

The Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland: Process Evaluation



AGRICULTURE, ENVIRONMENT AND MARINE

The Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland: Process Evaluation



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List of acronyms

CESAP: Climate Emergency Skills Action Plan

CIAG: Careers Information Advice and Guidance

DELP: Digitally Enabled Learning Pilot

DESAP: Digital Economy Skills Action Plan

DYW: Developing the Young Workforce

EU: European Union

HIE: Highlands and Islands Enterprise

ISG: Implementation Steering Group

MyWOW: My World of Work

NTTF: The National Training Transition Fund

RESAS: Rural & Environmental Science and Analytical Services

ROA: Regional Outcome Agreements

SAPRS: The Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland

SDS: Skills Development Scotland

SG: Scottish Government

SOSE: South of Scotland Enterprise

Highlights

What is the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland?

Scotland's rural economy contributes significantly to providing employment for people and to the national economic output. Rural areas face particular skills challenges, including skills shortages, talent retention and attraction, and demographic challenges. In response, Skills Development Scotland and the Scottish Government launched the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland: 2019-2021 in June 2019.

This plan sets out the strategic, partnership approach to support skills needs in rural Scotland, addressing the challenges through enhanced work-based learning pathways and by increasing access to education and skills provision in rural areas. It was intended to bring together a range of actions that would meet the current and future skills required for jobs in rural areas.

What is the report about?

This report presents the main findings of an independent process evaluation of the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland: 2019-2021. It considers how effective its Implementation Steering Group has been at driving actions, the extent to which the plan has delivered on its five priority areas and whether the creation of the plan contributed to additional activity and investment.

What did we do?

The study comprised a literature review and 30 in-depth interviews with Implementation Steering Group members and a group of wider stakeholders representing organisations involved in activities contained within the plan.

What did we learn?

Skills Development Scotland, in particular the Skills Planning Manager for the Rural Economy, played a key role in overseeing activity. The Implementation Steering Group have proved effective in driving activity forward and adding value in four key areas: raising the profile of region-specific and sector-specific skills issues in rural Scotland; increasing understanding of the challenges and potential solutions in other sectors or regions; generating new opportunities or solutions through collaboration; and raising awareness of supporting communications activities.

Considerable progress has been made across all five priority areas. As a result of the cross-sector coordination central to the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland, activities including insights into skills shortages, skills interventions, skills support and promotional activity are now better aligned to skills needs in the rural economy. Some expected activities have, however, not occurred as planned, and this was predominantly due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Next Steps

The findings from this evaluation will be used to inform options on the future of the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland.

Executive Summary

Context

Skills Development Scotland and the Scottish Government launched the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland (SAPRS): 2019-2021 in June 2019. The plan looked to co-ordinate and facilitate the development of skills required for jobs in rural areas, both currently and in the future. An Implementation Steering Group (ISG) was set up to drive forward the plan's activities, which were categorised into five priority areas for action¹, also referred to as “the five pillars”:

- **Priority area A:** Better understand the skills rural employers need and align provision to support this;
- **Priority area B:** Provide individuals with accessible education and skills provision to secure, sustain and progress in their careers in rural areas;
- **Priority area C:** Develop the current workforce in rural areas through upskilling and reskilling;
- **Priority area D:** Build a secure pipeline for the future; and
- **Priority area E:** Take a co-ordinated, strategic approach to tackling skills in rural areas.

Methodology

This report presents the main findings of a process evaluation of the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland conducted in 2021-22 by IFF Research, with support from a Research Advisory Group consisting of Skills Development Scotland and Scottish Government representatives.

The process evaluation focused on three key research questions:

- How effective has the Implementation Steering Group (ISG) been at driving actions?
- To what extent has the SAPRS delivered on the five broad priority areas?
- Has the creation of SAPRS contributed to additional activity or investment?

The evaluation method consisted of a literature review and 30 qualitative in-depth interviews with members of the Implementation Steering Group and a group of wider stakeholders representing organisations involved in activities contained within the plan (see Annex A).

This report sets out the evaluation findings by research question. A summary of the main findings is included in the next section.

¹ These are set out in detail in the full report on the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland: 2019–2021, which is available on the [Skills Development Scotland website](#).

Evaluation findings

Effectiveness and impact of the Implementation Steering Group

The Implementation Steering Group (ISG) has been effective at driving action in a number of ways. Overall, the main added value of the group for stakeholders was that it has acted as a focal point for the rural Scotland skills agenda. It has brought together individuals and organisations with similar areas of expertise, who were experiencing similar challenges, connecting local, regional and national interests. In particular it is:

- Raising the profile of the skills issues of ISG members' own sector or region;
- Increasing understanding of the challenges faced by partners operating in other sectors or regions and potential solutions;
- Generating new opportunities or solutions through collaboration; and
- Disseminating, showcasing and promoting SAPRS activities via external communications and marketing activities.

Progress by priority area

Considerable progress has been made across all priority areas of the SAPRS, including skills insights and barriers in rural Scotland, skills interventions, skills support and promotional activity. These activities now have a much greater emphasis on the skills needs of rural Scotland, in part due to the cross-sector co-ordination central to the SAPRS.

- **Priority area A: To better understand the skills rural employers need and align provision to support this.**

Clear progress has been made across the various activities planned in priority area A, although this has been slower than intended due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Key developments enhanced by the SAPRS include the Skills Assessment for Rural Scotland and tailored links to the underpinning Data Matrix, a variety of ISG-led or supported research, and the first Rural Business Panel Survey. These provide more nuanced, tailored and accessible insights into the skills needs of rural Scotland.

- **Priority area B: To provide individuals with accessible education and skills provision to secure, sustain and progress in their careers in rural areas.**

With respect to raising awareness, a key focus has been promoting the value of apprenticeships in rural areas, for example through the Scottish Apprenticeship Week campaign and case studies that ISG members have supported. Other activity has sought to make it easier for individuals to find opportunities in rural areas that are suitable for them. Skills Development Scotland (SDS) and partners have also piloted more flexible models of

apprenticeship delivery, thereby enhancing their accessibility, while the South of Scotland Skills and Learning Network seeks to improve access to learning opportunities. While there has been valuable progress, some of these schemes are still in their infancy and do not cut across all sectors and regions of the rural economy. Therefore, their impact on the rural economy as a whole might take time to materialise.

- **Priority area C: To develop the current workforce in rural areas through upskilling and reskilling.**

Although the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has disrupted some of the planned activity, a range of activities are in place to develop the workforce in rural areas, and there is evidence that the SAPRS has contributed to a number of these activities. Key activities within this priority area include the development of the Rural Employers' Toolkit; enhancement of the Skills for Growth service to support rural areas; the Skills Discovery tool on Our Skillsforce; and enhanced careers information support. Activity has covered a range of sectors and skills specialisms, although a couple of ISG members considered that more could be done in certain areas, including a more strategic approach to developing environmental skills.

- **Priority area D: To build a secure pipeline for the future.**

Overall, there has been mixed progress towards priority area D. Progress has been made on careers advice and enhancing work-based learning pathways. SDS have made good use of digital platforms for both of these, by for example creating an internal Yammer page for colleagues to share resources, and publishing case studies and holding online events to promote employment opportunities in rural areas.

Activity around promoting careers opportunities was adapted due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and this rapidly changing context.

The evidence review on creating a more diverse workforce was paused due to coronavirus (COVID-19), but work on understanding the barriers continued as it was a priority for Government-led COVID-19 data. Nevertheless there are various activities occurring at a more local or sectoral level promoting diversity within the rural economy.

- **Priority area E: To take a coordinated, strategic approach to tackling skills in rural areas.**

Overall, good progress has been made toward priority area E. The most significant development has been the development of the Implementation Steering Group. The cross-sector, cross-region, and multi-agency approach to this group has been central to ensuring a co-ordinated approach to tackling skills in rural areas. However, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, and its impact on a range of organisations, has meant that other planned, strategic-focused activities sitting within priority area E have been paused or adapted.

The SAPRS' contribution to additional activity and investment

The SAPRS was not intended to create strands of new activity, but to bring together and raise the profile of existing activities. There is substantial evidence from the research that it has achieved this aim and that the plan has been fundamental in improving the quality of, and raising awareness around, existing skills interventions.

This research found that the SAPRS has added value to Scotland's rural economy in three key areas:

- Providing a fresh focus on the skills needs of the rural economy;
- Enabling collaboration and partnership opportunities; and
- Raising the profile of skills needs in rural areas.

Together, these three benefits have helped wider stakeholders to understand the importance of considering rural needs in their decision-making in skills interventions.

The skills landscape has evolved quickly since the launch of the SAPRS, and the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in particular has contributed to new skills challenges. The SAPRS has enabled relevant stakeholders to be more responsive to these challenges, and support the skills needs of the rural economy accordingly. However, some stakeholders felt that more could be done to align the plan to other strategic activities, such as the Climate Emergency Skills Action Plan, published in December 2020.

Looking to the future, stakeholders from both the Implementation Steering Group (ISG) and those outside the ISG would like to see the SAPRS continue. Some felt it should continue in its current form while others would like to see more focus on specific cross-cutting areas such as digital skills or the environment. Embedding a flexible approach to any future iteration of the SAPRS, so it could continue to respond to emerging and changing needs, was seen as critical.

Conclusions

The evidence from this evaluation demonstrates that a wealth of activity has occurred since the development of SAPRS that – as a result of the coordinated approach underpinning the plan – has seen an increased focus on the needs of the rural economy. While the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic slowed progress, the plan has ensured that skills intelligence, skills provision, careers guidance and promotional work contain a stronger emphasis on the skills needs of the rural economy. Any future iteration of the plan might consider widening the types of skills it covers, focusing support and activities on particular demographics, and aligning more closely to other government strategies.

Chapter 1: Introduction

The Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland was created in 2019, with a view to developing the skills required for jobs in rural areas in Scotland. Since its creation, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, along with other events and policy changes, has contributed to a fundamental shift in the landscape that has affected skills delivery and needs within rural Scotland.

Introduction

This report presents the findings of an independent process evaluation of the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland (SAPRS): 2019-2021, conducted by IFF Research on behalf of Skills Development Scotland (SDS) and the Scottish Government in 2021-22. This chapter provides an introduction to the SAPRS, outlining its background, focus, structure, and the evolving context within which it sits. It has been informed by the SAPRS full report, and other skills and policy publications.

Background

There are a range of issues that contribute to both direct and indirect impacts on skills within rural Scotland. These relate to demographic challenges, economic output, productivity and employment, among other areas². In response to these impacts, the Scottish Government made a commitment in 2017/18 to develop a skills action plan for rural Scotland³. This resulted in SDS and the Scottish Government launching the SAPRS: 2019-2021 in June 2019⁴. The SAPRS focuses on developing the skills required for jobs in rural areas within Scotland through education, training and re-skilling. Activity within the SAPRS largely builds on existing work that was already underway across rural Scotland, either through individual partners or through interventions that the Scottish Government had previously put in place. It was intended to bring together a range of actions to meet the current and future skills required for jobs in rural areas. A key mechanism of the SAPRS was the creation of an Implementation Steering Group⁵ (ISG) as a focal point for the delivery of the plan, bringing together representatives of organisations with an interest and expertise in the broad range of rural skills.

In defining the term 'rural', the SAPRS uses the Rural and Environment Science and Analytical Services (RESAS) classification⁶. This groups local authorities based on their relative degree of rurality, with the SAPRS focussing on areas defined as

² These issues are set out in the full report on the [Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland: 2019-2021](#).

³ This commitment is set out in the Scottish Government's [Programme for Scotland 2017-18](#).

⁴ See the full report on the [Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland: 2019–2021](#).

⁵ Current members of the ISG are shown on the [Skills Development Scotland website](#).

⁶ This four-fold definition put forward by RESAS was first published in [Understanding the Scottish rural economy](#) (Scottish Government, 2018).

‘Mainly Rural’⁷ or ‘Islands and Remote’⁸. The definition of “rural skills” as applied to the SAPRS covers a wide range of skills across the full breadth of the rural economy.

Structure

The SAPRS sets out a partnership approach to developing the skills and talent needed to ensure that Scotland’s rural economy and communities continue to flourish and grow. It focuses on five priority areas for action, also referred to as “the five pillars”:

- **Priority area A:** Better understand the skills rural employers need and align provision to support this;
- **Priority area B:** Provide individuals with accessible education and skills provision to secure, sustain and progress in their careers in rural areas;
- **Priority area C:** Develop the current workforce in rural areas through upskilling and reskilling;
- **Priority area D:** Build a secure pipeline for the future; and
- **Priority area E:** Take a co-ordinated, strategic approach to tackling skills in rural areas.

Context

Since the launch of the SAPRS in 2019, Scotland has faced unprecedented challenges. The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic began in early 2020, around six months after the inaugural meeting of the full ISG. This has had a significant impact on the rural economy, skills needs and skills delivery⁹. The most recent Rural Scotland Business Panel¹⁰ survey revealed the challenges that rural businesses have been navigating during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. These include shortages of trained and skilled employees, inflation and increased costs, record fuel prices and disruption to the wider supply chain.

Within the Government’s Programme for Scotland 2020-21¹¹, Scottish Government set clear priorities for mitigating the economic, health, and social consequences of the pandemic. The programme set out a strategy to help create “new jobs, good jobs and green jobs” and to work with employers and individuals to build the skills

⁷ ‘Mainly Rural’ includes: Aberdeenshire, Angus, Clackmannanshire, East Ayrshire, East Lothian, Dumfries and Galloway, Highland, Moray, Perth and Kinross, South Ayrshire, Scottish Borders.

⁸ ‘Islands and Remote’ includes: Argyll and Bute, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Orkney Islands, Shetland Islands.

⁹ Scotland’s GDP fell by over 20% at the start of the pandemic, although has since returned to 1.3% below pre-pandemic levels, as publicised in the [State of the economy: November 2021](#) report.

¹⁰ Findings from the survey are available in the [Rural Scotland Business Panel survey: report](#) (2022).

¹¹ These are contained in [Protecting Scotland, Renewing Scotland: The Government's Programme for Scotland 2020-2021](#).

and infrastructure required in the future. The National Transition Training Fund¹² was launched by the Scottish Government in 2020 to support individuals over 25 years old who had been made redundant or were at risk of redundancy, as well as supporting the sectors hit hardest by the pandemic. In addition, the Young Person Guarantee¹³ sought to connect every 16–24-year-old in Scotland to some form of opportunity, be this employment, apprenticeship, education or volunteering.

The move towards remote working in some roles and sectors has reduced travelling costs and time, and widened opportunities for working or learning in other parts of the country, potentially helping to improve access to a wider range of jobs and learning opportunities in rural areas¹⁴. It has however had the potential to exacerbate existing inequalities in digital connectivity and mobile coverage across rural Scotland, thus reducing employment and training opportunities for rural communities¹⁵.

The other defining event of this period has been the UK's exit from the EU, with the UK's participation in EU free movement ending on 1 January 2021. The Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population estimated that this would result in a 50-80% drop in new EU migration to Scotland, with a disproportionate effect on rural areas, placing pressure on labour supply¹⁶. While it is still too early to assess the impact on labour supply of the UK's exit from the EU, in addition to the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, there is evidence that it is contributing to more restricted labour markets, and growing skills shortages in Scotland¹⁷.

This rapidly changing economic landscape and its impact on individuals, businesses and sectors has in turn impacted on the proposed actions set out in the SAPRS, and the approach taken by the ISG. This is explored in more detail later in the report.

¹² More information can be found on the [Scottish Government website](#).

¹³ For an introduction to the Young Person Guarantee, see [Youth Guarantee - No-one Left Behind: initial report](#) (Scottish Government, 2020).

¹⁴ According to [Scottish Government survey data](#) from April 2022, 30% of Scottish workers in rural areas were working from home at least some of the time.

¹⁵ For example, see [Why Does Digital Matter? - Scotland's digital strategy](#) (Scottish Government, 2017)

¹⁶ This [Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population report](#) looked at how the ending of free movement and future UK Immigration policy will affect Scotland's devolved responsibilities

¹⁷ For example, see the Royal Bank of Scotland's 2022 [report on recruitment activity](#).

Chapter 2: Methodology

The evaluation was conducted by IFF Research, with support provided by a Research Advisory Group which included representatives from Skills Development Scotland (SDS) and Scottish Government. The evaluation consisted of a literature review and 30 qualitative depth interviews with key stakeholders.

Introduction

This chapter sets out the three research questions for the evaluation. It then details the full methodology and sampling approach used in the evaluation as well as outlining the approach to analysis.

Evaluation aims and objectives

In 2021, the Scottish Government and Skills Development Scotland commissioned IFF Research to conduct a process evaluation of the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland. IFF was supported through this process by a Research Advisory Group, which included representatives from SDS and Scottish Government.

The evaluation focused on three research questions:

- 1. How effective has the Implementation Steering Group (ISG) been at driving actions?**
Specific topic areas included: how the partnership has evolved in terms of its role and remit; what value the partnership adds; and what evidence there is of the ways in which the group is working in partnership to deliver a more coordinated response to skills issues.
- 2. To what extent has the SAPRS delivered on the five broad priority areas agreed?**
Specific topic areas explored included: recognition of the changing landscape; a reflection of the activities undertaken to implement the SAPRS; and what has been achieved (for example, new activities/COVID-19 specific activities; enhanced partnerships and collaborative working; improved access to skills provision; sharing of best practice).
- 3. Has the creation of SAPRS contributed to additional activity/investment?**
Specific topic areas included: how the partnership/plan is bringing about additionality or more effective activity; as well as examples of this in practice.

The process evaluation examined the reach of the SAPRS in terms of the sectors, groups and places that it was looking to support, the extent to which partners and stakeholders were satisfied with SAPRS activity, and any effects that taking this approach has had on the rural economy.

The findings of the research will be of particular value for informing the future direction of both the SAPRS and the ISG. These considerations, including the value of the approach, ways of working and responses to lessons learned, are set out in the Recommendations chapter.

Method

The evaluation methodology involved two stages: a review of existing literature, and 30 stakeholder interviews.

Literature review

The literature review sought to gain a broader understanding of the progress of the SAPRS, and to inform the topic guide for the qualitative interviews. This enabled the researchers carrying out the evaluation to contextualise stakeholder comments, situate the SAPRS within its broader context, and explore to what extent the SAPRS delivered on the five broad priority areas.

Key documents reviewed at this stage included two SAPRS Progress Update Reports¹⁸, compiled in Spring 2021 and Spring 2022 by SDS for members of the ISG. These were designed to be shared with partners and to provide learning for future activities. The two progress reports, alongside documentation relating to individual activities linked to the SAPRS, provided detail on the first research objective: **“To what extent has the SAPRS delivered on the five broad priority areas agreed?”**.

In addition to these reports, the literature review included ISG meeting minutes¹⁹, and the results of an ISG members survey²⁰ conducted in August-September 2021, which helped further understanding of the second objective: **“How effective has the Implementation Steering Group (ISG) been at driving actions?”**

Finally, the literature review explored research and insight papers covering broader themes such as the impact of coronavirus (COVID-19), and the labour market in Scotland. These provided important context for the Background chapter of this report.

Stakeholder interviews

Between December 2021 and June 2022 a total of 30 interviews were conducted with relevant stakeholders, 23 of which were with members of the Implementation Steering Group (ISG). ISG members represent organisations with a key stake in both the identification of challenges affecting skills in rural Scotland, and the means of addressing them. A group of wider stakeholders – those outside the ISG but

¹⁸ SDS shared these documents with IFF, however they have not been published.

¹⁹ Minutes from ISG meetings are published online and available here: [Previous minutes and reports | Skills Development Scotland](#)

²⁰ SDS shared this document with IFF, however it was not published.

representing organisations involved in activities contained within the SAPRS – were also invited to take part in interviews. This resulted in an additional 7 interviews. Organisations represented across the ISG and more widely included local councils, funding bodies, education and training bodies, representatives from sectors across the rural economy, Scottish Government and SDS.

Members of the Research Advisory Group initially identified stakeholders suitable for interview. Participants were selected to ensure that a good range of stakeholders, with different views and perspectives, and from a range of industries, were included in the interviews. Of the suggested participants, only a small number were unable or unwilling to participate. These were not generally skewed towards any particular industry. Although neither of the representatives from Highlands and Islands Enterprise were able to take part, this region was represented by other participants.

Interviews were carried out remotely, using Microsoft Teams, Zoom or telephone, and lasted for approximately 45 minutes. Interviewers used a semi-structured topic guide (see Annex A) designed by IFF, and agreed with the Research Advisory Group. This focused on participants' views on the following themes:

- Priority areas for the SAPRS
- Emerging issues and challenges affecting SAPRS content and delivery
- Reflections on ISG collaboration and outputs
- Where the SAPRS has added value
- Key lessons learned

All interviews were recorded (with participant permission) and notes written up based on the recordings into an analysis framework. The framework was structured around headings/themes relating to the objectives (for example, "Progress in priority areas", "Partnership working within the ISG" and so on), and included relevant additional information (such as interviewees' backgrounds).

Members of the IFF team then carried out detailed individual analysis of a specific topic area and wrote up analysis notes. Subsequently, the research team met for a full analysis session, where each team member led on their topic area, followed by full discussion and additional observations from the team. This session was then written up into an analysis template, which formed the basis of this report.

Chapter 3: The effectiveness of the Implementation Steering Group

This section covers the first research objective, “How effective has the Implementation Steering Group (ISG) been at driving actions?”. It explores the purpose and membership of the ISG; how the group’s role and remit has evolved; what value the partnership adds; and how the group has worked in partnership to deliver a more coordinated response to skills issues.

The ISG’s primary role has been to drive forward activity set out in the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland (SAPRS). Most ISG members thought they were fulfilling this remit. An important factor was that ISG membership represented the skills needs of rural Scotland well. Most were content with how the group’s membership had evolved, although some felt there was scope to broaden membership further through further representation of third sector organisations.

ISG members highlighted four key areas of added value gained from this engagement:

1. Raising the profile of the skills issues of ISG members’ own sector or region
2. Increasing understanding of the challenges faced by partners operating in other sectors or regions and potential solutions
3. Generating new opportunities or solutions through collaboration
4. Raising awareness of activity which supports the implementation of the SAPRS through web page development, blogs and newsletters

The work of the ISG has undoubtedly been amplified through these dissemination activities and has resulted in a range of high-quality content. There is however scope to improve awareness of these outputs, to further increase their impact.

A range of mechanisms exist to support the group in delivering a coordinated response to skills issues in rural Scotland. These include well-attended quarterly meetings and sub-groups that appear central to planning and implementing activity on specific themes. The role of the Skills Planning Manager for the Rural Economy, who co-ordinates the ISG, has been crucial in delivering a coordinated response.

In summary, the vast majority of stakeholders felt that the ISG had been effective in driving actions. Bringing skills issues in rural Scotland together under a single ‘umbrella’ has created the opportunity to promote more localised or sector-focused skills concerns, the opportunity to learn from others, the facilitation of new collaboration or funding opportunities, and promotional activities.

Introduction

The Implementation Steering Group (ISG) brings together 25 partners from across industry, education and the enterprise and skills agencies. The group first met in December 2019²¹, and evolved from the original Advisory Group that developed the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland (SAPRS). It meets on a quarterly basis and its role is to drive forward activity set out in the SAPRS. It is chaired by Henry Graham.

This section discusses findings related to the first research objective, “**How effective has the Implementation Steering Group been at driving actions?**” It explores how the group’s role and remit has evolved; what value the partnership adds; and how the group has worked in partnership to deliver a more coordinated response to skills issues. This section draws on in-depth interviews with ISG members, a survey of members conducted by SDS in August-September 2021,²² and secondary analysis of performance data indicating the reach of ISG-led communications materials.

The role and remit of the Implementation Steering Group

The ISG’s purpose, as established in its Terms of Reference, is: “to act as the focal point for the delivery of the skills actions identified within the plan, and to ensure that progress against these was monitored”²³. Specifically, members are required to:

- act in the interest of rural Scotland, whilst being representative of their organisation’s remit and priorities;
- attend quarterly steering group meetings and if necessary nominate a seconder;
- lead or support specific actions where appropriate and carry out any agreed actions assigned to them in a timely manner;
- if required, support subgroup meetings arranged to address specific action areas; and
- share examples of existing best practice and be featured in published case studies if required.

Overall, ISG members who took part in interviews understood the role and remit of the partnership, which most described as monitoring and discussing the progress of the SAPRS on an ongoing basis. Supporting this sense of clarity was the clear

²¹ For a summarised timeline of ISG activities, see Annex A of this report.

²² This ‘ISG Members Survey’ (unpublished) captured feedback on a number of aspects of the ISG including its quarterly meetings, subgroup meetings, “Lunch and Learn” sessions and its communications (blogs, newsletters and case studies).

²³ More information about the ISG, including its membership and Terms of Reference, finalised in November 2021, is available here on the [Skills Development Scotland website](#).

communication and direction provided by the Skills Planning Manager for the Rural Economy²⁴, and the ISG Chair.

Membership of the ISG

Representation from a variety of sectors and regions was an important factor to help deliver skills actions in rural Scotland. Scottish Government and SDS identified experts who had experience in skills in rural Scotland, as well as experience in a range of relevant sectors, to be the initial ISG members. The types of bodies represented included voluntary organisations, public sector bodies and umbrella bodies representing businesses. Initial ISG members included (but were not limited to) representatives from the Scottish Funding Council, Lantra, Scottish Enterprise, Colleges Scotland, the Federation of Small Businesses, the Scottish Tourism Alliance and Developing Young Workforce.

Overall, members of the ISG who took part in interviews felt the representation in the group was appropriate. Results from the ISG Members' Survey also revealed that most were content with the level of representation that had been achieved. As one interviewee commented, the flexibility of the ISG in terms of its membership base has been important:

There was always a flexibility built into the ISG. It was always organic enough to grow. It wasn't a fixed, rigid structure.

However, some felt the membership was too narrow. One member felt that better representation could be achieved by inviting individuals from more community-based and/or third sector organisations focused on rural areas. Another reflected that the group would benefit from an expert in Housing and Planning, although it should be noted that the ISG is a skills group rather than a Rural Economy Group.

Overall, stakeholders understood the ISG's purpose and remit. The majority thought that a good range of rural sectors and organisations were represented on the ISG. They noted that there was also the flexibility to recruit new members to the ISG, with different areas of expertise, as needed - for example, in response to new emerging issues. A minority of stakeholders felt that the ISG could consider getting more involvement from community-based organisations and specific business organisations.

How the Implementation Steering Group contributes to a more co-ordinated response to skills issues

ISG members felt that the partnership has helped to drive forward and promote SAPRS activities. It has supported their industry or region's own needs and has facilitated partnerships and other opportunities across regions and sectors. This subsection explores how the ISG has been able to contribute to a more co-ordinated response to skills issues, covering how the partnership works together

²⁴ This role is explored in more detail later in the section.

and how it has worked in practice. Key aspects of the partnership's work include its quarterly meetings, sub-group meetings, Lunch and Learn sessions, and the Skills Planning Manager role.

Quarterly meetings

ISG members have used quarterly meetings to share information, engage with each other, and consider future action and opportunities. ISG members who took part in interviews reported that these meetings were well attended, with active participation from most. This is reinforced by the ISG Members' Survey, in which the majority of respondents (74%) agreed that "All group members are engaged and contribute well".

The way in which the meetings have been run, and the topics they have covered, have been important in encouraging positive attendance and participation. ISG members generally agreed that the quarterly meetings have been well facilitated, noting the role of the Chair in particular. They described the meetings as varied, informative and relevant, and that meetings contributed to positive discussions.

These meetings have helped to maintain momentum, and allowed ISG members to reflect on the pace and quality of progress. The meetings have also helped to maintain engagement and focus for continuing to drive the SAPRS forward and deliver activities. Hearing about how activities were progressing, and giving talks about their own areas and activities of interest, all helped to contribute to this. Other sessions between meetings also helped to maintain enthusiasm and engagement.

ISG members made suggestions in the Members Survey about how to improve the quarterly meetings. The main suggestion was to allow more time for members to contribute to discussions by, for example, having fewer items on the agenda in each meeting.

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic meant that the ISG had to quickly adapt its ways of working, and the vast majority of meetings took place online. Most interviewees felt this was a positive development, as it made it easier for ISG members who lived in more remote rural locations to attend the meetings. Remote meetings also made it easier to share information. However, a small minority of stakeholders were keen to return to in-person meetings, as they felt these would help individuals to engage more and network with one another.

In conclusion, stakeholders found the quarterly meetings to be useful, engaging and relevant. They effectively served to monitor the progress of the SAPRS and helped to ensure that activities were being driven forward, as well as providing opportunities for networking, collaborations and sharing ideas and progress. Although a small number of stakeholders had suggestions for improvement, the majority were overwhelmingly positive about the benefits of the quarterly meetings.

Sub-groups

Between meetings, around a quarter of the partners met in sub-groups. These were set up after the initial formation of the ISG, to focus on specific areas that could not be covered within the quarterly meetings. These sub-groups included Communications, Skills and Recovery, Research and Consultation, and more recently, Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) Live.

The sub-groups allowed members to continue discussing skills development in rural Scotland between the ISG's quarterly meetings, to share best practice and to take forward specific areas of work. The Communications sub-group, for example, has been fundamental in promoting case studies used to highlight the work of the ISG.

Sub-group members agreed that these were useful in bringing focus to each group's area of interest. Stakeholders acknowledged that it could be difficult to discuss and arrange activities in a larger group, where certain topics were not always relevant to all group members. One stakeholder felt that the sub-groups were critical to ensure that implementation of activities actually occurred. Another suggested that if the SAPRS were to continue, additional sub-groups might be of value - for example, a sub-group focused on the skills needs of smaller businesses.

Lunch and Learn

In addition, the ISG launched Lunch and Learn Sessions, to share best practice, learn from different approaches, enhance understanding of how the SAPRS is being implemented, drive forward new activities, and identify opportunities for enhanced collaboration to develop skills in rural Scotland. Like the sub-groups, these sessions have allowed members to delve deeper into some of the topics covered in ISG quarterly meetings.

Lunch and Learn sessions have been fairly well-attended, with 58% of respondents from the Members' Survey reporting that they had attended at least one session. Of those who attended the sessions, 78% felt that the topics were relevant, 73% felt that the meetings were well facilitated, 73% felt that they had the opportunity to ask questions, and 78% felt that the sessions aided their understanding of subject areas.

Skills Planning Manager

The Skills Planning Manager for the Rural Economy oversees the focus of the ISG. This role is funded, and has been crucial in producing the suite of ISG communications that promote SAPRS activities and help to drive engagement. In particular, the Skills Planning Manager has worked closely with partners to understand the skills activities they are involved in, any progress made, and support them to promote this activity and / or collaborate with other ISG members to develop it further. As the SAPRS has a limited budget allocated to it, this role has helped facilitate a considerable amount of progress at relatively low cost; one stakeholder described this as being "exceptionally good value for money".

ISG members who took part in interviews attributed a large amount of the ISG's success to the Skills Planning Manager for the Rural Economy and were very positive about her contributions. In particular, members highlighted her communication skills and approachability, and welcomed that she provided a platform to collaborate with others.

However, this does create risks for the ISG and the wider plan should the post no longer be supported. A small number of participants questioned what might happen to the ISG and to the SAPRS more broadly if this were to happen. This points towards the need for the ISG to consider how to continue to support this role and build in resilience to any changes in the future.

One of the ISG's key impacts has been its contribution to a more co-ordinated response to skills issues. Stakeholders found the quarterly meetings to be useful, engaging and relevant. They effectively served to monitor the progress of the SAPRS and helped to ensure that activities were being driven forward. The topics covered in the meetings were described as engaging, and the meetings have encouraged networking and collaboration among members. Stakeholders noted that the Skills Planning Manager for the Rural Economy has been instrumental to the success of these meetings and the high levels of engagement generated.

A small minority suggested that the meetings could be improved by allowing more time for members to contribute to discussions, or to include fewer topics in a single session, but the vast majority of stakeholders were highly positive about the energy and momentum that the quarterly meetings generated.

The four sub-groups (Communications, Skills and Recovery, Research and Consultation, and Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) Live) helped to provide additional focus on specific areas of interest. Stakeholders have used these groups to discuss the specific issues in more depth than the ISG quarterly meetings allow, to share best practice and to take forward specific areas of work within the SAPRS. The ISG's "Lunch And Learn" sessions have had similar benefits, as members have been able to delve deeper into specific topics. The Skills Planning Manager for the Rural Economy is seen as critical to the success of the SAPRS, and an important element to continue in any future iteration of the Plan.

The contribution of the Implementation Steering Group

For ISG members, the main added value of the ISG was that it has acted as a single, coherent, focal point for the rural Scotland skills agenda. The group has brought together individuals and organisations with similar areas of expertise, who were experiencing similar challenges, connecting local regional and national interests. One stakeholder noted that this was a different approach:

It's quite a novel approach, having all these people in the same room looking at rural skills right across Scotland rather than just from a local perspective.

ISG members who took part in interviews shared four ways in which the group added value to the rural Scotland skills agenda, by: promoting the skills needs of their own sector/region; increasing understanding of the challenges faced by members in other sectors/regions; generating new opportunities or solutions through collaboration; and disseminating, showcasing and promoting SAPRS activities via external communications and marketing activities. Each of these is discussed in more detail below.

Promoting the skills needs of ISG members' own sector or region

ISG members welcomed the opportunities created by the partnership to promote the skills needs of their own sector or region. The ISG meetings helped to ensure their particular challenges were considered in wider conversations about skills needs and interventions in rural Scotland. Members of organisations with less experience of working in cross-sector partnerships found the ISG especially beneficial. One stakeholder described how working within a partnership was particularly useful for those who worked in the most remote areas:

[Being part of the ISG helps with] sharing experiences, and accessing support ... it's a little bit lonely out here in the rural areas ... having a point of reference and somewhere to put forward a message is very valuable.

Another stakeholder whose organisation provides support for small businesses, noted that membership of the ISG provided them with opportunities to interact with people and organisations they might not otherwise have met, and to explain the specific needs of small businesses.

The ISG consider skills challenges from a range of perspectives. Stakeholders felt that this has helped to raise the profile of skills needs and helped place 'rural Scotland' higher up on the national skills agenda, as this member explains:

It's focused attention on rural Scotland. People like me and others on the steering group are now thinking about what we can do in the rural dimension and we now have a mechanism to feed in ideas that that can be taken forward to the relevant folks. So, it's creating a space where we can think about this stuff.

Increasing understanding of the challenges faced by partners operating in other sectors or regions and potential solutions

ISG members felt the quarterly meetings helped them to gain a deeper knowledge and understanding of sector developments across Scotland, which they could then apply to their own work. One example included a training provider who had to move their training from face to face to online due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. This stakeholder learned from a Western Isles provider that had undergone a similar process and shared the lessons they learned at an ISG quarterly meeting.

Improved knowledge and understanding also helped some members to identify relevant information for their own organisation or industry in a timely and effective manner. This included a council member who learned about employment trends due to furloughing in an ISG meeting. He was able to feed this back to his colleagues who were facing similar issues. This also helped his own organisation be more efficient as he did not then have to independently seek out the relevant information. Learning from other members also benefited ISG members by avoiding duplication of work already underway elsewhere. It also helped to ensure that skills interventions across rural Scotland adopted a more consistent, joined up approach.

Generating new opportunities or solutions through collaboration

The ISG was also viewed as an effective way for members to increase their professional networks, cascade learning and engage in group activities. ISG members reported collaborating both with one another and more widely, with connections they had made through other ISG members. The quarterly meetings allowed members to learn about other activities and initiatives related to skills development in rural Scotland. As the quote below demonstrates, the reach of the group therefore goes beyond its core membership.

I most value building connections with groups that I would never have encountered otherwise. Niche areas that probably wouldn't have been aware of us either, had it not been for the ISG.

For ISG members who already had connections to others in the group, the ISG provided the opportunity to strengthen those relationships. ISG members shared the advantages these new and stronger professional networks brought them. For example, one ISG member became aware of, and accessed, new project funding through a contact made via the ISG. Another stakeholder who represented the college sector in Scotland, described a challenge in how to access apprentices during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Through collaboration with other ISG members, particularly Lantra and other training providers, they were able to share learnings and collectively develop a solution. That said, there was some evidence that ISG members were restricted in the amount of time and resource they had, which somewhat limited their ability to develop cross-sectoral initiatives.

Disseminating, showcasing and promoting SAPRS activities

A final way in which the ISG adds value is through its external communications and marketing activities that promote SAPRS activities. These communications are aimed at anyone with an interest in skills needs in rural Scotland. They help highlight the skills needs of rural Scotland within government and public sector organisations, and more broadly. Some of this content is shared through short blogs or through the Rural Skills Newsletter²⁵. Additionally, case studies are shared on social media under the hashtag #RuralSkillsScotland, often promoting the

²⁵ The Rural Skills Newsletter is available here on the [Skills Development Scotland website](#).

individual experiences of individuals or employers (for example, individuals who have undertaken an apprenticeship).

The objectives of these communications and marketing activities are as follows:

- to raise awareness of work that partners are involved in to support implementation of the plan;
- to showcase examples of activity which is helping to address gaps in skills;
- to raise awareness of support that can be accessed in rural areas and how it can be of value; and
- to raise awareness of the topics that are of importance in rural areas.

Broadly speaking, most ISG members were satisfied with the communication outputs. These help to showcase the activities contained within the SAPRS. In particular, stakeholders felt they help to promote activities and knowledge beyond the ISG, thereby amplifying their work. Some participants also reported that blogs helped bridge the gap between ISG meetings and allowed subjects to be considered in more depth than in the meetings, where time is limited. The stakeholder below describes this in more detail:

That's where you start to see ripples extending beyond just the people who come to ISG meetings. So the comms work is incredibly positive. It gives us an outlet and it gives us a mechanism for people to see what we're doing, and to tell other people about it.

In addition to the blogs, the Digital Rural Skills newsletter was seen as a valuable resource that allows for the promotion of certain sectors which would not necessarily otherwise receive coverage. The newsletter also helps to support the implementation of the SAPRS in terms of signposting and promotion of support such as the Digital Start Fund²⁶.

However, outside of the Scottish Government and SDS, not all ISG members were able to discuss the communications in detail. When asked about communications, some participants commented they were “good”, but were unable to provide additional depth or detail. This suggests a lack of awareness of the communications outputs among some ISG members. An opportunity therefore exists for all ISG members to promote or contribute to these more actively.

While the external communications offer an important platform, their effectiveness is only guaranteed if they have sufficient reach. The rural blog posts received the most traction, with 720 unique page views between November 2021 and January 2022²⁷. At present there have been three editions of the newsletter. Over the past 12 months, the newsletters have received 54 hits and as of March 2022, 92 people

²⁶A Scottish Government fund launched in 2019. It offers people who are unemployed or on low incomes a grant to access training in software development, cyber security, and other digital fields. More details can be found here on the [Skills Development Scotland website](#).

²⁷ The blogs that received the most unique views during this period were: The ‘Gaelic Skills and Career Pathways’; ‘Peatland Skills on the front line of Climate Change’; ‘Sparking the Interest of our Young People’.

were signed up to the mailing list; an increase from 70 in December 2021. Although this is positive and suggests the newsletter is growing in its reach, it also highlights there may be further room for growth.

Overall, the main added value of the ISG for stakeholders was that it has acted as a focal point for the rural Scotland skills agenda. It has brought together individuals and organisations with similar areas of expertise, who were experiencing similar challenges, connecting local, regional and national interests. It has added value in four ways, as detailed below.

Stakeholders reported using the ISG meetings and other communications to ensure that the skills needs within their own sector or area were considered in wider conversations about skills needs and interventions in rural Scotland.

The meetings and other communications also helped stakeholders to gain a deeper knowledge and understanding of sector developments, challenges and potential solutions across Scotland, which they could then apply to their own work.

The ISG was also viewed as an effective way for members to grow their professional networks, cascade learning and engage in group activities, thereby generating new opportunities or solutions through collaboration.

Finally, the ISG produces and disseminates a range of external communications and marketing activities to promote SAPRS activities, aimed at anyone with an interest in skills in rural Scotland. These helped to promote activities and knowledge beyond the ISG, thereby amplifying stakeholders' work within the SAPRS, although there is scope for extending their reach further.

Conclusions

This section has explored how effective the Implementation Steering Group (ISG) has been at driving actions within the SAPRS. It has drawn on interviews with ISG members, a survey of ISG members conducted in 2021, and data indicating the reach of ISG-led communications materials. Overall, the ISG has been effective at driving action, with opportunities for further improvements if the SAPRS was to continue.

ISG members understood the ISG's purpose and remit, "to act as the focal point for the delivery of the skills actions identified within the plan, and to ensure that progress against these was monitored". The majority of interviewees agreed that a good range of rural sectors and organisations were represented in ISG membership, and that there flexibility to recruit new members, with different areas of expertise, as needed. A minority of stakeholders felt that the ISG could consider getting more involvement from community-based organisations and specific business organisations.

The ISG has worked well in bringing a more co-ordinated response to skills issues in rural Scotland. It has brought together individuals and organisations with similar areas of expertise, who were experiencing similar challenges, connecting local,

regional and national interests. Highlighting and discussing these challenges in quarterly meetings, sub-groups and Lunch and Learn sessions has created opportunities to:

- promote more localised or sector-focused skills concerns in rural Scotland;
- learn from others;
- facilitate new collaborations or funding opportunities; and
- engage in promotional activities.

The sub-groups have been critical for driving actions on certain themes. Continuing to run these, and broadening their coverage, could help increase momentum driving activities forward. The funded role of the Skills Planning Manager for the Rural Economy has also been critical in ensuring collaboration and coordination across the ISG. Going forward, it will be important to consider how best to maintain this role and continue to develop and maintain good relationships with ISG members.

A considerable amount of communications and other promotional content has been produced, and a number of stakeholders felt this has added further value. However, the evidence on the reach of these materials suggests that more could be done to increase awareness of these activities.



Chapter 4: Progress by Priority

This section addresses the second research question, “To what extent has the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland (SAPRS) delivered on the five broad priority areas agreed?”

The research found that considerable progress has been made across all priority areas of the SAPRS, including: skills insights, interventions and support in rural Scotland; and promotional activity. These activities have a much greater focus on the skills needs of rural Scotland, in part due to the cross-sector co-ordination central to the SAPRS.

Some expected activities have however not occurred as planned. This was predominantly due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which led to delays in activities, or led to activities being adapted.

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the second research question, “**To what extent has the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland (SAPRS) delivered on the five broad priority areas agreed?**” It summarises the progress made to date across activities within the SAPRS, taking each priority area in turn. The five broad priority areas are:

- **Priority area A:** Better understand the skills rural employers need and align provision to support this;
- **Priority area B:** Provide individuals with accessible education and skills provision to secure, sustain and progress in their careers in rural areas;
- **Priority area C:** Develop the current workforce in rural areas through upskilling and reskilling;
- **Priority area D:** Build a secure pipeline for the future; and
- **Priority area E:** Take a co-ordinated, strategic approach to tackling skills in rural areas.

This chapter draws on two SAPRS Progress Update Reports,²⁸ collated in Spring 2021 and Spring 2022 by SDS in collaboration with partners on the Implementation Steering Group (ISG). It also draws on interviews with stakeholders, to assess their views on progress made, and explore the barriers and challenges they have faced. The stakeholder interviews have also informed the case studies presented in this section.

²⁸ These documents have not been published and are for the use of the Implementation Steering Group (ISG).

Priority area A: Better understand the skills rural employers need and align provision to support this

Key activities within this priority area include:

- Skills Assessment for Rural Scotland;
- Data Matrix interactive tool;
- Skills Alignment Pilot; and
- The Rural Business Panel Survey.

Skills Development Scotland published the first Skills Assessment for Rural Scotland in 2020, which is now updated on an annual basis²⁹. This document provides a robust evidence base that supports skills investment planning across rural Scotland. Underpinning the Skills Assessment is the Data Matrix, an interactive tool which presents data on skills supply, skills demand and skills mismatches. A rural cut of the data was included to support the SAPRS, accessed via a Rural button on the dashboard³⁰. This allows for analysis of individual indicators at a Local Authority level and rural Scotland as a whole, making it easier for organisations to identify and analyse the rural data that is of most use to them. One ISG member in the interviews highlighted the value of the tool, and specifically being able to search by Local Authority:

It's very helpful as it provides a rural database where you can search by local authority and generate specific outputs. The data is very useful, and we can encourage others to use the data.

The Skills Assessment for Rural Scotland is complemented by Regional Skills Assessments in more localised rural geographies³¹, as well as Sector Skills Assessments, which provide evidence of relevance to a number of industries with a strong rural footprint³².

In addition to these SDS resources, ISG members have invested in numerous sectoral, thematic and regional consultations and research studies, to improve their understanding of the skills needs in rural Scotland. The ISG meetings and communication platforms (such as blogs) provide opportunities to share and discuss this information. Examples of research shared include Lantra's Skills

²⁹ The most recent Skills Assessment for Rural Scotland is available on the [Skills Development Scotland website](#).

³⁰ [The RSA Data Matrix](#).

³¹ All Regional Skills Assessments are available here on the [Skills Development Scotland website](#).

³² A few examples include Agriculture; Tourism; Creative Industries; and Food & Drink – Primary Production. These can be found here on the [Skills Development Scotland website](#).

Summit report³³, National Farmers Union Scotland (NFUS) employer workshops³⁴, Highland recruitment research³⁵, and research on the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic³⁶. The Federation of Small Businesses has also presented findings from sectoral and regionally-focused surveys to the ISG, with ISG members encouraged to promote this information to their networks³⁷. Sharing information has been a key benefit of the SAPRS for many ISG members, as one interviewee highlighted:

The value of actually being able to articulate, in quite a compelling way, what's happening across rural Scotland and how partners are responding to local and regional needs. I personally feel that that's not something that was there before the Rural Plan.

An important part of Priority area A was better aligning education and skills provision to the needs of the rural economy. In partnership with South of Scotland Enterprise (SOSE) and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), SDS commissioned a skills planning pilot, which sought to map regional demand with provision in a rural area.

Further work is being taken forward through the SFC-led South of Scotland Regional Pathfinder, and a range of partnership activity has occurred to inform more targeted responses to skills issues in rural areas. These activities have benefitted financially from the National Transition Training Fund³⁸, which supports individuals who had been made redundant or were at risk of redundancy, as well as the sectors hit hardest by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. The expertise of ISG members has been key in shaping these interventions and responding to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Projects of note include the Timber Haulage Academy³⁹ by Confor, and Redesigning Rural by Scottish Enterprise⁴⁰. While these activities were likely to have occurred without the SAPRS, the networks created as a result of the SAPRS have helped to promote potential opportunities and ensure

³³ This report, available on the [Lantra Scotland website](#), focused on the challenges and opportunities relating to recruitment and skills in the land based sectors.

³⁴ These workshops with agricultural employers explored the challenges and opportunities to attract and retain staff.

³⁵ This research, commissioned by Skills Development Scotland, examined recruitment needs of employers in Highland.

³⁶ For example, the Highlands and Islands Enterprise research on the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which explored a range of economic and labour market indicators, see the [full report](#).

³⁷ One example of this is the Highlands and Islands Winter Survey, with results here on the [FSB website](#).

³⁸ More information on the National Transition Training Fund, which the Scottish Government launched in 2020, can be found on the [Scottish Government website](#).

³⁹ This provides individuals the chance to experience haulage. More information is available on the [Confor website](#).

⁴⁰ This creates work placement opportunities for individuals affected by the pandemic, as summarised in the [National Transition Training Fund Year 1 Report](#).

the design and delivery of these activities better meets the needs of the rural economy. As one ISG member in the interviews described:

[Programme X] probably would have gone ahead without the SAPRS because we were approached directly by Scottish Government. SAPRS has brought a framework and focus, so we know where we fit in the landscape of skills delivery.

One of the ambitions of the SAPRS is to better understand the skills needs of employers in rural areas through direct engagement. As outlined in the progress reports, activity here has built on existing or proposed panels or datasets, rather than creating new studies. Initial activity in this area was put on hold, in order to prioritise responses to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. However, in 2021, South of Scotland Enterprise (SOSE) collaborated with Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) to develop the latter's existing business panel survey and undertake a joint survey of businesses in each region⁴¹. Building on this, the first national Rural Scotland Business Panel Survey⁴² was then commissioned through a partnership between the Scottish Government, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and South of Scotland Enterprise. As well as measuring the economic health of rural Scotland more broadly, the survey captures information on skills needs, such as the extent of labour shortages. A more enhanced dataset on skills needs and gaps can be found in the Scottish Employer Skills Survey (which for example can break down skills needs at an occupational level)⁴³.

Overall, the research has found that clear progress has been made across the various activities planned in priority area A, although this has been slower than intended due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Key developments include the Skills Assessment for Rural Scotland and tailored links to the underpinning Data Matrix, a variety of ISG led or supported research, and the first Rural Business Panel Survey. These provide more nuanced, tailored and accessible insights into the skills needs of rural Scotland.

⁴¹ The results are available on the [South of Scotland Enterprise website](#).

⁴² The first report is available on the [Scottish Government website](#).

⁴³ The most recent Scottish Employer Skills Survey, commissioned by Scottish Government and capturing responses of 3,500 employers, is available on the [Scottish Government website](#).

Priority area B: Provide individuals with accessible education and skills provision to secure, sustain and progress in their careers in rural areas

Key activities within this priority area include:

- The development of the South of Scotland Skills and Learning Network;
- Promotion of the benefits of apprenticeships in rural Scotland;
- Creation of innovative ways to support Apprenticeship delivery;
- Awareness raising of the rural supplement for training providers; and
- Improvement to the accessibility of education opportunities.

Priority area B gained increased significance in 2020 due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which necessitated a move to more accessible and flexible forms of education and skills provision.

In 2020, the Scottish Funding Council, with support from Dumfries & Galloway and Borders Colleges, launched the South of Scotland Skills and Learning Network⁴⁴. This consists of four physical hubs that provide access to learning opportunities for individuals of all ages, irrespective of location, through its digital learning platform. Key sectors of interest are care, renewable energy, construction and engineering. During the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the Scottish Funding Council worked with colleges and universities in rural areas to explore how they were adapting to the changing landscape, and to share any learnings. As highlighted within the progress update, this work demonstrated that colleges typically structured their response to the pandemic in three stages: an immediate response in April to July 2020; planning for the start of the next academic year 2020-21; and thinking longer term about post-pandemic impacts on learning.

Apprenticeships are a vital mechanism in Scotland for delivering skills provision through a work-based learning approach. SDS and partners, including Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) and providers, continue to promote apprenticeships in rural areas through the use of innovative communication methods (described below) in order to ensure national campaigns for Scottish Apprenticeships resonate in rural areas. Scottish Apprenticeship Week⁴⁵ is an example of a national campaign led by Skills Development Scotland (SDS). With ISG members encouraged to support related activity during the event, this has helped to contribute to a greater focus on Apprenticeships in rural Scotland.

⁴⁴ More information on this network is available [Scottish Government website](#).

⁴⁵ This initiative runs in March every year. More information can be found on the [Scottish Apprenticeship Week web page](#).

SDS has also worked with partners and employers to facilitate sector commentary pieces and apprenticeship case studies. These help to drive awareness of the range of apprenticeship pathways in rural Scotland⁴⁶. These have been formalised through the Case Study of the Month initiative, which has established a thematic focus for case studies. ISG partners have also helped promote Scottish Apprenticeships in their sectors or regions more widely⁴⁷.

Alongside this work, SDS has worked with industry partners to pilot innovative ways to support Modern Apprenticeship delivery and help respond to specific needs of individuals and (particularly small and micro) employers in rural Scotland. Examples include the Adhartas apprenticeship scheme⁴⁸, a novel apprenticeship model with an emphasis on the Gaelic language⁴⁹, and an industry led programme supporting the delivery of Modern Apprenticeships in Hospitality⁵⁰. One stakeholder who was interviewed reported that the SAPRS has been particularly important in contributing to the piloting of the new apprenticeship models within the rural economy.

A number of sector bodies are ISG members - so they're hearing directly about initiatives (e.g. the novel apprenticeship models)... and so that has really helped disseminate novel approaches to challenges that have been faced by employers working in rural areas.

In addition to these communications, and the novel apprenticeship model, further support for rural communities to access training includes the SDS Rural Supplement grant. This provides financial support to training providers who offer Modern Apprenticeships to individuals living in rural areas, in recognition of the increased costs for delivering apprentices in rural areas, and the need to reduce barriers for people in more remote areas. Introduced in 2017, it has supported the training of over 3,000 individuals since the creation of the SAPRS. Lantra and other industry partners supported uptake by conducting awareness raising activities.

The Skillseeder web platform and app is one example of an activity designed to improve awareness of and ease of access to education and skills provision in rural Scotland. Case study one draws on an interview with a Skillseeder representative.

⁴⁶ For example, various case studies have been published by [Seafood Scotland](#) and [Lantra](#).

⁴⁷ For example, ISG members Aberdeenshire Council had an article titled '[Work-based learning is a winning formula for secure careers](#)' published in October 2021, promoting the benefits of Foundation Apprenticeships for both learners and employers.

⁴⁸ The social enterprise Adhartas employs (mostly construction) apprentices directly, while all HR responsibility as well as apprentice and employer support sits with the local authority. More information can be found on the [Comhairle nan Eilean Siar council website](#).

⁴⁹ This model, comprising Bord Na Ghaidhlig, HIE, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and Argyll & Bute Council, supported tourism businesses in accessing Gaelic speaking apprentices to support customer experience.

⁵⁰ This industry-led programme sees hotels working together to maximise the learning experiences of the apprentices through the delivery of Masterclasses.

Case Study 1: Skillseeder app, by Skillseeder

Four entrepreneurs developed the [Skillseeder app](#) in 2020, in response to the Scottish Government's CivTech programme⁵¹. The aim of the app is to provide information about skills provision opportunities across rural Scotland through a simple, easily accessible platform. At the 'click of a button' potential learners can access a range of educational courses at different levels, and find relevant training.

There are currently 6,000 courses offered on the app. Training courses are identified via webscraping⁵², while training providers can also upload courses onto the app themselves. Whilst it took some time for the team behind the Skillseeder app to convince training providers of its merits, they have gradually been able to raise its profile. By making an accessible platform, the developers hoped to reduce barriers for specific groups, such as women and people with disabilities, who are more likely to encounter challenges attending and applying for training. The app is often able to target promotional activity at these individuals, through "search engine optimization"⁵³ and Facebook and Twitter targeting, although they have reported that it is more difficult to target people with disabilities.

Skillseeder has used information from ISG communications to help inform their delivery of the app, particularly in terms of targeting specific regions and sectors. The collaborative approach of the ISG has also meant that Skillseeder and the ISG have discussed other opportunities including support for peatland restoration. They are currently exploring linking trainers to workers in this area.

It is clear that a considerable amount of activity has focused on improving individuals' awareness of, and accessibility to, training provision in rural Scotland.

With respect to raising awareness, a key focus has been promoting the value of Apprenticeships in rural areas, for example via the Scottish Apprenticeship Week campaign and case studies that ISG members have supported. Other activity, such as the Skillseeder app, has sought to make it easier for individuals in rural areas to find training opportunities. Furthermore, SDS and partners have piloted examples of more flexible models of apprenticeship delivery, thereby enhancing their accessibility, while the South of Scotland Skills and Learning Network seeks to improve access to learning opportunities.

While there has been valuable progress, some of these schemes are still in their infancy and do not cut across all sectors and regions of the rural economy, so their impact on the rural economy as a whole might take time to materialise.

⁵¹ See the [CivTech Challenge website](#).

⁵² 'Webscraping' is a technique where a computer program extracts content and data from websites. This data can then be manipulated and analysed as needed.

⁵³ Search engine optimization refers to the process of improving the quality and quantity of website traffic to a website or a web page from search engines

Priority area C: Develop the current workforce in rural areas through upskilling and reskilling

Key activities within this priority area include:

- The Rural Employers' Toolkit;
- A range of sectoral-focused upskilling and reskilling initiatives;
- Skills for Growth service;
- Skills Discovery tool on Our Skillsforce;
- Enhanced Careers Information, Advice and Guidance support; and
- Promotion of digital skills projects.

Supporting interventions that meet the skills needs of rural employers are important to this Priority. The Rural Employers' Toolkit⁵⁴ is an example of one such intervention. Lantra, supported with funding from SDS, and on behalf of the ISG, developed this toolkit to give rural employers practical guidance and support across all sectors of the economy. A number of Scottish Government-funded, sectoral-focused initiatives have also contributed to this priority area since 2019, including the Seafood Upskilling and Reskilling project, a range of Forestry upskilling and reskilling activity, and the Tourism & Hospitality Talent Development Programme⁵⁵.

Other activity has focused on training opportunities for women in the rural economy, particularly in Agriculture and other land-based sectors, and Aquaculture⁵⁶. One ISG member felt that this activity is helping to increase awareness within the rural economy of the need to attract a more diverse workforce. However, as covered in the following section on priority area D, there is more work to be done in this area.

Many land-based sectors are heavily gender-segregated which raises the issue of changing sectoral demographics. We want to attract new people, women, and men into non-traditional sectors. We are seeing more success in these areas, with more awareness in imaging and promotion to try to promote a more diverse workforce. SAPRS has supported this by producing case studies, blogs, "My day at work" pieces etc., to help dispel stereotypes.

Additionally, there has been some activity to respond to the climate emergency. For example, Borders College and Dumfries & Galloway College have developed a

⁵⁴ [The Rural Employers' Toolkit](#) is covered in more detail in a case study in the next section, 'The Broader value and future focus of the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland'

⁵⁵ This is a virtual leadership, management and supervisory training programme that is designed to motivate and develop top talent to support the sector to recover from the significant impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic across the Tourism and Hospitality sector.

⁵⁶ These include the [Women in Agriculture Practical Training Fund](#), and the [Women in Rural Economy Training Fund](#), both administered by Lantra, and supported by promotional activity such as this short film: ['Rural women benefit from training'](#).

Green Skills Academy⁵⁷, while the Scottish Government-funded Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation Practical Training Fund⁵⁸ was launched in 2022. Some ISG members felt there needed to be a greater strategic approach to these activities, further discussed in Chapter 5.

SDS and ISG partners have played an important role in encouraging employers to understand their workforce development needs and access relevant support. Owing to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, this often took the form of online promotion. This included Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) in the West Highland region hosting an online webinar on apprenticeship funding opportunities for employers⁵⁹, and an online Business Support Post-COVID event in the Scottish Borders targeted at construction employers⁶⁰. A key form of support is SDS's Skills for Growth service⁶¹. Case study two below draws on an interview with a representative of the team running this programme.

Case Study 2: Skills for Growth, by Skills Development Scotland

Skills for Growth was launched ten years ago by SDS. Its aim was to help businesses tackle longer-term challenges such as changing demographics and technological changes, and to highlight the demand for skills across a number of sectors. The programme helps businesses tackle these challenges, providing opportunities for training, support and funding. Since its launch, the programme has also digitized, allowing more businesses, including rural employers, to access services.

The SAPRS has benefitted the programme in a number of ways, in part because it has highlighted the need to have staff based in rural locations to provide support to businesses in these areas. The ISG Skills Planning Manager at SDS consulted the Skills for Growth team about products and services – as a result of this, and the subsequent networking opportunities, Skills for Growth's involvement with the SAPRS has resulted in an increase in the number of referrals from rural businesses seeking support. In terms of Skills for Growth's impact on the rural economy, its last evaluation in November 2021 highlighted the results from a survey of supported businesses. Of the 97 respondents surveyed, 94% recommended Skills for Growth, stating immediate benefit to their organisation and increased understanding of their skills needs. Just over half (56%) of respondents were businesses operating in local authorities with remote and island, rural and mainly rural areas.

⁵⁷ More information on the [Borders College website](#).

⁵⁸ More information on the Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation Practical Training Fund can be found on the [Scottish Government website](#).

⁵⁹ More information on this event can be found on the [DYW West Highland website](#).

⁶⁰ This event was run by the Construction Industry Training Board, Energy Savings Partnership, Borders College & SDS.

⁶¹ There is more information on this service on the [Skills Development Scotland website](#). Case studies have helped to promote this service. For example, see this recent case study on the [Isle of Raasay distillery](#).

Skills for Growth complements the Skills Discovery tool on Our Skillsforce⁶², which helps small to medium sized enterprises understand the skills needs and skills gaps across their business or department.

Alongside supporting employers, activity within priority area C also seeks to help individuals who are looking to change or progress their careers. Promoting pathways into the workplace has played a role, with various SDS case studies developed exploring the different educational routes individuals have taken to join a new industry⁶³. Enhancing careers advice is also a key activity here:

- SDS has supported careers staff by ensuring the labour market intelligence they receive is relevant to the rural economy.
- The SDS Virtual Experts programme, which forms part of the “My World of Work (MyWOW)⁶⁴ Live”⁶⁵ interactive activities, aims to bring the world of work to life through direct engagement with industry experts.
- SDS has also run “meet the expert” virtual sessions where experts in various sectors inform young people about careers available to them. One ISG member in the interviews highlighted the influence of the SAPRS on these sessions, with partners coming together to support initiatives.

One theme within this priority area relates to supporting digital leadership and management skills. SDS and ISG members have taken responsibility for promoting existing national projects such as the Digitally Enabled Learning Pilot (DELP), the Digital Start Fund, the Digital Xtra Fund, and the Digital Skills Pipeline. While these are nationally available offers, the key has been to signpost and share these opportunities to ensure that they reach a rural audience, for example through the digital newsletter which was issued in November 2021⁶⁶. There are also more localised digital interventions that focus on specific rural areas.

SDS are currently in the process of developing a Digital Economy Skills Action Plan (DESAP)⁶⁷, with ISG members offered the opportunity to feed into the consultation process. Recognising that the need for digital skills cuts across all sectors, the plan will take a whole-economy approach, focusing on common digital economy skills requirements across sectors. The Digital Economy Skills Action Plan will consider skills in three segments:

- Digital skills that employees need to enable them to do their jobs, as employers adopt more digital technology. These are currently referred to as “Digital Enablement Skills”.

⁶² This is available on the [Our Skillsforce website](#).

⁶³ A couple of individual-focused case studies are available [Skills Development Scotland website](#).

⁶⁴ [My World of Work](#) is Scotland’s career information and advice website.

⁶⁵ [My World of Work Live](#) is a set of interactive activities that help young people understand possible future careers.

⁶⁶ See the [Rural Skills newsletter](#).

⁶⁷ A summary of the Digital Economy Skills Action Plan (DESAP) can be found on the [ScotlandIS website](#).

- Roles that are not technology-based, but which require an increasing number of digital skills. These are currently referred to as “Hybrid Digital Tech Professionals”.
- Specialist digital technology professions that require specific skills, such as data analytics and software engineering. These are currently referred to as “Digital Tech Professionals”.

Work towards priority area C has progressed largely as planned. Although the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has disrupted some of the planned activity, a range of activities are in place to develop the workforce in rural areas.

The SAPRS has helped enhance the focus of existing initiatives on the needs of rural Scotland, providing a platform to promote these initiatives, and bringing partners together to work collaboratively on them. Activity has covered a range of sectors and skills specialisms, although one or two ISG members considered that more could be done in certain areas, including a more strategic approach to developing green skills.

Priority area D: Build a secure pipeline for the future

Key activities within this priority area include:

- Providing more localised careers information, advice and guidance;
- Promoting career opportunities;
- Creating a more diverse workforce; and
- Enhancing work-based learning pathways through for example Foundation Apprenticeships.

In terms of more localised careers information, as outlined in the previous section, a range of work has been undertaken to support this. A key additional development during 2020-21 was the introduction of an SDS Yammer page, which allows colleagues across the organisation to share careers information internally. This page now has 180 members, and provides career-related resources⁶⁸ that reflect current skills needs in rural Scotland. SDS colleagues – for example, those working in Careers Information Advice and Guidance (CIAG) – can then share these resources with teachers and training providers, to help them support young people.

Activity around promoting careers opportunities was adapted due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, and the rapidly changing context. In particular, the SAPRS had an activity to ‘investigate the value of utilising digital platforms to extend access to skills resources’. This work was accelerated, as the swift shift to online delivery due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic meant that the planned scoping

⁶⁸ The (unpublished) Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland (SAPRS) 2022 Progress Update Report contains more detail on the content of the Yammer page.

exercise was no longer relevant. Implementation Steering Group (ISG) partners have since consistently used digital platforms to ensure that individuals can obtain a relevant and up-to-date picture of employment opportunities in rural areas. Examples of this have included the VirtRural Careers event⁶⁹ and Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) Live⁷⁰.

ISG members and SDS have used case studies and events to promote career opportunities to all ages but with a primary focus on young people and their parents, carers and influencers living and working in rural areas, as the section above on 'priority area C' outlines.

From a workforce diversity perspective, the SAPRS aimed to assess the issues and barriers individuals with protected characteristics in rural areas face in accessing training and gaining employment. The evidence review was paused due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic but the work on understanding barriers continued. A draft report looking at existing evidence from public sources was produced with the intention of providing a basis for agreeing next steps. There are however, multiple activities occurring at a local or sectoral level promoting the importance of diversity within the rural economy by all partners⁷¹.

Finally, an important element of building a secure pipeline is ensuring work-based learning pathways in rural areas. The national Foundation Apprenticeships programme has a key role to play here, providing school pupils with skills for work and an industry-recognised qualification. SDS' Foundation Apprenticeships recruitment campaign allows employers to target by geography and communicate with young people living in rural areas. Collaborative work between ISG members and beyond has helped promote and increase the uptake of Foundation Apprenticeships, with SDS working closely with delivery providers, local authorities, schools and Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) Groups at a regional level.

Foundation Apprenticeships have seen a substantial increase in starts since 2019⁷². This increase has been reflected in rural areas as well, with Aberdeenshire starts, for example, increasing from 61 individuals in 2018 to 647 in 2020. This trend can be seen across all other rural areas too. In partnership with others, SDS has also overseen the creation of the Land Based Pre-Apprenticeship⁷³, which piloted in 2019-20, and for the 2021-22 year saw 47 starts.

⁶⁹ This event, run by Lantra, aimed to raise awareness, and increase knowledge of careers available in Scotland's land based, aquaculture and environmental conservation sectors.

⁷⁰ This initiative was launched in 2020 by Education Scotland working in partnership with e-Sgoil and industry partners. DYW Live provides live sessions that support learners' development of employability skills, career pathways and industry connections. More information is available on the [DYW Live website](#).

⁷¹ These include the [Women in Agriculture Practical Training Fund](#), the [Women in Rural Economy Training Fund](#), and the Borders College's '[Agriculture – not just for boys!](#)' campaign.

⁷² See the [SDS Foundation Apprenticeships Progress Report](#) (June, 2021).

⁷³ This 6-month Pre-Apprenticeship serves as an introduction to land-based industries for learners. More information is available [Lantra Scotland website](#).

Overall, there has been mixed progress within priority area D, in line with the anticipated activities. Progress has been made on careers advice and enhancing work-based learning pathways. SDS have made good use of digital platforms for both of these, by creating both an internal Yammer page for colleagues to share resources and using digital platforms, case studies and online events to ensure that young people can obtain a relevant and up-to-date picture of employment opportunities in rural areas.

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic resulted in an adjustment in how careers opportunities were promoted such as exclusively using digital platforms for long periods. The evidence review on creating a more diverse workforce was paused due to the pandemic, but work on understanding the barriers continued as it was a priority for Government-led coronavirus (COVID-19) data. A draft report was produced with the original intention of providing a platform for discussion on the next steps. Nevertheless, there are multiple activities occurring at a local or sectoral level promoting diversity within the rural economy by all partners.

Priority area E: Take a coordinated, strategic approach to tackling skills in rural areas

Key activities within this priority area include:

- the creation of the Implementation Steering Group (ISG);
- a skills mapping exercise;
- the development of learner pathways; and
- a calendar of events to promote key messages relating to the rural agenda.

The work of the Implementation Steering Group (ISG), which has overseen progress of the SAPRS since December 2019, has been vital to ensuring a multi-agency, cross-sectoral approach to addressing skills issues in rural areas. The ISG has a broad membership with a wide range of expertise spanning across sectors and regions. The group has met regularly online, with sub-groups allowing for more targeted discussions and activity planning.

However, some ISG members who took part in interviews felt that the ISG could give more attention to strategic planning. A handful of ISG members also acknowledged that the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic had necessitated a more reactive approach to immediate skills needs.

A skills-mapping provision exercise was planned as part of priority area E to map the volume, type and delivery of education and training opportunities on offer across rural areas in Scotland. As a result of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, this work has not happened. Stakeholders, including SDS' Skills Evidence & Impact and Regional Skills Planning and Sector Development Teams, the Scottish Funding Council, Lantra and others, instead focused activity on understanding and responding to skills issues caused by the pandemic. However, at a sectoral level, a "root and branch" review of learning in Scotland's land-based

and aquaculture sectors has commenced by the independent Commission for the Land-Based and Aquaculture Learning Review⁷⁴.

A further planned initiative was the development of learner journey pathways across relevant college and university Regional Outcome Agreements (ROAs)⁷⁵. As the progress update highlights, this work – which the Scottish Funding Council leads in partnership with Scotland’s Colleges and SDS – is considered central to delivering the ‘right’ outcomes for learners. Similar to above, Scottish Funding Council adapted their work in this area due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. For example, they took a more proportionate approach to reporting requests in relation to the Regional Outcome Agreements.

A final activity within priority area E was to compile a calendar of events to help promote key messages relating to the rural agenda. While – as set out in the previous section – the webpage for the SAPRS, regular blogs and case studies helped promote the activity of the ISG, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has meant there have been few opportunities to promote key messages at in-person events.

Overall, good progress has been made towards taking a coordinated, strategic approach to tackling skills in rural areas. The most significant development has been the development of the ISG. The cross-sector, cross-region, and multi-agency approach to this group has been central to ensuring a co-ordinated approach to tackling skills in rural areas.

However, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, and its impact on a range of organisations, has meant that other planned activities sitting within priority area E have been paused or adapted.

Conclusions

This chapter has addressed the research question “**To what extent has the SAPRS delivered on the five broad priority areas agreed?**” To make this assessment, the research has primarily drawn on the Implementation Steering Group (ISG) progress updates, supplemented by stakeholder interviews where relevant.

As detailed, a considerable amount of progress has been achieved across the five priority areas. This progress has contributed to an enhanced focus on the skills needs of rural Scotland through a number of activities, including: skills insights, skills provision, careers guidance, and promotional work.

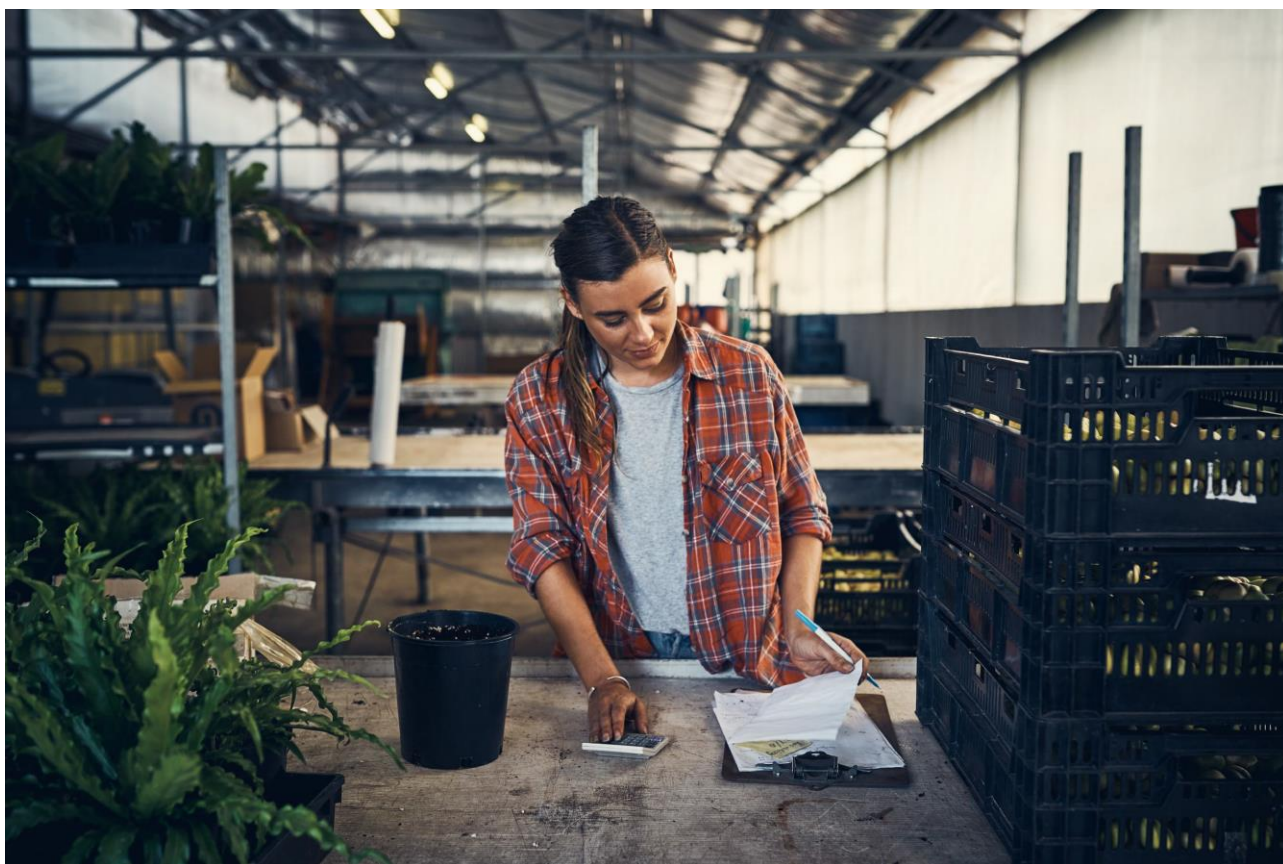
SDS has played a key role in driving activity forward, but activities have typically involved multiple partners collaborating and therefore bridging the divide between

⁷⁴ An overview of their work can be found on the [Scottish Government website](#).

⁷⁵ More information on the Scottish Funding Council’s Outcome Agreements – which set out what education providers plan to deliver in return for their funding – is available on the [SFC website](#).

local and national government, training providers, awarding bodies and industry bodies. ISG members have helped drive the impact of this activity, supporting collaboration on interventions, sharing knowledge and promoting activity.

A theme running across the five priority areas is the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. In many ways, the SAPRS has enabled and enhanced the ability of stakeholders to respond more effectively to the quickly evolving skills needs of industry and learners. However, certain activities have not progressed as anticipated. The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic impacted the method of promoting careers opportunities and vacancies and the volume of vacancies and opportunities in some sectors. SDS and partners have made good use of digital platforms to promote careers advice and enhance work-based learning pathways. The evidence review on understanding the barriers to a diverse workforce was paused in order for partners to produce coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic-related data on people affected by the pandemic in their sector.



Chapter 5: Benefits and coverage

This chapter addresses the third research question, “Has the creation of the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland (SAPRS) contributed to additional activity / investment?” and considers its added value to Scotland’s rural economy.

Overall, this research has found that the SAPRS has added value to Scotland’s rural economy in three key areas: providing a fresh focus on the skills needs of the rural economy; enabling collaboration and partnership opportunities; and raising the profile of skills needs in rural areas.

Together, these three benefits have helped wider stakeholders to understand the importance of considering rural needs in their decision-making in the development and delivery of skills interventions.

The SAPRS was not intended to create strands of new activity, but to bring together and raise the profile of existing activities. There is substantial evidence from the research that it has achieved this aim and that the SAPRS has been fundamental in improving the quality of, and raising awareness around, existing skills interventions.

Looking to the future, stakeholders from both the Implementation Steering Group (ISG) and those outside the ISG would like to see the SAPRS continue. Some think it should continue in its current form while others would like to see more focus on specific cross-cutting areas such as digital skills or green skills.

Introduction

This chapter discusses findings related to the third research question, “**Has the creation of the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland (SAPRS) contributed to additional activity / investment?**” The chapter explores the broader effectiveness of the SAPRS by discussing how the partnership and plan brings about additional or more effective activity, including examples of this in practice, and the value that stakeholders consider it to bring to the rural economy. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the future direction of the SAPRS, considering how it might evolve to continue meeting the skills needs of the rural economy.

This chapter draws on interviews with stakeholders, which included both ISG members and wider stakeholders. The stakeholder interviews have also informed the case study presented in this section.

Added value of the SAPRS to the rural economy

The SAPRS has made three key achievements in adding value to Scotland’s rural economy. The programme has provided a fresh focus on the skills needs of the rural economy, enabled wider and deeper collaboration and partnership opportunities, and has raised the profile of skills needs in rural areas.

Reframing skills through a rural lens

Most stakeholders agreed that a key achievement of the SAPRS has been to reframe skills information, interventions and support through a rural lens. This has helped organisations to better understand the needs of rural businesses, as well as drawing learnings from other sectors or regions. The first national Rural Scotland Business Panel Survey (see Chapter 5) is an example of a project that has benefitted from this reframing. The survey captures broad measures on the economic health of rural Scotland and information on skills needs.

A non-ISG member shared how the SAPRS had helped them to ensure they consider rural needs in all aspects of their job. It has done so by highlighting rural challenges that are less typical in urban settings, like poor digital connectivity, poor public transport links and longer travel times between locations. This stakeholder learned about these factors through the dedicated SAPRS communications (see Chapter 4), and through word of mouth at meetings and other events related to their job role. The stakeholder felt that other attendees at meetings and events raised rural challenges more frequently, which they also attributed to the SAPRS. One ISG stakeholder noted the SAPRS had helped them to identify gaps in their own provision:

It's highlighting where the data gaps are and where therefore the gaps in provision might be falling. The original plan has provided some means of starting to recognise that.

Enabling partnerships and new collaborations

The SAPRS has also brought together different stakeholders in the rural economy, enabling wider and deeper collaboration and collective knowledge-sharing. As a result of the SAPRS, individuals representing a variety of organisations have been brought together in ways that had not happened before, as illustrated below:

That coordination, the ability to network, a shared approach to the challenges, and a sharing of ideas and information has really helped drive action and delivery and benefit for rural skills.

One stakeholder explained how the knowledge-sharing channels SAPRS enabled resulted in them identifying an opportunity to work together on a mutually beneficial initiative. Without SAPRS, that common need and willingness to collaborate may not have been identified.

Raising the profile of skills needs of the rural economy

Additionally, the SAPRS has served to raise the profile of the skills needs to be addressed in rural areas. As rural businesses are typically more remote, their needs risk 'flying under the radar'. The SAPRS has helped to promote the issues faced by the rural economy, targeting a range of audiences. These audiences have

included national and local government, training providers and industry representatives. This benefit of the SAPRS was noted by an ISG stakeholder:

It has brought to the forefront some of the good work that was going on that ministers may not have been aware of. I think there's more to do, but I think we've really got a much clearer story to tell than we did 18 months ago.

A stakeholder working in Careers Advice Information and Guidance offered another example of SAPRS helping to raise the profile of skills needs. They described reading their industry news and gradually, over a period of over a year, hearing more about the SAPRS. Through this, they came to understand how important the rural sector was to Scotland's economy, and that rural areas had unique challenges that the stakeholder had not previously considered when offering careers-related resources. They reached out to SDS colleagues to collaborate on the creation of a rural-specific online hub, offering resources to those involved in different rural sectors and highlighting specific careers within those sectors.

A separate, non-ISG, stakeholder stated that the SAPRS had acted as a framework for their organisation, enabling them to stay on track and communicate their vision. They have used the SAPRS as evidence when talking to decision makers. They have specifically referenced the data made accessible by the SAPRS, and also referred to it as an essential guide, during their interviewing process for a new rural skills role.

The Rural Youth Project provides another example of how the SAPRS has added value to a project that already existed. Case study three⁷⁶ below draws on an interview with one of the Rural Youth Project's founders.

Case Study 3: The Rural Youth Project

The Rural Youth project was launched in 2018 in response to the trend of young people born in rural areas moving away to urban locations to pursue careers. Its aim is to develop strategies to both encourage young people (age 18-28) into rural careers, and to facilitate their involvement in agricultural and rural activity by better understanding their current situation, aspirations, opportunities and challenges.

The project uses a number of creative, interactive methods including its bespoke "Ideas Festivals" (a series of talks and workshops to share knowledge and promote leadership), other workshops, storytelling and sharing the voices of young people.

The Rural Youth Project has used the SAPRS in a number of ways. The SAPRS' focus on inclusivity has helped the project's founders think about their strategy for how to ensure that young people who have left a community are welcomed back more holistically. For example, rather than focusing only on helping and encouraging young people to develop skills that are useful to a rural community,

⁷⁶ More information can be found on the [Rural Youth Project website](#).

activities also cover how to facilitate the community welcoming the return of young people to the community. As the founder of the project states:

“If that community won't welcome them back and won't welcome them to contribute, then that's a problem...that is the essences of the Plan [the SAPRS], which very much drives what we what we do.”

Consequently, the Rural Youth Project often refers to the SAPRS to ensure that the Project's aims are aligned with Scottish Government's aims. The project's founder refers to the SAPRS as a “guiding light that governs our strategy and the direction of travel”.

The Rural Youth Project has also formed new partnerships – for example, linking up with Scottish Enterprise's Rural Leadership program and jointly produced activities to encourage the peer-to-peer learning as well. They have also recorded a video case study for the Skills Planning Manager at SDS, for a forthcoming SAPRS blog, and would like to find more ways to link up with SDS and the SAPRS in the future.

Overall, the research has found that SAPRS has added value to Scotland's rural economy. It has done so in three ways:

The SAPRS has helped to reframe skills information, interventions and support through a rural lens. This has helped organisations to better understand the skills development, planning and needs of rural businesses and people living in rural communities, and how these might differ from the needs of businesses and people in urban areas.

The SAPRS has also helped different stakeholders in the rural economy to collaborate and share knowledge. As a result of the SAPRS, individuals representing a variety of organisations have been brought together in new ways.

Finally, the SAPRS has helped to raise the profile of the skills needs in rural areas. As rural businesses are typically more remote, their needs face the risk of 'flying under the radar'. In this way, the SAPRS has helped to promote the issues faced by the rural economy.

Evidence of the SAPRS contributing to additional activity and investment

In this section we consider how the SAPRS has contributed to additional activity and investment. It is important to note that the SAPRS was delivered on a very small budget, and was not intended to fund new skills interventions. Rather, the intention was to bring together and enhance existing and new activities, of which there is ample evidence from both the progress reports and research interviews of this occurring. One stakeholder summarises this approach as follows:

The plan was never all about developing new projects. It was partly about putting it in a framework together. There's been a lot of value in understanding some of the stuff that was going to be taking place anyway. But we didn't have a really strong understanding of how all of it fit within 'Rural', and how we could develop a compelling story about it.

Chapter 4 highlighted projects the SAPRS has supported. While for the most part these would have occurred without the SAPRS, there was a general consensus among stakeholders during interviewing that it has helped to either promote projects or to ensure that project design and delivery has better met the needs of the rural economy.

Although stakeholders recognised the difficulty in assessing the extent of the SAPRS' contribution to stronger outcomes within the rural economy, there was little doubt that it has contributed to progress.

Stakeholders also identified three broad areas where the SAPRS has contributed to activities that were not necessarily foreseen when the plan was originally launched. These relate to activities funded through the National Training Transition Fund (set up to respond to the coronavirus [COVID-19] pandemic), a somewhat linked focus on digital learning and skills, and growing concerns around the environment and the climate emergency. Each of these is described below.

The National Training Transition Fund (NTTF)

As detailed in Chapter 4, part of the Scottish Government's coronavirus (COVID-19) response was to introduce the National Transition Training Fund (NTTF) in 2020. A recurring reflection of ISG members in the interviews was that they were able to utilise funding from the NTTF to support activities relating to skills development in rural Scotland, such as in the seafood and land-based sectors, and the creative industry.

The SAPRS has had a positive impact on the engagement many training providers have with the NTTF. Some suggested that without the SAPRS, and the work done by the ISG in promoting it, they would never have engaged with the fund. This highlights the benefit of the type of collaborative working that the SAPRS has encouraged and how this is more broadly benefitting the wider skills landscape in rural Scotland. One stakeholder in the interviews offered an example of this in practice:

As a result of being engaged with the SAPRS, we are now working more closely with Developing the Young Workforce and the initiative with the green job skills hub, workforce academy and the NTTF. Those are initiatives that have been happening that we would not have engaged with necessarily.

Digital learning and skills

One of the SAPRS's objectives⁷⁷ is to "Support and encourage skills for the future with a particular focus on digital, leadership and management skills". The importance of digital skills has increased substantially since the SAPRS launched, as the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has led to large-scale remote online working and learning. It is clear from previous minutes and reports from ISG meetings that this is now a key development influencing skills needs in rural Scotland.

ISG members reported that businesses in rural communities sometimes lack the necessary digital skills they require, or suffer from connectivity issues. In addition, some ISG members felt that local provision for digital skills could be improved. Addressing these challenges is therefore key when supporting skills development in rural Scotland. Some felt the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic provided no other option than to face the digital skills gap, and as a result, they felt this contributed to activity and initiatives in the digital landscape and skills development area.

There was general consensus among those interviewed that any future iterations of the SAPRS could further increase this focus on digital skills due to the significant cross-cutting benefits relating to digital upskilling.

Climate emergency and the transition to Net Zero

While developing 'green' skills was not a focus of the original SAPRS, SDS have been quick to respond to the changes that have happened since the plan was launched in 2019. At the national level, SDS facilitated the development of the Climate Emergency Skills Action Plan⁷⁸ (CESAP) in 2020, in response to the climate emergency. The plan recognises the need to develop new skills to support the transition to a Net Zero economy. This includes improving access to skills training in sectors that will help create new green and sustainable jobs.

An example of how this is translating into action is the Green Hub, which is an enhancement of the SDS internal digital platform to support Careers Information Advice and Guidance. Launched in August 2021, the Green Hub has a focus on labour market information and insight relating to green jobs. This resource makes links with the SAPRS, stressing the importance of material that has been developed by ISG members. For example, the Green Hub includes a blog on the climate emergency by Scotland's nature agency, NatureScot⁷⁹ (June 2021). The blog discusses the impact of climate change and changes that are occurring in the rural

⁷⁷ Priority area TC2, within Priority area C: "Develop the current workforce in rural areas through upskilling and reskilling". For more details, see the [Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland: 2019-2021 report](#).

⁷⁸ See more information on the [Climate Emergency Skills Action Plan](#).

⁷⁹ See the [NatureScot website](#).

sector to combat its effects, with a focus on providing skills pathways for young people to enter the nature-based sector⁸⁰.

ISG meetings have incorporated discussion on the climate emergency, with a spotlight session on the climate emergency held in the September 2020 meeting. Many of the stakeholders interviewed were pleased the environmental and climate emergency gap is being addressed in this way, as they believe it is an integral part of skills development in rural Scotland.

However, stakeholder views on the role of SAPRS in environmental or green skills were more mixed. Stakeholders whose roles include sustainability development were less clear on how activities within both the SAPRS and the Climate Emergency Skills Action Plan aligned. These stakeholders recognised the potential value of collaboration and knowledge exchange with the Climate Emergency Skills Action Plan (CESAP), especially where the same stakeholders work across both. These stakeholders would benefit from a clearer understanding of how these fit together across a shared strategic approach.

While developing environmental or 'green' skills was not a focus of the original SAPRS, SDS have been quick to respond to the changes that have happened since the plan was launched in 2019. The SAPRS was not intended to fund new skills interventions, but to bring together and enhance existing and new activities, of which there is ample evidence from both the progress reports and research interviews of this occurring.

Indeed, stakeholders typically reflected that whilst skills activities in rural Scotland would have occurred without the SAPRS for the most part, there was a general consensus that it has helped to either promote projects or to ensure that project design and delivery has better met the needs of the rural economy.

The skills landscape has evolved quickly since the launch of the SAPRS, as a result of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic introducing new, and exacerbating existing, challenges. The SAPRS has enabled stakeholders to be more responsive to these challenges, and support the skills needs of the rural economy accordingly.

Future focus of the SAPRS

This final section outlines stakeholders' views on the future of the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland. Stakeholders interviewed for the research were asked their views on whether the SAPRS should continue, what direction it should take and what skills needs the SAPRS should prioritise.

Continuing the SAPRS

The vast majority of stakeholders agreed that the SAPRS should continue. Their reasons relate to the range of benefits discussed above; namely, the plan has

⁸⁰ The blog post can be found [Skills Development Scotland website](#).

successfully highlighted the importance of the rural economy and its skills needs to the Scottish economy. The collaboration and activity has strengthened and connected skills activity in rural Scotland.

Of those who thought the SAPRS should continue, some suggested that policy makers could consider how the SAPRS might move forward and evolve in the future, while remaining open to change as needed. Stakeholders who felt the SAPRS should continue felt it would benefit from a policy approach that allows room for greater flexibility so it could better respond to emerging needs. One of the strengths of the SAPRS lay in how quickly and flexibly it was able to respond to the changes imposed by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, such as adapting activities to accommodate a large-scale move to remote online working and social distancing. This is more fully described in the chapter outlining Progress By Priority. Stakeholders felt that this kind of flexibility will continue to be critical; for example, digital and green skills needs are evolving quickly, so any future iterations of the plan will need to be able to adapt as circumstances and needs change.

Across all interviews, with both ISG members and wider stakeholders, only one person was unconvinced that the SAPRS was a suitable way of resolving skills issues in rural Scotland. This stakeholder did not agree that the challenges faced by rural Scotland were unique, and thought that separating rural Scotland from urban Scotland risked creating unnecessary division in the country. However, their views did not represent the majority of stakeholders who were generally positive about how it had raised the profile of skills needs in rural Scotland.

Suggested future priorities

Stakeholders shared suggestions in interviews for additional areas for the SAPRS to prioritise. These included:

- How to get industry to commit to innovation that would contribute to more attractive job opportunities;
- The rapidly evolving skills needs within industry that need to adapt to technological change and environmental pressures;
- How to ensure that rural opportunities are highlighted to young people before they make career choices (for example more opportunities for outreach in schools); and
- A clearer articulation of its alignment to other government strategies – for example, the Scottish Government’s new economic strategy, and the Climate Emergency Skills Action Plan (CESAP).

One stakeholder offered examples of areas of Scottish Government policy where better alignment could be articulated:

I think it's a future that will need an articulation relative to the developments that are coming out in the current political and skills landscape. So the work of the Enterprise and Skills Strategic Board and the work of the National Strategy for Economic Transformation.

Clarity around priority areas

A small number of ISG stakeholders would also like to better understand how their role and activities fit into the wider plan and would appreciate more clarity around the five priority areas. One ISG stakeholder suggested that this could be achieved by referencing the priority areas during the ISG meetings:

I'd like more clarity so people understand more about what the groups are and their purpose. To concentrate more on the five priority areas and ensure all members are aware of them in each [ISG] meeting.

The majority of stakeholders who took part in interviews would like to see the SAPRS continue, with several offering suggestions about how the plan could be strengthened going forward.

Many highlighted the flexibility of the plan, in responding to changes due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, as a key strength. Embedding a flexible approach to any future iteration of the SAPRS, so it could continue to respond to emerging and changing needs, was seen as critical.

A smaller number of stakeholders would like more clarity on how the SAPRS aligns with other policies. They shared ideas of how to strengthen any future iterations of the SAPRS and to better support stakeholders to understand how their roles, organisations and activities fit within the wider plan.

Others would like to see an increased focus on the emerging, cross-cutting skills needs in digital and green skills.

Conclusions

This chapter has addressed the third research question, “Has the creation of the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland (SAPRS) contributed to additional activity / investment?” and considered its value to Scotland’s rural economy. To make this assessment, this chapter has primarily drawn on stakeholder interviews with ISG and non-ISG members.

The vast majority of stakeholders agreed that the SAPRS has benefited existing skills activities in rural Scotland. The key benefits of the SAPRS, as described by stakeholders in research interviews, are as follows:

- It has helped to reframe skills information, interventions and support through a rural lens. This has helped organisations to better understand the needs of rural businesses and how these might differ from the needs of businesses in urban areas.
- It has helped different stakeholders in the rural economy to collaborate and share knowledge. As a result of the SAPRS, individuals representing a variety of organisations have been brought together in new ways.

- It has helped to raise the profile of the skills needs in rural areas. As rural businesses are typically more remote, their needs risk ‘flying under the radar’. In this way, the SAPRS has helped to promote the issues faced by the rural economy.
- It has helped raise the visibility of learner journeys and pathways in rural areas.

The model is flexible to enable stakeholders to better respond to evolving skills challenges, such as those prompted by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, and the climate emergency.

The vast majority of the stakeholders who took part in interviews would like to see the SAPRS continue, with several offering suggestions in terms of how the SAPRS could be strengthened going forward. Embedding a flexible approach to any future iteration of the SAPRS, so it could continue to respond to emerging and changing needs, was seen as critical. A smaller number of stakeholders would like more clarity on how the SAPRS aligns with other policies. Others would like to see an increased focus on the emerging, cross-cutting skills needs in digital and the environment.



Chapter 6: Recommendations

This chapter sets out recommendations for the future direction of the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland (SAPRS). It considers stakeholder views as well as the authors' interpretation of the evaluation findings. A key outcome of the evaluation was the clear consensus that the SAPRS has been valuable in driving progress on skills in rural Scotland. These six adaptations should be considered.

- **Content of the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland:** Both the focus of activities, and the flexibility of the plan, have enabled the SAPRS to support the skills needs of the rural economy. Going forwards the plan will need to increase its focus on: digital skills; skills that help industry navigate the climate crisis; other emerging and future skills demands.
- **Targets for the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland:** The plan has succeeded in supporting skills initiatives across all regions of rural Scotland. However, more progress could be made supporting activities that help certain types of individuals who face particular barriers to employment, such as women and individuals with a disability.
- **Structure of the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland:** The structure of the plan consists of five priority areas. These remain appropriate, however there is a lack of clarity outside of Skills Development Scotland (SDS) staff as to how skills activities relate to particular priority areas. This contributes to a lack of understanding about how skills activities are supporting the wider strategic picture. There would be value in SDS more clearly articulating the priority areas to Implementation Steering Group (ISG) members and how the work of members aligns with the priorities.
- **Broader alignment of the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland:** Linked to the structure of the plan, there was a lack of clarity as to how it aligns to other strategic plans (such as the Climate Emergency Skills Action Plan). Reinforcing this within the SAPRS Skills Development Scotland itself, and in communications, would support stakeholders' understanding of the wider picture, and contribute to more effective delivery of initiatives.
- **The make-up of the Implementation Steering Group:** The Skills Planning Manager role is fundamental in driving the work of the ISG. Ensuring this remains a funded, full-time position will be essential to the future success of the plan. It is also important that the ISG remains open to new members and to a broader composition of organisations (including third sector organisations), to ensure they represent the needs of the rural economy.
- **Implementation Steering Group communication:** Broadly stakeholders appeared content with the frequency and format of ISG meetings. To enhance their effectiveness and encourage greater agency of the SAPRS, the group might benefit from more thematic sub-group meetings. Sub-groups might also benefit from developing their own action plans aligned with specific priorities within the main plan.

Chapter 7: Conclusions

This final chapter considers the key learnings from this evaluation of the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland: 2019-2021. Drawing on evidence from earlier chapters, it highlights what has worked well and what has worked less well, and explores the implications for the future of the plan.

This report has presented the main findings of an independent process evaluation of the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland (SAPRS). It has considered:

- How effective its Implementation Steering Group (ISG) has been at driving actions;
- The extent to which the plan has delivered on its five priority areas, and;
- Whether the creation of the plan has contributed to additional activity and investment.

Overall, this evaluation has demonstrated that the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland has brought together a range of activities to meet current skills needs in rural Scotland, although the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has affected the speed of progress.

Aspects which have worked well include a number of new or evolving activities that have supported the skills system in rural areas. The SAPRS has contributed to a more coordinated and strategic approach for these activities, in terms of design, implementation and promotion. It has therefore ensured that skills intelligence, skills provision, careers guidance and promotional work contain a stronger emphasis on skills needs in rural Scotland. In particular this activity has helped organisations respond in a more targeted and effective way to the skills challenges caused by the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

The Implementation Steering Group (ISG) has been a critical factor in driving the SAPRS forwards. Bringing skills in rural Scotland together under a single 'umbrella' has provided the ability to promote more localised or sector-focused skills concerns, facilitated both shared learning and collaboration, and encouraged promotional activities. The funded role of the Skills Planning Manager for the Rural Economy at Skills Development Scotland has been key here.

Aspects of the plan that have worked less well include:

- While the intention of the plan was not to fund new skills interventions, there is little evidence that it has contributed to additional funding. However, there is evidence that the SAPRS has contributed to the reallocation of planned activity or financing, such as the use of the National Transition Training Fund to support rural skills activities.
- The pace of progress on certain aspects has been slower than expected, due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

- Adapting in a more strategic fashion to evolving rural skills needs, such as those associated with the climate crisis.

The evidence from this evaluation suggests that the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland: 2019-2021 has been valuable in bringing together a range of actions to meet current and future skills needs in rural Scotland. The plan will need to evolve to continue being fit for purpose. This includes widening the types of skills it covers, focusing support and activities on particular demographics, and aligning more closely to other Scottish Government strategies. This evaluation has established an important baseline in terms of what the SAPRS has delivered. In any future version of the Plan, it will be important to capture the full impact of its activities.

Annex A: Summary of topic guide questions

A Introductions and background

- Participant's organisation's remit and their job role within this
- The nature of their involvement in the development and implementation of skills interventions to support rural Scotland

B The SAPRS – priority areas and changing landscape

- Participant's role and involvement in the SAPRS
- Whether the participant has a particular interest in, or responsibility for, delivery on a specific SAPRS priority area (which area, how they supported the implementation of actions/activities, outcomes, improvements)
- Thoughts on progress, activities and outcomes within other priority areas
- Impact of Digital and Climate Emergency on the SAPRS
- Key challenges and how these were met
- Whether activities would have occurred without the work of the SAPRS
- Whether the SAPRS set a clear strategic direction
- Impact of the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic on the SAPRS in terms of planning and implementation; what has changed versus what was planned

C The Implementation Steering Group

- How the ISG came about; opinions on membership; aims and objectives
- How well the ISG is working in terms of set-up, structure, meetings, progress, communications
- Whether being part of the ISG has added value for them
- Whether the ISG has helped them make links with partners
- Whether the ISG has worked to create a clear strategic direction

D Impact of the SAPRS

- To what extent the SAPRS has created opportunities for skills provision and development in rural communities
- Whether the SAPRS has helped to provide a more aerial view of skills development in rural areas and whether this has been of value
- What has worked well in terms of partnership working; why
- Whether working in partnership benefits skills development in rural Scotland
- Whether working in partnership has resulted in any achievements that they could not have achieved in isolation
- Any key challenges or things that have worked less well; any key learnings
- Thoughts on the main additional value of the SAPRS
- Thoughts about the direction any future iteration of the SAPRS could take

Annex B: Summary timeline of Implementation Steering Group activities

Table 1: Timetable of key Implementation Steering Group activities, 2019-2022

Month	Activity
Jun-19	Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland (SAPRS) published
Dec-19	First Implementation Steering Group (ISG) meeting, in person
Feb-20	Communications Sub-group established
May-20	Extraordinary ISG meeting, focusing on COVID-19 response ISG meetings move online
Jul-20	Lunch and Learn sessions commence
Jul-20	Skills and Recovery Sub-group established
Jul-20	Research and Consultation Sub-group established
Nov-20	Webpage for SAPRS goes live
Mar-21	First SAPRS Progress Update Report
Apr-21	First newsletter published
Jul-21	Case Study of the Month begins
Oct-21	Independent evaluation of SAPRS commissioned
Nov-21	ISG Members Survey results
Jan-22	Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) Sub-group established
Jan-22	Second SAPRS Progress Update Report



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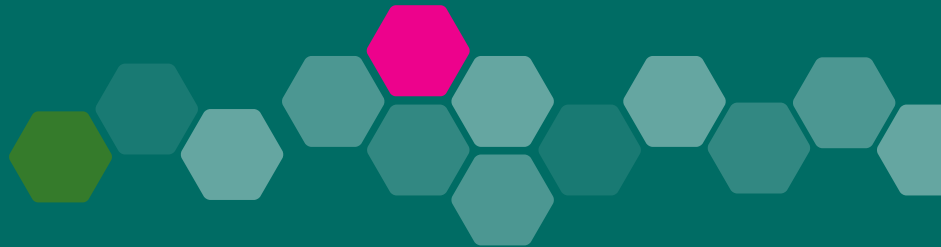
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