of its landmass).

Since the 1970s a succession of laws have specifically sought to directly engage with the problem of regional depopulation and decline and support those areas designated as *kasō* to the tune of 115,860.8 billion Yen (£772 billion) (1970 – 2020) (see report by [Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2020](#): p.150). The Act on Emergency Measures for Depopulated Areas, the first law relating to the promotion of depopulated areas, was enacted in 1970. Originally designed as a 10-year time-limited piece of legislation, it was subsequently amended and extended four times. Along with revisions to the title of the laws – e.g., from ‘measures’ to ‘development’, ‘revitalisation’, ‘promotion of self-reliance’ and ‘sustainable development’ – the objectives and support measures have also changed (see Table 2 for an overview of the *kasō* laws). When the Depopulation Areas Act was first enacted, the aim was to reduce regional disparities

and ensure a national minimum standard in terms of services and facilities, in particular through the development of infrastructure including transportation, water and sewerage systems (Feldhoff 2013).

Table 2: Overview of Kaso Laws (1970 – 2030)

Name of Law	Aims	Problems Identified	Mechanisms and Approaches
Act on Emergency Measures for Depopulated Areas 過疎地域対策緊急措置法 1970 – 1979	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prevent excessive population decline</li> <li>• Improve residents' welfare</li> <li>• Reduce regional disparities</li> </ul>	Rapid population outflow to cities, especially among new graduates.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Urgent measures.</li> <li>- Ensure national minimum standards.</li> </ul>
Act on Special Measures for the Development of Depopulated Areas 過疎地域振興特別措置法 1980-1989	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop depopulated areas</li> <li>• Improve residents' welfare</li> <li>• Increase employment</li> <li>• Reduction of regional inequalities</li> </ul>	Lack of employment opportunities and medical care; ageing due to population outflow especially among young generation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Improvement of residents living standards and welfare; increase employment and reduction of inequalities through comprehensive and planned development measures.</li> </ul>
Act on Special Measures for the Revitalisation of Depopulated Areas 過疎地域活性化特別措置法 1990-1999	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Revitalise depopulated areas</li> <li>• Improve residents' welfare</li> <li>• Increase employment</li> <li>• Reduction of regional inequalities</li> </ul>	'Excess' concentration of population and industry in the Tokyo Metropolitan area after overcoming the second oil crisis. Problems due to ageing society and delays in industrial and public facility development.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- From 'development' to 'revitalise'.</li> <li>- Focus on community development based on local initiative and ingenuity.</li> <li>- Focus on comprehensive regional development, including private sector vitality, as well</li> </ul>

			as the development of public facilities.
<p>Act on Special Measures for the Promotion of Self-Reliance of Depopulated Areas          過疎地域自立促進特別措置法          2000-2020</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote regional Independence</li> <li>• Improve residents' welfare</li> <li>• Increase employment</li> <li>• Reduction of regional inequalities</li> <li>• Contribute to the moulding of a 'beautiful country'</li> </ul>	<p>Significant ageing population; significant stagnation of agriculture, forestry and fisheries; lack of daily transportation; weakening of the local healthcare systems; requests for the establishment of flexible support to make use of local resources and ingenuity.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Expansion of soft elements in order to create local communities where residents can live safely and securely into the future.</li> </ul>
<p>Act on Special Measures for Supporting the Sustainable Development of Depopulated Areas          過疎地域の持続的発展の支援に関する特別措置法          2021 – 2030</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support sustainable development of depopulated areas</li> <li>• Secure and develop human resources</li> <li>• Improve resident's welfare</li> <li>• Increase employment</li> <li>• Reduction of regional inequalities</li> <li>• Contribute to the moulding of</li> </ul>	<p>Decline in the vitality of local communities due to accelerated population decline; ageing and consolidation of public facilities; maintenance of agricultural land, forests and housing.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- From 'promote independence' to 'support sustainable development'.</li> <li>- Developing human resources through partnership between communities, residents and schools.</li> <li>- Promotion of ICT technology.</li> <li>- Creation of human flows (migration and</li> </ul>

	a 'beautiful country'		other rural mobilities). - Increase employment. - Promote regional governance. - Promote renewable energy. - Target setting and follow-up.
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Since the 2010 amendment to the Act on Special Measures for the Promotion of Self-Reliance of Depopulated Areas, the scope of support has been broadened to include 'soft' development projects that focus on promoting migration and settlement, passing on local traditional culture and maintaining and revitalising community, with the aim of achieving sustainable development of the depopulated areas. The background to this transition in *kasō* policy was a shift in the demographic and economic fortunes of Japan.

The 1960s was a period of rapid economic growth in which the so-called 'golden eggs' (the first baby boom generation, born between 1947 and 1949) were absorbed into the urban workforce resulting in a significant population decline in rural areas. This led to a shortage of labour in agriculture, forestry and fisheries in rural areas, which also had a negative impact on maintaining livelihood functions such as education, medical care and disaster prevention in more peripheral areas. In contrast, issues caused by high population densities became apparent in the cities. As depopulation became a social problem nationwide, the Act on Emergency Measures for Depopulated Areas was enacted to 'prevent excessive population decline' (see: [Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Summary](#)), with a focus on the development of living and industrial infrastructure to correct the disparity with urban areas.

In the late 1970s, with two oil crises having a significant economic impact, population movement from rural to metropolitan areas slowed substantially (with brief periods of reversal) (see [Cabinet Office Report 2019](#)). Furthermore, attempts were made to move regional development approaches away from a centralised and uniform system of governance towards a decentralised and participatory system of self-government under the banner of 'an era of the regions' – it was after all the peak of regionalism in other western countries (Keating 1997). However, problems such as poor employment opportunities, lack of access to medical care and an ageing population, which in part resulted from an overall trend of population outflows from rural areas, became more

pronounced and the Act on Special Measures for the Development of Depopulated Areas was enacted in 1980.

Following the second oil crisis, the tendency towards concentration in the Tokyo metropolitan area again strengthened, and the late 1980s to 1990s saw the arrival of inflated asset prices called the ‘bubble economy’ and the proliferation of exogenous driven developments in the form of resorts and golf courses (Kusakabe 2013). However, at the same time there was a growing emphasis on regional revitalisation based on local assets, initiative and ingenuity. Against this backdrop, the Act on Special Measures for the Revitalisation of Depopulated Areas was enacted in 1990.

In the early 1990s, the bubble economy burst and Japan subsequently faced more than two decades of economic stagnation. With an increasing concentration of people in the Tokyo metropolitan area and a declining and ageing population becoming more apparent, the Grand Design for the National Land of the 21st Century was formulated in 1998, which encouraged regional self-reliance and emphasised decentralised national land development through the participation and cooperation of a diverse range of actors including residents, local businesses and non-profit organisations. Similarly, between 2000 and 2020 the *kasō* Act sought to foster self-reliant local communities that draw upon and demonstrate local assets and resources. In addition to correcting the disparity between depopulated areas and urban areas, which had been the main focus of previous depopulation acts, the acts have also, for the first time, referred to the importance of the value and role of depopulated areas and aimed to ‘contribute to the formation of a beautiful and dignified national land’ (see [Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications’ webpage](#)). Between 2000 and 2020 the *kasō* Act was partially amended four times and the period of validity extended (see Table 3 for overview of spending). A major change was the 2010 amendments which made ‘soft’ projects including improving local medical care, operating community transportation and maintaining and revitalising communities eligible for depopulation bonds (*kasosai*). These are bonds issued by the local municipality to fund development initiatives with 70% of the debt underwritten by central government (Chang 2018). However, despite the emphasis on independence and self-reliance as well as the inclusion of ‘soft’ projects, the mechanism for policy implementation was characteristically top-down, with local municipalities required to submit plans that resonated with the framework developed by central government (Chang 2018). Further, there is an argument that such subsidy schemes incentivise maintaining the *status quo* (depopulation), as substantial amounts of subsidy are contingent on ‘depopulated’ status. Added to this, the use of debt bonds can lead to accumulated levels of debt placing a large financial burden on municipalities and their residents (Matanle and Rausch 2011: p. 250).

Table 3: Overview of Percentage of Spending per Type of Project for the Depopulation Areas Act (2000 - 2020)

Share of Spending (%) (819 Depopulated Areas)					
Transport and Information Infrastructure	Industrial Development	Living Conditions Improvement (e.g., water + sewage systems)	Elderly Care	Education and Culture	Medical Services
37%	28%	21%	4%	7%	2%

\*Adapted from Chang (2018)

The current Special Measures Act on Supporting the Sustainable Development of Depopulated Areas has been in force since 2021. While previous depopulation measures have achieved some success in promoting industry, improving infrastructure such as transport and communications, and ensuring opportunities for local medical care and education, challenges remain in terms of accelerating population decline in Japan overall (as a result of low birth rates and continuing outmigration), maintaining public transport, securing actors in the medical and welfare fields, and revitalising communities.

In response to these challenges, and in addition to the existing objectives of improving the welfare of residents, increasing employment, correcting regional disparities and creating “*a beautiful and dignified national land*”, the *kasō* Act now focuses on ‘securing and fostering human resources’ (see [Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications’ webpage](#)). As part of this, the Act clearly articulates an aim to promote internal urban-rural migration, settlement and inter-regional exchange, and to develop human resources and leadership in local communities. A new preamble has also been added to the Act, emphasising the positive functions of depopulated areas, such as the stable supply of food, water and energy, the securing of biodiversity and the transmission of diverse cultures. In this sense, increasing importance is being placed on depopulated areas as concerns about large-scale disasters and infectious diseases due to urban population concentration are increasing.

The new depopulation act moves away from a conceptualisation of depopulated areas as literally lagging behind and in need of improvement, following global trends in development studies that seek to value and mobilise local assets (see a review in Gkartzios et al. 2022b). Here, Odagiri (2022) argues that depopulated areas are increasingly being conceptualised as low-density residential spaces that have a different value from urban spaces. Although there is still net negative migration from rural areas to large urban conurbations and an advancing ageing population, the idea of simply increasing the population of depopulated areas is questionable as the total population of

Japan is declining. The new act has therefore started to move towards the goal of the creation of a system that enables people to continue to live in low-density areas by securing and developing diverse human resources capable of building new lifestyles and business models that make use of diverse local resources (Odagiri, 2022). These shifts are also taking place in the context of recent drives to rationalise public expenditure and arguments that there are different potential growth pathways that could be followed, including low/no growth, as well as the ongoing complexity regarding the acceptability of, and potential for, immigration into Japan.

## **Regional Revitalisation**

In 2014, under the banner of ‘Towns, People, Jobs: Regional Revitalisation’, the Japanese Government put forward a range of aims and measures in four packages aimed at overcoming population decline and promoting the vitality of regional economies (see [Cabinet Office Summary Document 2019](#)). The Regional Revitalisation Strategy was underpinned by a concern for the issues of ageing and population shrinkage in Japan’s more peripheral regions. The Strategy was also based on the argument that there was an ‘excessive’ concentration of human and financial capital in the Tokyo metropolitan area which needed correcting. Unlike the *kasō* Acts, in the implementation of the Regional Revitalisation Strategy, central government does not prepare a development framework, but assesses plans produced by local municipalities using Key Performance Indicators, and allocates subsidies based on this assessment (Chang 2018). Originally to run from 2015 to 2019, the Regional Revitalisation Strategy sought to: promote employment; create inflows of migrants into regional areas; support marriage, childbirth and parenthood; and promote safe and secure living, creating regions suited to current times. From 2020, a ‘Second Stage’ of the Regional Revitalisation Strategy was introduced and it is scheduled to run until 2024 (see [Cabinet Office Summary Document 2019](#)). The second stage of the Regional Revitalisation Strategy had an estimated budget of 2.2 trillion Yen in 2021 (~£13 billion) (see [Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Document 2021](#)), and includes an updated package of goals and measures which stresses, amongst other things, four particular aspects:

1. ‘*Kankeijinkō*’ and inward investment by businesses and individuals

As part of the objective to promote greater flows of both people and capital to more regional areas, the Regional Revitalisation Strategy promoted what is termed *kankeijinkō*. *Kankeijinkō* can be translated as ‘relationship population’ and represents ‘not (permanent) migrants; nor tourists’ but rather people from ‘outside the area who could play a role in community development’ ([Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Summary Document 2019](#)). *Kankeijinkō* is understood to include a wide variety of individuals who frequently visit a particular area for a range of reasons,

including work, volunteering or as part of longer-term quasi-leisure related visits. The understanding here is that *kankeijinkō* represent a group of people on a spectrum of 'commitment' to a particular rural area, from those who undertake regular visits to those who own second homes (Teraoka, 2020). The thought is that through a process of relationship building between people and place, migrants from more urban areas play a role in regional revitalisation by injecting much needed skills, human and financial capital into these regions, and as they become increasingly committed to a particular rural area, they become more likely to migrate permanently thus playing a role in tackling population decline.

A number of specific initiatives have been proposed to support the establishment of *kankeijinkō* including satellite offices and teleworking for those who wish to live and work in two places at once; satellite campuses for students to study in more remote regions; revitalisation internships; and rural community experience initiatives for children. More concretely, since 2019 the Japanese government has been offering residents of the special 23 wards of Tokyo up to 1 million Yen (~£6,000) to those wishing to relocate to more remote regions and a further 2 million Yen (~£12,000) to those starting a business (3 million total) (see Cabinet Office Summary Documents [2019](#), [2021](#)).

With regard to remote islands in Japan, under the *kankeijinkō* initiative, a project entitled 'Remote Islands, Travel and Parallel Work' was started in 2019 with the aim of promoting flows of people to the remote islands (see [Kankeijinkō Portal Site](#)). Parallel work is a reference to a working pattern where a person may live and work in two separate locations supported by information technology. Run by Ama Town (Nakanoshima Island) this project sought to publicise and promote visits to remote islands for those interested in living and working, either permanently or temporarily, on one of Japan's islands.

## 2. Society 5.0

As part of the effort to promote regional vitality with the longer-term goal of improving the economic and social viability of more remote areas of Japan, under the Regional Revitalisation policy, the government has sought to encourage information technology adoption and innovation, AI and digital technologies. Digital technologies are understood not only to play a key role in allowing more flexible working ('parallel working' for example); but also in promoting economic development through greater connectivity (5G), automation and robotics notably related to farming (see [Cabinet Office Summary Document 2021](#)). Further, automation, robotics and AI are also thought to play a key role in helping tackle some of the issues related to population ageing and shrinking, notably a decrease in the labour force and increasing healthcare burdens. As

part of this promotion, remote islands (*ritou* 離島) are eligible for subsidies of up to two thirds of infrastructure costs to improve connectivity including 5G and internet services ([Regional Society 5.0 Promotion Group 2021](#)).

### 3. Sustainable Development Goals and Environmental Initiatives

Linked into the concept of Society 5.0, an increased emphasis has been placed on the utilisation of renewable resources and decarbonisation in more peripheral areas of Japan. This is understood to be cross-cutting in nature, necessitating and progressing in tandem with greater digitalisation and smart technologies while contributing positively to economic development, the environmental agenda and the broader Sustainable Development Goals ([Cabinet Office Summary Document 2021](#)). To drive and disseminate innovation, the Japanese government has been providing 250,000,000 Yen per year (~£1,550,000) for 10 SDG model projects that embed integrative approaches and spark positive synergies across society, economy and environment. Between 2018 and 2021, 40 of these model projects have been funded across peripheral and semi-peripheral areas of Japan.

These projects seek to generate lasting partnerships between public, private and third sector stakeholders, and embed and utilise digital technologies and connectivities. As part of this, a 'Matching Platform' (website, events and facilitator office) was released which seeks to match together individuals and organisations in order to develop partnerships with the goal of formulating concrete projects ([Cabinet Office SDG Summary Document 2022](#)). Iki island (Nagasaki Prefecture) was awarded the status of SDG Model. As with many islands in Japan, Iki island is facing depopulation and ageing, trends which are interrelated with a number of other issues, including falling levels of commerce, reductions in fisheries activities and issues related to farming succession. Under the Iki island SDG model project, a range of goals have been proposed, including: the boosting of agricultural value chains (particularly related to asparagus); tackling a shortage of labour, through in part, the use of smart technologies (automation and better use of data); skills development particularly in IT (education and training); developing a renewable energy project; and, encouraging teleworking in collaboration with the Iki Telework Centre ([Iki City Municipal Government Future City SDG Plan 2021](#)).

### 4. Community Cooperative Support (CCS) initiative (chiiki okoshi kyōryokutai (地域おこし協力隊))

The Community Cooperative Support initiative (CCS) was started in 2009 by the Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC) and provides support for people moving from urban to rural areas. Members of the initiative are supported in

the form of a stipend (between 160,000 - 250,000 Yen a month (~£990 - £1,350)) for a maximum of three years via payments that the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications provides to local municipalities. In return for receiving this stipend, members of the CCS take part in a range of activities aimed at promoting or preserving local culture, history or nature (Reiher 2020; Klien 2022). Since its inception, the number of participating municipalities has increased from 31 to over 1,000 with 6,005 individuals taking part in 2021 (see: [Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Report 2022](#)). The long-term goal of the CCS initiative has been to encourage regional revitalisation by bringing in CCS members to work in areas suffering from population decline and ageing and ultimately to encourage primarily working-age individuals to migrate permanently.

Figures collected by the [Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications](#) (2021) indicate that 63% of participants in the CCS scheme ended up staying in their adopted areas after completion of their three-year CCS term indicating some success. Members of the CCS initiative are placed on remote islands in Japan, and a number of island authorities are appealing for people interested in taking part in the scheme. However, the figures from Okinawa, a cluster of islands at the southern-most end of the Japanese archipelago, show that only 48% of CCS members take up permanent residence in Okinawa, in comparison to the nationwide average of 63% (this proportion staying in Okinawa increased slightly to 56% in 2022 (see: [Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Report 2022](#))). This suggests that permanent relocation particularly to some islands presents a set of challenges not found elsewhere, an area which is worthy of further research.

#### **4.3.2 Island Specific Policies**

Japan consists of 6,852 islands, of which 6,847 are defined as 'remote islands' (*ritō* (離島)), excluding Honshu, Hokkaido, Shikoku, Kyushu and the main island of Okinawa. Of these, 416 are inhabited islands, and the population of these remote islands as a whole is 615,000, accounting for 0.5% of the total Japanese population. Although the total area of the remote islands is only 2% of Japan's territory, the length of their coastline accounts for more than 20% of Japan's total, and the islands have an important role as the basis for a claim to territorial waters and the Exclusive Economic Zone ([Japanese Remote Islands Centre 2020](#)). Promotion measures are implemented for 303 islands based on the five acts outlined below. These acts exclude remote islands where bridges allow daily movement off the islands ([Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transportation Follow Up Document 2021](#)).

The Remote Islands Development Act, first enacted in 1953 and currently covering 254 islands, is regarded as the starting point of the remote islands promotion policy.

Originally intended as a 10-year time-limited piece of legislation (Kuwahara 2012), it has been amended and extended six times. The current act was enacted in 2012 and aims to ‘promote exchanges between regions, prevent the increase in the number of remote islands with no residents and the significant decline in the population, and promote the settlement of people on remote islands’ ([Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transportation Follow Up Document 2021](#): p.24).

In addition to conventional infrastructure development, the Remote Islands Revitalisation Grant Programme (離島活性化交付金事業) has been implemented since 2013 as a support project to promote the further independent development of the remote islands. The goal is to increase employment and the number of *kankeijinkō* (see Section 4.3.1 above) by expanding the scope of support to include aspects of daily life such as mobility, migration and settlement. This programme is made up of three pillars: 1) settlement promotion projects; 2) exchange promotion projects; and 3) safety and security improvement projects ([Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transportation Follow Up Document 2021](#)). The settlement promotion projects include industrial revitalisation, such as the development of local speciality products, and settlement attraction projects, such as trial migration experiences (see Section 4.3.3 below). The exchange promotion projects include initiatives related to the dissemination of information and the promotion of exchange between the islands and the mainland. From 2021, in the context of the spread of Covid-19, support has been made available to combat the spread of infectious diseases on remote islands and, in order to promote new ways of working on remote islands in the wake of the pandemic, support has been expanded to include the renovation of abandoned houses and other idle facilities into shared offices and other facilities. In the run-up to the forthcoming revision in 2023 of the Remote Islands Revitalisation Grant Programme, a number of trends are attracting attention including an increase in *kankeijinkō*; the digitalisation of remote islands; and the creation of new industrial and employment opportunities through the introduction of renewable energy. This is in line with the government's digitalisation and carbon neutral efforts and is expected to expand the potential of the remote islands.

After the enactment of the Remote Islands Development Act in 1953, a number of similar subsequent acts were introduced to support islands that were excluded from the original Remote Islands Development Act as they were under Allied occupation following the Second World War (Kuwahara 2012). These acts include: the Amami Islands Promotion and Development Special Measures Act enacted in 1954 for eight Amami islands; the Ogasawara Islands Promotion and Development Special Measures Act in 1969 for four Ogasawara islands; and the Okinawa Promotion and Development Special Measures Act in 1972 for 37 Okinawa islands. The Amami Islands and the

Ogasawara Islands Acts have been amended every five years, and Okinawa Act every ten years.<sup>7</sup>

In 2017, the Act on Special Measures Concerning the Preservation of the Remote Border Island Areas and the Maintenance of Local Communities in Relation to Specified Remote Border Island Areas was enacted as a 10-year time-limited piece of legislation. This Act covers 71 islands located near the maritime border and aims to maintain local communities on the islands as a base for the preservation of territorial waters and the Exclusive Economic Zone. The background to the enactment of the Act is the ongoing friction over territorial claims with Japan's neighbouring countries ([Cabinet Secretariat Webpage undated](#)). Together with measures under the Remote Islands Development Act, the 2017 Act promotes measures such as lower fares on shipping and air routes, reducing the cost burden of daily commodities, expanding employment opportunities and promoting tourism ([Cabinet Office Summary Document 2017](#)).

#### 4.3.3 Local Policies and Initiatives

The following outlines two types of initiative commonly found in remote or peripheral areas of Japan. Unlike above, these initiatives tend to be administered and run at a local level.

##### Akiya Bank

In many peripheral areas of Japan, shrinking populations have resulted in an increase in abandoned and underutilised land and houses. One approach to this issue is the *akiya* bank (empty house bank 空き家バンク). These initiatives, often run by the local authorities, are essentially a list of unused houses for sale or rent in rural area. The aim is to help attract potential in-migrants while at the same time utilising buildings which can become an eyesore and hazardous if not maintained. Such schemes were enabled by a law enacted in 2014 that allowed local authorities to collect information on abandoned property. While initially run at the local level, a web site by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism now collates and disseminates information nation-wide and a nation-wide non-profit organisation also focuses on the issue (Rausch 2020).

Under *akiya* bank schemes, administrators, often local government officials, act as links between property owners and those interested in utilising them. In comparison to a Scottish context, the cost of the houses can be very low (prices of under £10,000 not being uncommon), with houses being given away for free in some cases.<sup>8</sup> The *akiya*

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<sup>7</sup> For further information on these Acts see Kuwahara (2012).

<sup>8</sup> For an island example see [Kutsuna Island Akiya Bank](#).

bank schemes have a number of benefits. First, as the schemes are often administered by local officials, potential in-migrants are offered support in selecting appropriate locations and are often introduced to members of the local community alleviating some of anxiety about moving into a new location. Second, the scheme provides owners reassurance that those taking over the property are aware of local surroundings, and are able and willing to try to integrate into communities that can be at times parochial (Takamura 2015).

Questions have, however, been raised over the usefulness of such schemes. Rausch (2020) argues that employment is the prime concern of rural in-migrants rather than housing, and hence offering housing without employment opportunities is unlikely to attract significant numbers of young families. Secondly, most empty houses are located in areas that are remote, meaning that unless people are willing to undertake long commutes to nearby cities, then such locations will be unattractive.

#### Migration Introductory/Welcome Services

Linked to the *akiya* bank schemes, a number of municipalities offer ‘welcome’ or ‘introduction’ services for those looking to migrate to rural areas. Often delivered by local non-governmental organisations, these services include information about employment and welfare, education and child-rearing. Information is primarily delivered through websites, but many areas also provide online or in-person consultations, as well as symposiums located in major Japanese cities or conducted online. Some rural municipalities even offer ‘experience’ services, whereby potential in-migrants can temporarily live and work in the area in order to gain a sense of the lifestyle.<sup>9</sup>

#### **4.4 Summary: Island Overview and Policy Context**

Section 4 of the report has provided an overview of the key characteristics of Japan’s islands and has summarised a number of national, local level and island-specific policies and initiative that seek to address regional decline, depopulation and promote regional revitalisation.

Japan’s islands are hugely diverse in terms of their geographical, political, cultural, socio-economic and environmental characteristics, with many experiencing significant social and environmental change, particularly since the Second World War. Demographic decline and ageing has been significant, particularly on some of the more remote islands, with four key phases of demographic shift identifiable: 1) post-war and the baby boom (from the late 1940s to the 1960s); 2) high economic growth (from the 1960s to the 1970s) and labour migration (out-migration to the cities and island tourist boom); 3) energy crisis, slowing economic growth, and slowing rural out-migration (the

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<sup>9</sup> An example can be found on [Shimane Prefecture’s migrant support website](#).

1970s to 1980s); 4) post-bubble (mid-1990s to present) population decline and ageing driven by low birth rates and continued out-migration.

On most islands, the importance of primary sector activities such as farming and fishing has declined while the tertiary sector has become more important in terms of employment. For some islands, tourism has historically been an important source of income, but the number of tourists has been declining steadily since the 1970s. Population decline has meant that maintaining traditional cultural practices and events that help foster a sense of communal belonging has become difficult on some islands. It is also the case that many island residents are highly mobile, between islands, borders, livelihood strategies, and forms of labour.

Japanese development policies for peripheral and remote regions have historically focused on infrastructure development (roads, facilities and communications). Indeed, post-war public works and infrastructure spending was understood to be both a means and an end to rural development in Japan. Public works were seen to not only technologically modernise rural areas and boost local economies, but also provide employment for those inhabiting remote regions, providing a valuable source of income. Such measures, it was hoped, would incentivise fewer people to leave rural areas, and reduce population decline.

However, this focus on infrastructure and public works has been heavily criticised for fostering dependence and being destructive of the natural environment, wasteful and susceptible to pork-barrel politics.<sup>10</sup> More recent national-level policies have included 'soft' developmental objectives and measures that concentrate more on natural, cultural and other endogenous resources.

The post-war focus on public works, infrastructure and communications can also be seen with regards to island specific development policies (e.g., the Remote Island Development Act). However, similar to other national level policies, more recently there has been a greater emphasis placed on the diversity of the Japanese islands and the endogenous assets of each island. In particular, boosting tourism has become a focus of remote island development policies in Japan, with particular emphasis on eco- and cultural-tourism. In the context of friction over maritime national boundaries, one key concern embedded in some of the island specific policies relates to territorial claims and national security issues. Rural development policy in Japan has increasingly begun to focus on digitisation, digital connectivities, automation and AI as a means to both improve the economic outlook of remoter regions and tackle the issues stemming from of population decline and ageing. Linked to the importance placed on digital

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<sup>10</sup> 'Pork-barrel' politics refers to the use of funds for projects in certain areas to garner political support for a particular candidate or party.

technologies, greater emphasis has been placed on sustainability and the role of renewable energy in both income generation and decarbonisation. In the context of the high concentration of human and financial capital in the three main metropolitan areas of Japan, a key aim of a number of different rural development policies has been to encourage greater flows of people from urban areas to more remote regions. Such aims can be seen with regard to *kankeijinkō*, the Community Cooperative Support initiative and a variety of other local and national programmes. Such schemes are particularly notable in the context of Covid-19 as evidence suggests that the population of Tokyo has fallen for the first time in 26 years, and there has been a 'remarkable reversal of pre-COVID migration patterns and trends' in Japan (Fielding and Ishikawa 2021: p.11). In a country where the population is still declining overall, there is evidence of some debate about the goal of regional and island specific policies and whether this should be population growth and revitalisation or sustainability and the management of change.

## 5. Japanese Case Studies

Drawing on a desk-based review of written and digital sources, and a small number of interviews, this section presents the findings from four Japanese island case studies. The four islands have taken differentiated and innovative approaches to the issues of depopulation, demographic ageing and economic decline. The four case studies are: Ama Town (Nakanoshima Island); Sado Island; Amami Island and Gotō Islands. This chapter presents information relating to each case study in turn, providing background to the case studies, a brief overview of the initiatives that have been undertaken, and the key learning points. Due to limited time and resources, these case studies can only provide an outline of the islands and their initiatives and as such the following is intended to be a point of departure for future empirical and comparative research.

### 5.1 Case Study One: Ama Town (Nakanoshima Island)

Ama Town, situated on Nakanoshima Island, itself part of the Oki group of islands, is a relatively well studied case in both English and Japanese (e.g., Ginani 2019; Lewerich 2020; Klien 2020). The Oki islands are situated 60km off the north-western coast of the main island and as with many islands in Japan, services are limited. The mainland is accessible but requires a journey by ferry (3 – 4 hours) or jet boat (2 hours), with further travel necessary to reach the nearest cities once reaching the mainland (Lewerich 2020). From a peak population of 6,900 in 1950 (see: [Ama Town Statistical Report 2018](#)), the population had fallen to 2,267 in 2020, with those over the age of 65 making up 40% of the population (see: [Regional Economy Society Analyzing System Website](#)). Historically, economic activity on the island focused on agriculture and fisheries, but primary industries now contribute only 5% of the economic activity on the island with the public sector (30%), commerce (10%) and construction (10%) making up the largest proportions of economic activity (see: [Ama Town Interindustry Relations Report 2020](#)).

Looking at demographic changes more closely, Ama Town experienced a steady but pronounced net negative migration trend (more out-migration than in-migration) between 1995 and 2008, with 2005 being the only year with positive net migration during this period. This net negative migration has occurred alongside a 'natural' population decline, with the number of deaths exceeding births between 1995 and 2005 ([Ama Town Statistical Report 2018](#)).

Following the 2004 Trinity tax and administrative reforms carried out by the government at the time, Ama Town lost some 130 million Yen (~ £810,000) from its budget. This budget loss, coupled with a falling working age population and national economic changes resulted in some speculation that the town would go bankrupt as others had around that time (Lewerich 2020).

Following the election of a new mayor in 2002, a number of reforms and initiatives were undertaken in order to address Ama Town's situation. The emphasis of these reforms was on moving away from exogenous forms of development and building self-responsibility and local autonomy. As part of this, it has been reported that the number of local officials was reduced while the remaining officials took pay cuts of up to 50%. Other reforms and initiatives included investments in seafood processing, the branding of local beef, the renovation of local houses and, most famously, education reforms focusing on the high school (Lewerich 2020).

### **Ama Town Key Initiative: High School Project (高校魅力化プロジェクト)**

Following years of population decline, Ama Town's high school was in danger of closing permanently. However, following efforts to reform the school, entitled the High School Attractiveness Project, there has been a significant increase in the number of students. The project site, Okidozen High School, is the only high school in the Oki group of islands and is a public school for students not only from Nakanoshima but also from two other islands, Nishinoshima and Chiburijima. Before the start of the project, the school had only one class per year group and the number of students totalled 89 in 2008. However, by 2017, eight years after the start of the project, the enrolment had increased and the school had two classes per year group with around 180 students in total (see: [Oki Dozen Project Website](#)). The high school also started to attract students from outside of the Oki islands with 57% of the students from outside the islands (see: [Shimane Abroad Programme Website](#)).

The reasons for the low number of students were the declining birth rate and the deteriorating educational environment. According to national legislation, the number of teachers in a high school is determined by the number of students. Since this school had small number of students, few teachers were allocated, so one teacher was responsible for several subjects. Partly due to the high workload, the quality of education fell and students were at a disadvantage when it came to achieving the grades necessary for university. Therefore, children who wished to go to a good university often left the island when they reached high school age. In many cases, their parents also moved due to the significant financial cost of sending children to live and attend school off-island. Local staff from the town hall played a key role in initiating the project as they saw an impending crisis and, as a result of conversations with the town's mayor, the High School Attractiveness Project was launched in 2008.

The goal of this project is to create an attractive and sustainable school and community. To achieve this, the Okidozen High School introduced community-based learning to the school curriculum in which teachers aim to support the diverse ambitions and abilities of each student and train them to be community builders who can be active both globally

and locally. This does not mean that the goal is for students to remain living on the island, but rather they are encouraged to 'fly as far as they can' and then come back to the island with skill and experiences (this process is likened to a boomerang) (Yamanouchi et al. 2015).

It was noted by an interviewee that to help support students, Ama Town hires coordinators who are skilled in processes of human resource development and places them within the school to connect the children, the school and the local communities. In addition, an 'island study abroad programme' (島留学) was established to welcome students from outside the island and from overseas. This has reportedly helped to reduce the outflow of students to the mainland in search of new relationships and connections.

Further, a respondent for this project noted that national subsidies, such as grants for Revitalisation of Remote Islands (離島活性化交付金) and grants for the acceleration of the Regional Revitalisation Strategy (地方創生加速化交付金) were used for operating costs, including salaries for the coordinators and maintenance costs for school dormitories. In order to ensure the sustainability of the project, there is a future plan to make use of the Hometown Tax Donation Programme (ふるさと納税) which is a national programme to support the development of regional areas, especially small or less well-funded municipalities, through tax reductions given to tax payers who donate to local municipalities.

Overall, the high school has achieved a doubling of the number of students, which is unusual in remote areas of Japan (the number increased from 89 (2008) to 184 (2017)). The elementary and junior high schools around the islands have also started 'island study abroad programmes' and have hosted several groups of students and their families. This increase in the number of students appears to have resulted in a positive cycle of improved attractiveness of the island as a whole and a further influx of young people and families. This was reported to have positive knock-on effects in terms of a boost for local industry and revival and maintenance of traditional cultural practices. As such, an interviewee argued that there are now positive signs in Ama Town – tourism has developed, with a 30% increase in the number of visitors, from 9,329 in 2008 to 12,202 in 2015 and the proportion of villages that take an active role at the local festival has increased from 36% in 2006 to 64% in 2016 (see: [Oki Dozen Project Website](#)).

The project on this small island has also reportedly impacted positively on local and national policies. Since 2011, the prefectural government has had the funds to encourage other high schools in remote areas of the prefecture to implement the High School Attractiveness Project. Furthermore, the national government has amended the law on the number of teachers in high schools to ensure that there is an adequate

number of teachers even in small schools (Yamanouchi et al. 2015; [Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology 2021](#)).

### **Ama Town Key Lessons**

It is important to note that Ama Town is still experiencing population decline, but the rate has slowed. There are increasing numbers of in-migrants (between 2005 and 2017 migration was net positive (see: [Ama Town Statistical Report 2018](#))) and the numbers of high school students appears to have increased directly as a result of the education reforms.

An interviewee for this project reported that the biggest barrier encountered in the project was the tendency of high school teachers to want to maintain traditional educational approaches and subjects. They reported a number of 'allergic reactions' to the community-based learning, including in relation to embracing new and different cultures, the involvement of the community, and different educational transition pathways.

A key turning point of the project seems to be the increase in students' educational performance. Students and local residents reportedly now tell newly arrived teachers about the school's character. Personnel changes are also taken into consideration so that teachers who have improved their skills at the school can share their approach with other high schools around the prefecture. It was argued by an interviewee that this is evidence that the High School Attractiveness Project has taken root as a culture across the wider region rather than as one project in one location. Nakanoshima is sometimes referred to as a 'miracle island', but the High School Attractiveness Project was referred to by one interviewee as 'not a success story but a challenge story' as it has demonstrated how important it is to constantly experience trial and error when running a project like this.

One key lesson from this case study is the importance of mobilising a network of people from inside and outside the community (as discussed in western rural development discourse under the terms 'networked' or 'neo-endogenous rural development'). In this project, it was reported that the involvement of people from outside the island had helped to bring in new ideas and challenge strong traditional ideas and the somewhat fixed relationships within the community. Local residents were said to have displayed some opposition to the project being carried out by 'outsiders' initially, and in response an organisation was established which includes the director of education and the mayor of each island alongside parents, teachers and residents to ensure that a diverse range of voices informs decision-making.

Recently, the town has launched new initiatives to continue to tackle the challenge of depopulation, including the [‘Island Study Abroad for Adults’](#) programme (大人の島留学). This was launched in 2020 as a three-month to one-year work-based trial migration programme for young people from Japan and overseas. Through this programme the aim is to provide opportunities for young people to tackle island challenges and also for people from the islands to return to the region.

### **Education-related Scottish Examples**

The University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) campus on the Isle of Skye, [Sabhal Mor Ostaig](#), is the National Centre for Gaelic Language and Culture and is the only Gaelic medium college anywhere in the world. Not only has the campus developed and grown since being established in 1973, but the wider area has also seen economic growth.<sup>11</sup> Most recently, this is illustrated by plans for a new village which will incorporate 93 new homes. UHI also has campuses on a number of Scottish Islands: Orkney; Shetland; Western Isles. These are supplemented by a number of smaller learning centres across rural and island locations in north and west Scotland. Taking a different approach to the focus in Nakanoshima and Sabhal Mor Ostaig on having a physical educational presence in rural and island locations, e-Sgoil is the term used for the use of technology to connect schools and pupils throughout the Western Isles. The aim is to improve equality of opportunity across the Outer Hebrides through curriculum redesign and digital delivery. e-Sgoil set out to tackle the problem of shortage of teaching staff in the Western Isles which means there can be a lack of teachers in certain disciplines.

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<sup>11</sup> [Sabhal Mòr Ostaig: when culture drives economy - LGiU](#)

## 5.2 Case Study Two: Sado Island

Sado Island, part of Niigata prefecture, is located 50km off the eastern coast of mainland Japan. It is currently accessible by ferry and hydrofoil, taking 2.5 hours and 1 hour, respectively, from Niigata port. Transport options have been reduced, with an alternative sea route cancelled in 2019, and commercial flights having been stopped in 2014.

Originally made up of 10 separate administrative districts, following municipal mergers Sado Island is now administered as one single district - Sado City (Matanle 2017). Part of the driver for these mergers nationally has been cost reduction through administrative centralisation and rationalisation in the context of shrinking and ageing populations. Like many remoter regions of Japan, Sado has seen significant depopulation over the last 60 years with the population having fallen by over 50% from 1960 (113,000) to 2020 (51,000) (see: [Sado Government Website](#)).

As with many remote regions in Japan, farming, fisheries and related industries are important on Sado, with primary and secondary industries making up around 20% of Sado's economy. In 2020 there were just over 10,000 people employed in these sectors with an average income in 2020 for all sectors at 2.1 million Yen (~£12,000) (see: [Sado Government Website](#)), a figure that is roughly half of Tokyo's. Tourism has also been an important source of income on the island, with 1.4 million tourists having visited in 1994. However, the numbers have reduced steadily and significantly, with only 500,000 coming to visit between 2019 and 2020 (see: [Sado Tourism Association Report 2021](#)). Part of the attraction for tourists visiting Sado is the gold and silver mines with some 400 years of history although the last closed as a productive mine in 1989 (Johnsen 2020).

Matanle and Rausch (2011: 297) argue that Sado island has been caught in a 'spiral of decline' exacerbated by public service rationalisation. Jobs on the island are seen as poorly paid and unattractive by many younger people, which drives outmigration of those looking for better and more rewarding employment. This outmigration underpins population shrinkage and ageing which itself is linked to economic contraction. In this context, Matanle and Rausch (2011) argue that the reduction of public service positions through centrally driven government rationalisation and attempts at cost-cutting serves to close off a traditional source of relatively well paid and secure employment on the island. In this way, contraction and decline, and the responses to it can serve as drivers of further contraction and decline. However, there are a number of initiatives on Sado which have sought to address the issues of population and economic decline.

## **Sado Island Key Initiatives**

### Migration Support for Start-Ups

Sado City established the Migration Exchange Promotion Division in 2021 to help support migrants and business start-ups. The local government is focusing on supporting start-up companies with the aim of becoming the island with the highest success rate for entrepreneurship. Since Sado City is designated as a national inhabited border island, it is eligible for subsidies to fund the expansion of employment opportunities. These subsidies cover 3/4 of the costs of equipment, renovation, advertising and publicity, shop rental, personnel and research and development for up to five years for start-ups (up to 4.5 million Yen (~£27,000) per year) and business expansions (up to 9 million Yen (~£54,000) per year). The city also runs a business contest for start-ups that have been in business for less than 10 years. Winners receive support such as priority for the subsidies, rent discounts at incubation centres, business follow-up support and matching to venture capital (see: [Sado Business Contest Website](#)).

The incubation centres have been established to provide support to entrepreneurs and others in the early stages of business start-up by renting out offices and other facilities at low rents. So far, four centres have been developed on Sado Island by renovating old houses using a government grant for regional development telework and a temporary grant for Covid-19. There are 10 IT companies which set up their bases on the Island in 2021. The city also provides an incentive of 1 million Yen (~£6,000) per company if they move their head office functions or if two or more employees move to the area, and two companies have taken advantage of this offer.

One interviewee commented that these initiatives have contributed to an increase in the number of young migrants. In 2020, 503 people moved to Sado and 65% of in-migrants were under the age of 40 in 2020; the proportion was 58% in 2019. There are plans to encourage interaction between the local community and the IT companies based in the incubation centres. It is anticipated, for example, that entrepreneurs can teach local shop owners how to sell their products on the internet and teach programming to local children.

### Agriculture and Globally Important Agricultural Heritage Systems

In 2011, Sado island along with the Noto peninsula were the first areas in Japan to be designated as a “Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System” (GIAHS). Launched by the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) in 2002, the scheme’s aim is to identify and safeguard sites that are characterised by an ‘evolving system of human communities in an intricate relationship with their territory, cultural or agricultural landscape or biophysical and wider social environment’ (see: [FAO GIAHS Website](#)).

Sado Island's designation was on the basis of its interconnected mosaic of socio-agro-ecological systems including terraced rice paddies and irrigation ponds, the creation of which was driven by a high demand for rice during the period in which the gold mines operated.

The GIAHS designation followed efforts by local and national actors to promote the re-introduction of the crested ibis on the island through the introduction of ibis-friendly agriculture. Through a certification scheme, rice farmers could brand their rice as *toki* (crested ibis). To be certified, farmers had to meet a number of criteria including: 1) the creation of swales, fish ways and biotopes; 2) the irrigation of paddy fields in winter; and, 3) the reduction of chemical inputs by 50%.

GIAHS designation was anticipated to strengthen local pride, boost recognition of *toki* rice and other agricultural products, and increase tourism and rural-urban linkages centred around collaboration and learning. In this way, designation was not simply related to habitat and socio-ecosystem conservation but also revitalisation (see: [Sado GIAHS Designation Proposal](#)).

A report by the United Nations University ([UNU 2017](#)) notes that since 2008 the number of ibis friendly certified farmers has increased 256 to 524 and the area of land covered has almost doubled. The report argues that farmers' income has improved as rice sales have increased and *toki* branded rice commands a premium fetching almost double the price of conventionally grown rice. Further, the report argues that following GIAHS designation, there has been an increase in international and national exchanges helping drive efforts to conserve local culture and knowledge and contributing to Sado residents regaining a sense of pride in their landscape and way of life.

GIAHS designation has linked into other development initiatives. For example, a member of Sado's Community Cooperative Support (see section 4.3.1) has been organising activities and events to promote an understanding amongst visitors of the importance of Sado's socio-ecological system with the aim of leaving world-class terraced rice paddies to the next generation. Many of the visitors are university students from the Tokyo metropolitan area and some of visitors are reported to consider Sado Island as their second home town due to repeated visits. In some cases, these events and activities play a role as a gateway to getting to know the island and have encouraged some people to move there.

Research by Yamagishi (2020) has, however, highlighted a number of considerations. First, while the GIAHS is administered by the FAO internationally and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) nationally, the day-to-day management and responsibility falls upon the local government, adding to the burden of the local administration. Second, Yamagishi (2020) highlights a 'gap' between the GIAHS

designation of Sado as a driver of economic growth and revival, and the reality of Sado. Yamagishi (2020) suggests that population decline and ageing is inevitable on Sado, and rather than attempting to revitalise, there is a need to develop a vision of the future that is more centred on long-term sustainability and adaptation to change in-line with original conception of GIAHS. Yamagishi (2020) points to the fact that while there was an increase in the area designated as 'ibis friendly' in the early years of the scheme, there has been little increase since then, and the number of farmers has actually been reduced. This links into a broader critique of the 'growth' orientated goals, both economic and demographic, of many rural development policies in Japan (see: discussion in section 4.2.8 above and Matanle 2017).

### Tourism and Art

Part of the rationale for applying for GIAHS designation was that it would raise the profile of Sado leading to an increase in tourists. Similarly, in 2022 an application was made for Sado's historic mines to be inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage site, a move that was politically contentious (see: [New York Times Article 2022](#)). Nevertheless, the aim of the application was in part to bolster tourist numbers on the island, as has been apparent on other Japanese islands which achieved World Heritage status (Funk 2020). There are currently museums and a range of other attractions on Sado that are linked to the mines and the history of gold and silver mining. One particular initiative of note which embeds the history of mining on Sado is the Sado Galaxy art festival.

Japan has now quite an established practice of art-led rural development initiatives (see for example Kitagawa 2015). Through a networked approach between private art galleries, artists and local and regional stakeholders, a few art festivals are taking place in rural, remote and island communities in Japan (for an example of an island-based large outdoor art festival see the [Setouchi Art Triennale](#)). A review of the literature drawing on the prolific Echigo Tsumari Art Field in rural Niigata (see: Gkartzios et al. 2022) demonstrated opportunities for economic development through such festivals as well as their place-based sensibilities. For example, such festivals mobilise local cultural and heritage resources for the wider promotion of the regions in question, avoiding concentrating impact only on the duration of the festivals (for example through organising all year-round events). However, there are concerns over the overreliance on art as a way to deal with prolonged rural pathologies and unequal power relations across the art-policy network (see Favell 2017). The annual Sado Island Galaxy Art Festival (the most recent edition of which took place in 2021 ([Galaxy Art Festival Website](#))) mirrors this approach. The festival is rooted in the place capabilities of Sado and invites visitors to 'rediscover Sado's nature, history, and folklore' through artworks which are exhibited in open spaces throughout the island and collaborative art residency projects.

## Sado Key Lessons

Two of the initiatives highlighted here are linked to tourism, yet tourist numbers have fallen steadily and significantly since 1994, and Covid-19 has no doubt added to the drop in tourist numbers. Fundamentally, locations often compete for tourists and while Sado's agricultural system is perhaps unique, Sado's art festival takes place in the context of larger, more famous and more established art festivals in Japan.

The case of Sado perhaps brings to the fore the debate about whether growth should be the objective of development policy in peripheral areas of Japan. Questions have been asked as to whether growth is a realistic goal on Sado, or whether there should be a focus on long-term sustainability and adaptation to change (Yamagishi 2020). Either way, human resources are critical, and it is important to highlight that there are a notable number of in-migrants and repeat visitors to the area who see the island as their 'second home'.

However, an interviewee for this project suggested that there are people who have moved to Sado Island with high hopes and expectations, but who have become isolated and leave because they do not 'fit' with the local community. Experienced migrants and citizen volunteers can play a key role here in offering advice to potential migrants and newcomers on any problems or difficulties they may be facing. Although support for entrepreneurship is provided, newcomers have not been able to find jobs, so preparations are underway to launch a scheme next year that will allow them to experience multiple jobs on the island (see: [Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Webpage](#)). There are many activities to attract people (either as permanent, semi-permanent migrants or *kankeijinkō*) including the island's agricultural heritage and the art festival on Sado Island, but a key lesson is that it is important to inform people of the reality of both living and working in the community and to offer support to those who are thinking of moving to the island.

Furthermore, Sado Island highlights the development opportunities attempted through artistic practice (from attracting tourists, to new practices in support of local community governance). More research would be required to know the politics regarding the realisation of the Galaxy Art Festival, but in theory at least it is commendable to see activities that, as discussed in earlier parts of this report, mobilise local capital and resources through artistic practice.

## Arts-related Scottish Examples

The [Pier Arts Centre](#) in Stromness, Orkney was established in 1979 to provide a home for an important collection of British fine art in partnership with the Tate Gallery in London. Although it constitutes a formal artistic space (rather than the site-specific art

projects in Sado Island), it plays a key role in mobilising the local and extra-local artistic community, has library and archive services, and runs a programme of education and outreach activities.

Orkney also holds various arts and cultural activities, such as the [St Magnus Festival](#), the [Orkney Folk Festival](#) and the [Stromness Shopping Week](#).

### 5.3 Case Study Three: Amami Island

The municipality of Amami (Kagoshima prefecture) is located between the Japanese mainland and Okinawa. It consists of several islands including Amami-Oshima, the third largest island in Japan which is the location of the commercial centre, Naze area. Agricultural land is located in the centre of the island and the air and sea ports offer access to major cities and sub-islands. The tropical islands are also home to species certified as endangered by UNESCO. The culture of the island has diverse origins and local music and arts attract eco- and cultural tourists (see: [Amami City Website](#)).

Amami was integrated into Japan in 1953 following occupation by the allied forces and the islands' revenue has been subsidised by the Act on Special Measures for the Amami Islands Promotion and Development which helps with the cost of transportation, retail and logistic through subsidies ([Kagoshima Prefectural Government Report 2021](#)).

Amami has a range of national offices/bases for the legislature and border control ([Amami Coast Guard Office](#)). For workers and tourists, transportation is good with daily flights and ferries to major cities at a similar price to that on the mainland.

Amami follows the broader demographic trends of islands in Japan with decline during World War 2 followed by a baby boom, then continuous decline ([Amami City Report 2020](#)). Amami still has a relatively high birth rate of 1.9 which is 1.3 times the national average. Yet, the population of working age individuals between the ages of 15 and 64 is small, with roughly one in three of the population over 65 years old ([Amami City Report 2020](#)). However, the number of households has been stable since the 1970s, despite the population shrinkage with one reason for this being the numbers of migrants returning on retirement (Jung 2010) which is reported to be higher than on other islands (e.g., Okinawa islands) (Suyama et al. 2013 Takahashi 2018).

#### **Amami Key Initiatives: ICT and Flexible Work**

Amami has been a pioneer of 'public freelance' programmes (schemes aimed at allowing free-lance workers to work remotely) and in the field of *kankeijinko*. There is support on Amami for full- and semi-resident citizens/independent entrepreneurs, including job training, internships, remote/telework environment, child-care, marketing opportunities for home craft-makers, 'introductory living experiences' (see above in section 4.3.3) and related needs. The city government opened an ICT co-working facility in 2016 (ICT plaza Kasari) conveniently near the main airport which provides a good internet connection speed. The tenant companies which currently use the facility also provide training and support services to freelancers including web design and cloud sourcing services ([Amami City Freelance Initiative 2022](#)).

According to one of the Amami City Freelance Initiative participants, many of the other freelance participants are either returnee migrants, or originally from the mainland and have settled following tours or internship programmes. Indeed, it appears that Amami has been relatively successful in attracting repeat tourists ([Amami City Tourism Trend 2021](#)), and there are a number of young people from urban areas who could be classified as *kankeijinko* (see section 4.3) due to their longer-term involvement in marine and cultural activities. An interviewee for this research noted that they used to come to the islands for vacation and later found a place to live and a stable job through their local friend's networks. They currently work half their time on Amami and half in urban areas of Japan. Compared to the rent in the big cities, the interviewee commented, island property is spacious and cheaper, and the food is of better quality. Furthermore, the cost and standard of living on the island is similar to the mainland.

### **Amami Key Lessons**

According to one of the Amami City Freelance Initiative participants, many of the other freelance participants are either returnee migrants, or originally from the mainland and have settled following tours or internship programmes. Among more than 200 participants of the programme, there are over 50 entrepreneurs who settled between 2015 and 2020 ([Sharing Economy Association Japan 2020](#)). Many were attracted to and visited Amami repeatedly as tourists prior to the programme ([Amami City Tourism Trend 2021](#)). These young people from urban areas could be classified as *kankeijinko* (see section 4.3) due to their longer-term involvement in marine and cultural activities. An interviewee for this research noted that they used to come to the islands for vacation and later found a place to live and a stable job through their local friend networks. Some of them are based on Amami where the property is cheaper and spacious and occasionally travel to the mainland for work. One of the immigrant entrepreneurs noted that Amami has better quality food and natural environment, which makes for a better life and work balance, compared to the big cities.

### **Employment-related Scottish Examples**

[Smart Clachan](#) is an innovative project in Uist in the Western Isles, based on a combination of housing and teleworking. The concept of 'Smart Clachan' is driven by community-led cooperation and has been designed to address the triple and connected challenges of island depopulation in Uist, demographic change, and the climate crisis. The project is led by Rural Housing Scotland in partnership with community landowner Stòras Uibhist.

The project aims to develop live / workspaces which are “affordable, cooperative, interconnected, sustainable and low carbon” in locations across Uist. As well as helping

to stem depopulation and encourage relocation, the project aims to support Gaelic language and culture.

## 5.4 Case Study Four: Gotō Islands

Gotō City is a municipality that is part of Nagasaki prefecture located off the southwest coast of the Japanese main island. It consists of 52 uninhabited and 11 inhabited islands, of which the centre is located 100 km from the municipal capital (Myasoedov and Ota 2021). The actual city of Gotō is on the largest island called Fukue. Gotō City Municipality has a population of 34,391 residents (see: [Goto City Report 2021](#)). Access to Fukue is possible from Nagasaki and Fukuoka via boat (1.5 hours up to 4 times a day), or air in 30 mins. Access to the other smaller islands is only possible via boats transferring from Fukue.

Fisheries and farming were historically the primary source of household income but these sectors have declined in importance with labour emigration since the 1960s (for detailed statistics see: Japanese [Government's e-stat portal](#); see also: Miyamoto 1972; Takeuchi 1963). Growth sectors of the economy have centred on medical welfare for the increasing elderly population, childcare support and retail commercial sectors. The construction sector has also grown steadily in recent years (see: [Goto City Reports](#)).

The demographic trends on Gotō are typical of island transformation since WWII, with a population peak of over 90,000 in 1955 followed by rapid decline between 1955 and 1970 as the national economy picked up (see: [Gotō Population Vision 2015](#)). Population decline slowed from the 1970s onwards, but has continued up until the present (see: [Nagasaki Prefecture Report undated](#)). However, between 2007 and 2018, while still net negative, the number of in-migrants increased relative to the number of out-migrants. Further, in 2019 and 2020, in-migration exceeded out-migration for the first time in at least 20 years, which is unusual on Japanese islands, although this trend subsequently reversed in 2021 (see: [Nagasaki Prefecture Webpage](#)).

### Gotō Key Initiatives: Renewable Energy

Gotō City's municipal government has implemented various types of cross-cutting schemes to combat population decline including those related to business support, and subsidising residents' transportation costs, education and medical bills, initiatives that are often found on other islands too. Funding for some measures and initiatives to combat population decline is linked to the central government's Act on Preserving Remote Island Areas (有人離島法). However, what is striking about Gotō is the number of funding sources that have come from different ministries to finance a range of different types of projects which did not primarily aim, but helped, to create job opportunities. One example is the 'Renewable Energy Project' which aimed to develop sustainable and stable energy production for the islands' local communities. Although the energy project was not conceived as a 'population project', it has reportedly increased the profits of the farming and fishing industries, and has had a positive impact

on the job market. Renewable energy now makes up 50% of the islands' electricity (in comparison to a national average of 20%), but is expected to generate 80% in the next few years (see: [Maikōhō](#); Myasoedov and Ota 2021).

A reliable energy supply is a critical issue for island communities as they are susceptible to energy cost fluctuations. In this context, there is a demand for sustainable electricity at a competitive price for island industries. In 2010 an experimental wind project was completed on Gotō by a non-profit organisation with the support of the Ministry of Environment (Promotion and Research Institute for Ocean Economics 2018). After ten years of technical support and investment in local skills, electricity generation was handed over to the newly established local initiative, *Gotō Shimin Denryoku*, which is half owned by the local public office. The other half is owned by private enterprises and individuals including local businesses and entrepreneurs (Myasoedov and Ota 2021).

However, one of the primary stakeholder groups, fishermen, were initially dubious about the expected benefits from the renewable energy project. Local residents were also uncertain about the potential benefits and had concerns related to the cost of electricity and profit-sharing. In order to address these concerns, local government and academic institutes held consultations and mediated between stakeholders in order to understand the issues and allay the concerns of the local population ([Gotō City Renewable Energy Report 2018](#)).

*Gotō Shimin Denryoku* now provides half of the household and commercial electricity on the island through a mix of renewable technologies including wind and solar. Electricity used in the industries is supplied at an agreed fixed rate. In a few years, it is hoped that 70 to 80% of energy demand will be supplied by constructing more wind farms. Seafood production has increased around the vicinity of the wind turbines, due to the positive impact on fish habitats, which has, in turn, improved the employment opportunities in the construction sector, which was also stimulated by profits from electricity production ([Promotion and Research Institute for Ocean Economics Presentation 2018](#)). One of the consequences of the lower structures of the floating offshore wind turbines, was the creation of an excellent nesting environment for marine microorganisms (Myasoedov and Ota 2021).

### **Gotō Key Lessons**

In examining documents from this case study and drawing on interviewee testimony three key points stand out in relation to the approaches taken on Gotō: 1) the identification of key demographics and their needs; 2) partnership and communication with stakeholders to help spread awareness about the issues and potential solutions and overcome concerns; and 3) approaching depopulation from multiple angles with multiple interconnected projects.

Understanding the reasons behind and context of age-specific emigration enabled targeted support of the working-age population through business-related initiatives and educational schemes or scholarships (often provided on the condition that young graduates would come/return to live on the island (see: [Gotō-shi Education Funding Scheme webpage](#))). Initially, according to interview testimony, a high percentage of jobs were created by public funds, e.g., through renewable energy and sustainable tourism projects. From this initial funding, businesses brought in new investment and job schemes which in turn drove expansion of related industries (see: [Gotō-shi Funding Scheme for a list of funding schemes](#)). Further, these projects can have impacts beyond the islands on which they are situated, bringing benefits to other island communities. For example, the maintenance of wind turbines is a specialist skill that can be transferred from local maintenance companies to different projects both in Japan and abroad ([Gotō City Renewable Energy Report 2018](#)).

The projects on Gotō, particularly the renewable energy project, highlight the importance of understanding local relations, issues and concerns and working in partnership with local people. According to informant testimony, many of the island residents of Gotō have known each other throughout their lives, including local civil servants and key stakeholders. Consequently, an interviewee for this case study argued that development programmes need to be carefully implemented within the close human relationships found on the islands and successful initiatives require an understanding of social relations and need to garner trust amongst people who may have different goals and aims.

Dedicated, well informed and creative civil servants who have a good understanding of national strategies and funding opportunities as well as the specific local strengths, opportunities and issues also appear important in the case of Gotō. In Japan, it is common practice in human resource allocation for local civil servants to move between departments that cover different sectors and initiatives (e.g., housing, digital transformation, etc.). This can mean that local civil servants become well connected across the workplace and develop a good knowledge of the work of other departments and activities of local government. The importance of working across domains can perhaps be seen in the renewable project above which was the outcome of five departments working together towards establishing Gotō as the 'City of Energy'.

### **Renewable Energy-related Scottish Examples**

The [ORION project](#) (Opportunity for Renewable Integration with Offshore Networks), set up by Shetland Islands Council has a net zero focus and is a collaboration which includes UK and Scottish government agencies, regulators, and industry stakeholders.

The purpose of the project is to develop a far-reaching clean energy plan for Shetland and the wider region. The project aims to support the generation of clean, affordable power, which will help to eradicate fuel poverty, whilst also protecting the environment and providing employment opportunities locally.

The Isle of [Eigg generates all of its electricity](#) using a mix of solar, wind and hydro energy. The [community owned company](#) has been supplying electricity on the island [since 2008](#).

A project in Orkney is being developed to address demographic challenges on the island. [Hope Cohousing](#) is a community interest company working to establish a small cohousing project in St Margaret's Hope, Orkney. The aim is to create rented 'eco-aware' homes for older people who want to live independently but with shared amenities within a supportive community.

## 6 Lessons for Scotland

From our literature and policy reviews as part of this project, and our four case studies in Japan, the research team has distilled a set of lessons to be considered by policy-makers in Scotland when designing and delivering island population policies and interventions. Some of the learning relates to broader policy principles which might be considered, while other learning relates to the shaping of more specific policy interventions, but all build on the evidence from Japan. We provide examples to illustrate our points where relevant.

These lessons also build on work completed by members of the research team under the Scottish Government Strategic Research Programme 2016-22. This focused on exploring international depopulation initiatives in remote locations and drew six key lessons for Scotland (see Box 1 below). These lessons, outlined below, resonate strongly with the learning generated from this project with its focus on Japan.

Box 1: Six aspects of particular importance when addressing depopulation in remote locations (from Mc Morran and Glendinning 2022).

- i) **Inward migration:** Whether migration is foreign or domestic, it can play an important role in slowing or reversing population and demographic decline (ageing, youth out-migration) and addressing labour shortages. However, **in-migration does not guarantee a sustained shift in** demographic trends and labour market integration does not guarantee social integration of in-migrants, with long term retention of in-migrants requiring considerable support. The political context and socio-economic factors may limit the potential for foreign in-migration to be utilised effectively to address demographic change in some contexts.
- ii) **Long term integration of foreign in-migrants in rural areas requires a holistic approach:** This can include specific posts (e.g., an integration coordinator) and initiatives (e.g., mentoring programmes, housing provision schemes) and catering for whole families (social networks to combat isolation and exclusion), as well as language training.
- iii) **Young people represent a critical and limited asset in remote areas:** Ensuring their retention and/or return requires innovative approaches to providing opportunities for empowerment, education, employment and entrepreneurial activity.
- iv) **Effective collaboration, communication of local values,** opportunities and knowledge sharing is a key component of addressing demographic challenges in rural areas.
- v) **Community resilience and capacity:** Resilient rural communities often exhibit a strong sense of community; community organisations and local businesses are responsive to local needs; strategic partnerships exist between community organisations and the public/private sector; and digital connectivity has been enhanced.

vi) **Networked rural development:** This emphasises the inter-twining of local and extra-local or endogenous and exogenous assets, resources, skills, knowledge, information etc. for successful rural community development.

## 1. Acknowledging the importance and diversity of islands

This work has demonstrated the importance of islands in both Japan and Scotland, not only in a political and strategic sense (related to security, defence and territorial considerations in Japan for example) but also in terms of their cultural significance. While extremely diverse, they are also economically important, in a way which perhaps goes beyond their significance in terms of their proportion of the national population in each country. While Japan has a long history of islands-focused policy interventions dating back to the post-war period, the history of islands-specific legislation and policies in Scotland is more recent. There is much to be learned from ongoing dialogue and engagement between the two countries to share experiences of national and local level depopulation policies interventions. The work in this project can usefully form the basis for starting this engagement.

## 2. Understanding the demographic contexts and trends in islands

It is critical that any policies seeking to address demographic trends on islands are informed by up-to-date and accurate evidence about the historic, recent and potential future population trends on those islands, and how they vary in different locations, including down to very local scale (recognising that there may be concerns around anonymity and confidentiality when numbers are small). The evidence should also go beyond population trends to encompass a broader understanding of the interplay between demographic trends and wider social, economic and environmental processes, including land use, service provision, economic activity, transport and digital infrastructure, etc. On all of these topics, both statistical (i.e. quantitative) and lived experience (i.e. qualitative) data is vital to fully understand the 'real-life' experiences of local people living and working on islands, as well as those moving to such locations.

While learning from what has worked (or not) in other countries is valuable, the different geographic, political, institutional, cultural and social contexts must be acknowledged. For example, in Japan, *kasō* areas make up only around 8% of the total Japanese population, but *kasō* areas cover almost 60% of the total area of Japan ([Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2018](#)). In comparison, Scotland's rural areas make up 17% of the national population, with 6% located in remote rural areas and 11% in accessible rural areas.<sup>12</sup> Rural areas account for 98% of Scotland's landmass, with 70%

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<sup>12</sup> We acknowledge that we cannot make direct comparisons across Japanese and Scottish ruralities. In Scotland a 'remote rural area' is more than 30 minutes drivetime to a settlement of 10,000 people or more while an 'accessible rural area' is less than 30 minutes.

of this being remote rural areas and 28% accessible rural areas. Moreover, while Japan is made up of five main islands and almost 7,000 smaller islands, 90% of which are uninhabited, Scotland has only about 10% of this total number of islands (790), of which 93 are inhabited. In both countries, the diversity of islands and their communities is huge, even within island groupings, and this provides a challenge to policy-makers seeking to develop appropriate – and indeed locally differentiated – policy responses.

It is also important that policy interventions are shaped with reference to broader social, economic, cultural and environmental trends and again adequate data is required to understand these trends. For example, promoting sustainable tourism as a foundation for encouraging positive population change on an island will need to be done with a thorough understanding of current and future trends in this industry, for example in terms of the types of tourism experience that people are likely to be looking to have in future. In this sense, care should be taken in trying to transpose ‘successful’ initiatives, either internationally or nationally, as different contexts can result in very different outcomes. In particular, experience has shown in the peripheries of Japan that trying to duplicate development schemes, particularly around tourism, can be ultimately counter-productive.

### **3. Ensuring clarity about the goals of demographic-focused policy interventions**

Clarity over the desired demographic outcomes from policy interventions is crucial at a time when countries have ambitious net zero and climate change related targets, tighter public sector budgets, and debates are growing around the extent to which growth should continue to be the ultimate policy goal. There are also other key contextual factors to consider when deciding on desirable outcomes. One example is wider national demographic trends – Japan for example continues to experience overall population decline and questions have been raised as to whether repopulating island communities is realistic in this context. A second such factor is the apparent recent changes in preferences, attitudes, lifestyles and values which have come about as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, including a shift in preferences towards hybrid working or parallel work, to use a Japanese term, and/or rural over urban living.

Fundamental decisions need to be taken about the goals of population and island policies in this complex context. Is a goal to repopulate all island communities realistic? And is that said repopulation a panacea to sustainable island and rural development? Should the focus be on ‘managed depopulation’ or ‘managed decline’ and on providing welfare support for those people who remain in communities that have experienced long-term out-migration and low birth rates, and associated downward pressures on service provision, economic activity and community capacity? Does this simply create a self-fulfilling prophecy? If the latter approach is taken, what are the wider implications

for land use, land management (linked to debates around rewilding and re-peopling in Scotland), sustainable economic activity and future tourism potential, to name a few?

Is a differentiated policy approach best, whereby the shape, extent and goal/s of interventions in different places vary, from revitalisation and repopulation in the most viable localities, to providing welfare support (perhaps over an agreed timescale) to communities which are unlikely to achieve revitalisation, either through public, private and/or third sector interventions. These are fundamental decisions that government may need to take, and are likely to be difficult, even in the context of increasingly important net zero and climate emergency-focused ambitions. But in any case, these decisions need to be taken with significant input from local people rather than top-down prescription.

A clear, evidence-based rationale for wanting to achieve a more balanced population is also important. For example, it is important to understand the negative impacts of urbanisation for city dwellers who experience overcrowding and congestion and also for rural dwellers as economic activity declines, services close and community cohesion is lost. In Japan, for example, the Act on Emergency measures for Depopulated Areas was introduced when it was evident that rural depopulation was creating social problems nationwide. Whatever policy outcome is desired, engagement with local stakeholders is vital to decide on the most appropriate outcomes for a particular locality.

#### **4. Providing a flexible policy framework to enable locally tailored interventions and initiatives**

Taking such a differentiated approach to tackling demographic challenges and opportunities in such diverse communities both within and across island groupings (in terms of geography, size, location, topography, culture and socio-economic conditions) requires a flexible policy framework that enables local level interventions to be tailored as far as possible to local circumstances. It is interesting to note that assessing the potential island-specific impacts of policy interventions is a legislative requirement in Scotland through [Islands Community Impact Assessments](#), introduced as part of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018.

The approach to defining remote and island communities in Japan is complex. Moreover, without doubt these designations have their own 'politic' to them and are attached to particular funding allocations, power relations across stakeholders, etc. There are disadvantages to such classifications or typologies, but it may be worth considering such an island typology in Scotland, which could be used, alongside the flexible policy framework, to guide local decisions around policy, practice and funding decisions. Such a typology must take account of the qualitative, lived experiences of local people to add depth and meaning to official statistics. More importantly, such

typologies need to consider the stakeholders – and their power struggles – that hold the key to their development trajectories. In this context, we might envisage the emergence of a typology along the lines of the prolific ‘differentiated countryside’ (in the context of the English countryside; See Murdoch et al. 2003), reworked for the purposes of a Scottish ‘differentiated archipelago’.

## **5. Incorporating ‘hard’ and ‘soft’: Taking a holistic approach to depopulation challenges**

The early focus on infrastructural improvement (particularly bridges) in national policies for Japan’s islands does appear to have led to some positive impacts for the islands within the Inland Sea area, which have benefited from much greater connectivity to the Japanese mainland. Benefits have also accrued in many island communities from improved digital infrastructure and connectivity.

However, such infrastructure improvements have also been costly and in some instances have had negative impacts related to community cohesion and displacement of island-based businesses. In terms of learning for Scotland, anticipating and then monitoring and measuring the extent of these positive and negative impacts is crucial to inform future investment decisions relating to infrastructure provision on Scotland’s islands, in the context of current work on National Planning Framework 4, for example.

In recognition of the potentially negative impacts of taking an infrastructure-focused approach, shifting towards a more holistic, cross-sectoral, place-based and community-led approach to tackling depopulation is important. This is happening in Japan, for example, with the 2010 *kasō* Act having been amended to incorporate ‘softer’ projects such as ensuring local medical care and operating community transport schemes – although it is important to note that infrastructure is still a key element of the Act.

A more holistic approach is also evident in Scotland’s National Islands Plan and its 13 Strategic Objectives. Further, the National Islands Plan specifically recognises the need to use the [Place Principle](#) to guide an integrated approach to ensuring sustainable island communities in future. Taking a holistic approach could help ensure that any tensions between different policy priorities and outcomes are illuminated and are able to be resolved early in the policy design process.

## **6. Engaging with island communities in co-designing policy interventions**

Engagement with island communities to shape policies and interventions relies on these communities having the capacity to engage. By the late 1980s/early 1990s in Japan, there was a growing policy emphasis on regional revitalisation based on local assets, initiative and ingenuity. Similarly, between 2000 and 2020 the *kasō* Acts have placed greater emphasis on building self-reliant local communities that draw upon and

demonstrate local assets and resources. In Scotland too, much policy emphasis has been placed on strengthening the capacity of communities to engage, including through wider legislation such as the Community Empowerment Act and wider policy reform, including relating to Local Governance. While some islands can benefit from very active communities with high levels of human and social capital and strong leaders, others may not, and for them, external support (financial, skills, knowledge, networks, etc.) will be vital. Appropriate support and facilitation is also required to ensure that when engaging with communities, all voices are heard, including those who might not traditionally get involved in such discussions. This could also explore creative engagement and the use of art-led initiatives as part of engaging with communities, raising local concerns and revealing even community disconnects, rather than the normative approach of utilising art as a way to bring the community together (see also Crawshaw and Gkartzios, 2016).

### **7. Exploring the ‘positives’ of demographic ageing as well as retaining/re-attracting young people**

Islands in both countries have long experienced challenges with ageing demographic profiles and the out-migration of young people, and the demographic ageing trends are predicted to continue in future. While older people can bring significant resources to island communities, including financial, social and human capital, as they age in-place, this can put strain on local health and social care services. Meantime, the loss of young people means a loss of the resources that they would otherwise contribute and potential risks for local schools and other services in future as there are fewer children born. One initiative that stands out in this regard is Ama’s High School Attractiveness project which appears to have been successful in both increasing the numbers of high school students and in terms of encouraging young families to either stay or in-migrate. Here an initiative has proved to be not only valuable to young people (i.e. high school students) but has also had broader positive demographic knock-on effects.

Scotland has tended to focus its policy approaches on retaining/attracting back young people to rural and island communities, whereas the focus in Japan has been more mixed, with both older and younger in-migrants a focus of interventions. This is at least partly related to different cultures and attitudes; demographic ageing and a rise in the number of older ‘dependent’ people in society tends to be viewed negatively in the UK, whereas in Japan attitudes towards older people and intergenerational living and working are generally much more positive. There may be particular lessons to be learned in the Japanese interventions that are focused on attracting older people to depopulating communities as well as the Japanese attitudes toward older citizens more broadly (see for example: Murakami et al. 2008, 2009).

## **8. Building on shifts in values, lifestyles and practical working and living preferences relating to the Covid-19 pandemic**

Recent developments on some of Japan's islands relating to eco- and culture-led tourism have a focus on attracting people seeking remoteness and distance from metropolitan population centres. This is a particular area in which ongoing shared learning between the countries, and indeed involving other countries undertaking similar developments, would be worthwhile. Such learning could be expanded to encompass agri-tourism initiatives, where there has been investment in Scotland recently, as in many areas of Japan it is possible to find tourist initiatives that offer visitors rural/farming experiences that are embedded in local communities. Developing such shared learning and following developments in this area is particularly important in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, and continuing restrictions and/or challenges relating to international travel.

## **9. (Appropriately) Using islands as test-beds for innovative policy responses**

In both Scotland and Japan, questions are increasingly asked around the extent to which growth should be the ultimate policy goal in the context of a range of potential policy objectives. Islands may be appropriate locations in which to explore innovative policy and practice interventions linked to a range of goals and which inter-relate strongly with different population-related outcomes at different levels (from encouraging repopulation and revitalisation to simply slowing depopulation or what could be termed 'managed decline', while still ensuring the welfare and quality of life of those continuing to reside on islands). It is critical that this testing or pilot work is done in appropriate ways, with the full involvement of local communities from the beginning of the design phase.

## **10. Recognising and building on the resources and positive benefits of depopulated/depopulating areas**

In recent years in Japan there has been more explicit focus on emphasising the positive functions of less densely populated areas, such as their role in supplying food, water and energy, their biodiversity and as a location for cultural heritage to thrive (see for example: [Ministry of Environment's Fifth Basic Environment Plan 2018](#)). In Japan too, there has been increased interest in depopulated areas as concerns about large-scale disasters and infectious diseases due to significant population concentration are increasing. Such changing perceptions challenge the narrative of sparsely and depopulating areas as literally lagging behind and in need of improvement and population growth. In Japan, remote and sparsely populated areas are increasingly being seen as having a different value from urban spaces and the national policy context in Japan is also starting to shift and adapt to recognise new lifestyles and

business models that make use of diverse resources in remote areas. Further, while it's probably fair to say that growth remains the dominant policy goal, the re-valuing of remote areas is taking place in the context of overall population decline in Japan and in the context of some (albeit fairly limited at present) discussion over the potential for different growth pathways, including green growth. Similar considerations are emerging in Scotland too (see for example: [Scotland's Degrowth Commission](#)).

### **11. Providing a range of support for (national and international) in-migrants**

In-migrants can sometimes struggle to integrate in island communities (even nationals from the same country), particularly in close-knit communities. Support and guidance can help. Scotland can potentially learn from Japan's various migration settlement initiatives, including 'experience' schemes and initiatives i.e. those initiatives which provide opportunities to 'test' locations before people move permanently and services to support people to settle when they first arrive. Sometimes there may be gap between the expectation or vision of island life and the reality (as was the case with in-migrants to Sado for example). As such, these support services may be especially beneficial to encourage those who come to stay long-term. This message is echoed in Box 1 above.

### **12. 'Translating' the Japanese policy concept of *Kankeijinkō* to island Scotland**

The Japanese concept of *kankeijinkō* (relationship population) may be worth considering in a Scottish context, although there are perhaps parallels with work already undertaken by Government and others to maintain links with the Scottish diaspora internationally based on family and cultural ties to island communities. What is striking in the Japanese context is that those people who regularly visit rural/island locations, perhaps to frequent second homes, or visit relatives or inherited property, are viewed positively in terms of their potential role in regional revitalisation. In Scotland, particularly in the context of the increased potential of (and preference for) hybrid or home working that takes advantage of improved digital connectivity, it may be worth exploring the potential for a scheme in an island location, with high levels of second/holiday home ownership for example, that engages visitors during their stay with the view to enhancing their positive impacts by contributing skills, financial capital and networks for example. A particular focus on attracting *kankeijinkō* who are interested in working from, or setting up businesses, satellite offices, enterprise hubs or teleworking locations in Scotland's island communities, at least on a part-time basis may be especially worthwhile. There are existing examples of enterprise hubs in rural locations from which lessons could be drawn (see for example, Merrell et al. 2022).

### **13. 'Translating' Japan's Community Cooperative Support initiative (*chiiki okoshi kyōryokutai*) to island Scotland**

Another specific initiative from which there may be useful learning for Scotland is Japan's Community Cooperative Support initiative (*chiiki okoshi kyōryokutai*) in which people moving from urban to rural areas are given a stipend for a maximum of three years in return for their participation in activities aimed at promoting or preserving local culture, history or nature. Data indicates that overall, 63% of participants in the CCS scheme ended up staying in their adopted areas after completion of their three-year CCS term, although the proportion does vary across localities. Further exploration of this data and the underlying reasons for people staying or not would be valuable (see Section 8).

### **14. Incorporating renewable energy and digital investment considerations into demographic initiatives**

An increasing emphasis has been placed in Japan on the utilisation of renewable resources and decarbonisation in more peripheral areas. This emphasis has emerged in tandem with greater emphasis on digitalisation, use of smart technologies and AI. National level funding has come from the Japanese Government for 10 SDG projects from which learning would be beneficial. These involve a range of stakeholders working in partnership and also a 'matching platform' for individuals and organisations with ideas and skills to formulate concrete projects. The Iki island project is one which has taken a very holistic approach with a range of goals including boosting agricultural supply chains, tackling labour shortages, skills development, a renewable energy project and encouraging teleworking. Another case that has stood out is that of Gotō where a renewable energy scheme has appeared to not only bring de-carbonisation benefits, but has contributed to jobs, skills, local income, energy security and marine conservation. What is important to note about Gotō is that at first, the renewable energy scheme was not initially conceptualised as a 'population project' but appears to have had a broader positive demographic impact. Second, the renewable energy project was established in the context of a broader suite of measures and initiatives aimed at tackling economic and population decline and the impact of that decline. This suggests a need for a multipronged approach that engages with a range of cross-cutting issues. There may be interesting learning here for [the six islands that Scottish Government has recently designated to be carbon neutral by 2040](#).

## 15. 'Translating' the *Akiya* bank concept to island Scotland

There may also be useful learning for Scotland from Japan's *akiya* bank (empty house bank) approach where unused houses are listed for sale or rent with the goal of attracting migrants to use these buildings. This scheme was enabled by a change in the law in 2014 which allowing local authorities to collect information on abandoned properties. It started locally but has grown to become a national-level scheme. While the cost of rural properties in Japan can be substantially lower than in Scotland, the 'matching' performed by local officials between potential in-migrants and empty properties might be worth revisiting, in addition to the broader elements of the bank which include introductions for potential migrants to local community members. Questions have been raised in Japan about the usefulness of this scheme in providing housing for people where there are limited employment opportunities, but the lack of affordable local housing is often regarded in Scotland as being the barrier to people either staying or moving to island locations.

## 7 Suggestions for further research

This scoping study has gathered information on the characteristics of islands in Scotland and Japan and the national islands and population policy contexts in both countries, and has briefly examined local depopulation-focused interventions on four Japanese islands, with reference to relevant Scottish interventions where appropriate. However, resource and time constraints have meant that the data gathering work was limited in scope, and the research team has identified a number of valuable avenues for further work in future. These potential projects could draw on, and make a significant contribution to, wider academic work from island studies scholars.

- **Further exploration of individuals' values in relation to island migration decisions:** A long history of academic work has shown how people's values and residential aspirations shape rural migration decisions (see for example Mitchell 2004). Understanding these values and aspirations, and how they have been shaped by Covid-19 could inform migration-focused interventions to ensure that they are targeted in the right way at the right group/s of people. For example, how do the values held by young people differ from those in the workforce or those of retirement age? How can migration interventions be shaped to take account of these values?
- **Exploring and evaluating the techniques that have been used to engage local island communities in shaping depopulation initiatives:** This project has examined a number of ways in which local island residents and stakeholders have been engaged - to a greater or lesser extent - in shaping interventions at their design and/or delivery phase. Exploring the success of these engagement

mechanisms in terms of ensuring that initiatives are truly bottom-up would be a very useful avenue for further research.

- **Exploring (changing) work and livelihood strategies in island communities:** Crofting is a feature of some of Scotland's islands, while for others the fisheries sector is an important source of income and employment. However, for many families and communities reliant on these income sources, the activities and returns are small-scale, necessitating multiple job-holding, although the recent National Islands Plan Survey showed that this was the case for only one in five respondents. This is also the case for residents on many of Japan's islands, particularly those in the Outer Sea. Further exploration of these livelihood strategies in island locations and how they could be supported (see for example [Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications Initiative](#)) would be valuable especially understanding how more 'traditional' forms of livelihood strategies are/are not/could be improved by hybridising with digital technologies, greater connectivity and AI. Further, evidence collected on changing work and employment patterns since the Covid-19 pandemic suggests that rural and island locations may benefit from more flexible or hybrid working becoming the norm for many companies with people choosing to work from home for at least some of their week. While it was initially hypothesised that this shift to more flexible working would impact more accessible rural locations, there is evidence that people are prepared to move further out of urban centres, thus bringing the benefits of this shift to a wider geographical area (Nordregio 2022). Longitudinal research to explore the short-, medium- and longer-term benefits of this shift for more remote rural and island communities would be worthwhile. Understanding this (shifting) techno-socio-economic context for island residents is critical to ensuring that policy interventions and funding streams embed these lived realities for households and communities.
- **Exploring the success of older- and young people-focused interventions:** While Japan has focused some of its depopulation interventions on the attraction of older people (though notably in rural areas rather than island locations, for more information see: Murakami et al. 2008, 2009), interventions in Scotland have tended to focus on retaining or attracting (back) young people. Further research to explore the shape and 'successes' of both types of intervention, and how they might 'translate' to other contexts, would be useful.
- **Ensuring that new residents stay long-term:** As highlighted in Box 1, for long-term reversal of depopulation trends, it is vital that those who are attracted to rural/island locations are encouraged to stay beyond the short-term. Further research into the long-term migration decisions and experiences of urban to rural or island migrants would be very valuable. Questions could include: what factors influence an individual's or family's decision to stay or leave, do people move up

or down the urban hierarchy (e.g. another island or rural location, or a town or city location)? More specifically, exploring the reasons for the variable success rates of Japan's Community Cooperative Support initiative (*chiiki okoshi kyōryokutai*) would be valuable.

- **Evaluating the impacts of having an unbalanced population profile and the benefits and positive outcomes of having a balanced population profile:** This is a key aim of Scotland's population policy but the 'pros and cons' of having a balanced population profile could be usefully unpicked for both rural and urban locations.

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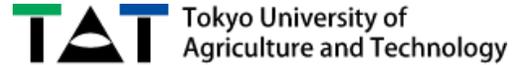
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## Appendix 1: Interview Guide (English translation)



### **Research on Island Depopulation in Japan – Information sheet for Local Case studies of Island Depopulation initiatives**

#### **Project Background**

A research team from Scotland's Rural College (SRUC), Newcastle University (Centre for Rural Economy), Akita International University and Tokyo University for Agriculture and Technology is carrying out research for the Scottish Government's Migration and Population Division in the External Affairs Directorate. The research is exploring the shared challenges and policy responses to island depopulation in Japan and Scotland.

The Scottish Government's Population Strategy contains a commitment to engage internationally to share learning and best practice on addressing demographic challenges and to carry out further evidence gathering and analysis on existing policies and literature to identify further areas of exploration.

The findings of this project will be used to inform the development of the Scottish Government's Population Strategy, the delivery of policies to support sustainable population profiles in Scotland's islands, and future engagement with Japan around shared challenges.

#### **Aim and structure of the interview**

We are carrying out in-depth explorations of depopulation initiatives on case study islands and the purpose of this interview is to find out more about the initiative(s) you are/have been involved in and the impacts that they have achieved in terms of responding to demographic challenges?

The interview will include questions relating to:

- Please can you provide some contextual information about the island/s? (e.g. location, distance from mainland and methods of travel to/from the mainland, key economic sectors, governance arrangements (e.g. level of administrative autonomy, island-only local government or part of mainland local government, etc.)

- What have been the main population and migration trends over the last 20-30 years and what is the current demographic situation (e.g. in terms of in- and out-migration by different age groups, age structure of the population, etc.)?
- What kind of intervention/s has been introduced? Why was this particular approach tried? When was the intervention launched? Who introduced it and drove it forward? How much autonomy has been afforded locally to address demographic challenges?
- Who are the key stakeholders involved? Do you think there are some stakeholders that should have been involved but were not? How have the stakeholders worked together, and what have their key roles been?
- What did the intervention set out to achieve? Has/have the intervention/s achieved this? What have been the main successes? How has this been measured/assessed?
- What have been the main barriers or obstacles experienced during design and delivery of the intervention? How have these been overcome, or why have they not been overcome?
- What do you anticipate will happen in future regarding the intervention? Will it need to be changed, and if so why?
- What are the main lessons that can be learned from this/these intervention/s, and for whom?

It would be very helpful if you are able to point us to any relevant literature, documents, data, etc. to add further to our understanding of the local context and the intervention. Thank you.

The interview will last for no longer than one hour. With your permission, the interview will be recorded so that we can take detailed notes afterwards. The recordings will be stored securely with password protection and will only be available to the research team and will be destroyed after one year.

In the interview we are asking you to comment in a professional capacity. While we may use direct quotations from the interviews in our report these will be anonymous; individuals' names will not be used.

If you have any questions about the project, please contact: [jane.atterton@sruc.ac.uk](mailto:jane.atterton@sruc.ac.uk) or [ldilley@aiu.ac.jp](mailto:ldilley@aiu.ac.jp)



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