

Scottish Rural Visa Pilot Proposal

September 2022

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1. Executive summary

This document, submitted by the Scottish Government to the Home Office and Migration Advisory Committee (MAC), sets out a proposal for a bespoke rural visa pilot scheme to facilitate migration to remote and rural areas in Scotland.

The development of this proposal has been led jointly by **Mairi Gougeon**, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands, and **Neil Gray**, Minister for Europe, Culture, and International Development, together working with Scottish local authorities and key stakeholders representing employers based within remote and rural communities in Scotland. It builds upon wider work the Scottish Government has submitted to the Migration Advisory Committee to date on migration policy within the current UK constitutional framework, which has highlighted how the current UK immigration system does not meet the economic and demographic needs of Scotland's communities. The Migration Advisory Committee accepted in 2019 that the '*current migration system is not very effective in dealing with the particular problems remote communities experience*'.¹

The Scottish Government has repeatedly emphasised the urgency of the challenge for remote and rural communities, with restricted immigration following the ending of free movement threatening the economic and social viability of many areas. Many of these areas are particularly dependent on migration, with very few roles in remote and rural geographies meeting currently required salary thresholds or other criteria to recruit.

The Migration Advisory Committee highlighted evidence from the Scottish Government on remote communities in their [report of May 2019](#), and recommended the UK Government pilot a scheme to attract and retain migrants in remote areas. The then-Home Secretary, Sajid Javid, accepted that recommendation to develop a pilot scheme in a Written Ministerial Statement on 23 July 2019.

Following that commitment, the Scottish Government commissioned the independent Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population (EAG) to produce [an analysis](#) outlining three practical, deliverable, and evidence-based models for a remote and rural migration pilot scheme, which could be implemented within the current UK immigration system. The report consisted of the following policy options:

- i. *Adjustment to the Skilled Worker Route*
- ii. *Scottish Visa*
- iii. *Remote and Rural Migration Partnership Scheme*

Between Spring and Summer 2022, the Scottish Government consulted on the options, with a short-life working group comprised of twelve rural (and/or island) Scottish local authorities along with a range of business partners. Using the expertise and views from the working group, the feedback obtained has directly shaped this proposal in order to best reflect the differentiated needs across Scotland's remote and rural communities.

¹ [Full review of the shortage occupation list, May 2019 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

We have developed a robust and deliverable proposal which draws on international evidence, clearly reflects the needs of local communities and employers, and based on existing immigration enforcement.

Proposed pilot scheme: establishing a Scottish Rural Community Immigration Pilot

The main body of this proposal focuses on the opportunity for the UK Government to establish a version of the *Remote and Rural Migration Partnership Scheme* set out in the Expert Advisory Group paper. For the purposes of this paper, this is now named the **Scottish Rural Community Immigration Pilot (SRCIP)**. The proposed scheme is modelled on place-based migration solutions shown through the Canadian [Atlantic Immigration Program](#) and [Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot](#). It sets out a practical and robust approach to delivering a pilot scheme between the UK Government, Scottish Government, local authorities, employers and communities.

The SRCIP would present a distinctly new, community-driven and employer-based migration route. It would offer a world-leading approach to spread the benefits of immigration to smaller communities, enabling migration – based upon genuine employment opportunity – which would meet the economic and societal needs of a specific community (either in respect to acute shortage, or potential for future growth/regeneration).

Participating employer-sponsors within designated geographic areas referred to as Community Pilot Areas would be able to advertise vacancies (using SRCIP bespoke entry criteria). Employers and communities would then be able to assess prospective candidates, before recommending chosen candidates to the Home Office for final approval and security checks. Once a decision is approved, community partners – including employers, local statutory, and third sector services – would offer a package of integrated settlement support services for newcomers. Participating employers, in collaboration with Scottish Government and UK Government organisations, would also have responsibility for ensuring that terms and conditions of the scheme continued to be met.

Migrants would be required to adhere to conditions of employment whereby they are employed within the designated Community Pilot Area, with restrictions easing gradually over a period of four years. Migrants entered on the scheme would be strongly encouraged to live within the Community Pilot Area (with robust measures in place among partners to ensure migrants are supported to settle within the designated Community Pilot Area where possible).

After four years, restrictions would lift and migrants would be free to work anywhere in the UK, outside of their Community Pilot Area. Due to integrated settlement support offered and the focus on a community-driven scheme, it is the desired and intended outcome of the pilot that a majority of migrants would have established deeper roots in the community, and would continue to stay there beyond the four years. It should be noted the controls placed upon employment within this scheme are not dissimilar from place controls in other visa routes. For example, Skilled Worker Visas tie individuals to a specific role with a specific employer; while Student Visas tie an individual to a specified course at a specific university. This design

would therefore build on precedent of controls operating within existing visa routes – and as a result would remove challenges in relation to enforcement.

Though this proposal sets out how the SRCIP would be delivered within Community Pilot Areas, it is not within its scope to identify which communities would be selected. It is anticipated that decisions about the geographic size and boundaries of a participating Community Pilot Area would need to be considered in a shared forum including the UK Government, Scottish Government, Migration Advisory Committee, and local authorities. However, this proposal makes an initial suggestion that participating ‘community’ areas could be drawn using ‘Travel to Work Area’ (TTWA) geographic units to ensure appropriate size. (Note: while this proposal is primarily focussed on the implementation of the SRCIP in the Scottish context, the scheme itself has been designed in such a way to have broader applicability across the rest of the UK, where TTWAs also apply.)

Finally, the proposal sets out a robust and secure series of tests and controls, the roles of different organisations (including the Scottish Government as an ‘interlocutor’ and the roles of local authorities), along with additional considerations that would need to be worked through in the design and implementation of a SRCIP. To provide time to effectively implement, measure, and monitor the outcomes, it is anticipated the pilot be delivered for a minimum of **5 years**.

Any approach to support attraction and retention to remote and rural communities must be balanced with rigorous testing to monitor its effectiveness. Details are included as to how the scheme could be measured on its objectives to strategically mitigate² the impacts of local level population decline, to respond to critical labour market challenges, and – crucially – to retain migrants within targeted areas for the medium to long term once they have freedom to move, ensuring the continued economic and social viability of smaller communities.

However, given one role of this proposal is to open up an advanced conversation regarding bespoke migration solutions with the UK framework, there are a number of considerations that – if approved by UK Government – would need to be taken forward through a joint forum involving the UK Government, Scottish Government, Migration Advisory Committee, Expert Advisory Group and local delivery partners.

Baseline ask: upcoming SOL review

Whilst the principal focus of this proposal rests on the community-driven partnership approach of the SRCIP, the Scottish Government remains open and flexible in regard to delivering migration solutions which can improve and maximise outcomes for remote and rural communities.

The Scottish Government notes the upcoming review of the Shortage Occupation List (SOL) led by the MAC as an opportunity to consider an **adjustment to the existing list to better meet the needs of remote rural areas in Scotland**. This is discussed briefly in Section 7, and the Scottish Government calls upon the UK

² ‘Strategic mitigation’ is defined as an approach whereby migration is targeted in order to attract migrants with the skills and profile that would best address socio-economic challenges created by population decline

Government to work with the MAC and the Scottish Government to ensure that the interest of Scotland's remote and rural communities are appropriately considered within the review.

Summary of asks:

Implementing a rural visa pilot would represent an additional bespoke solution – alongside many others – implemented within the current immigration system. Many policies currently in operation, such as the differentiated approach to family migration for people in Northern Ireland and the Scotland Only Shortage Occupation List, demonstrate how bespoke solutions can be implemented where there is clear evidence of need. The UK Government has consistently argued that the immigration system needs to deliver for all parts of the UK. With specific challenges being faced by Scotland's remote and rural communities, now is the time to give active consideration to proposed system adaptations - as part of the Levelling Up Agenda - which aim to result in better outcomes for communities, local and regional economies.

Therefore, the Scottish Government makes the following asks of the UK Government:

- To commit to **implementing a Scottish Rural Community Immigration Pilot**, in collaboration with the Scottish Government and partners, with a view to launching the pilot in 2023
- To create a **joint UK Government-Scottish Government forum** (with representation from both the Migration Advisory Committee, the Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population, and local delivery partners), to support the design, implementation, and oversight of the SRCIP

In addition, we ask the UK Government to:

- To commit to the baseline ask to consider an adjustment to the existing Scottish Shortage Occupation List to better represent the needs of remote and rural areas in Scotland
- To commit to establish an agreed mechanism involving the MAC, Scottish Government and local delivery partners to effectively and efficiently incorporate the needs and requirements of remote and rural areas into the Shortage Occupation List, and to monitor and evaluate changes to ensure desired impact for communities is realised.

2. Background

2.1 Policy context

The Scottish Government is clear that inward migration enriches our society for the better, and migrants make a net contribution to our economy, our public services and our public finances. Scotland's demography - our ageing population, and depopulation of some remote and rural areas - means that inward migration is crucial to Scotland's future prosperity. Over the past decade, an estimated 45% of migrants to Scotland from overseas have come from EU countries, however analysis has shown that we can expect a reduction of around 30-50% in net overseas migration into Scotland as a result of the ending of free movement.³ This is particularly significant in the context of the latest [National Records of Scotland projections](#) published in January 2022 which show that in-migration is the only factor maintaining Scotland's current population growth, and that after 2028 Scotland's overall population will begin to decline.

The Scottish Government has outlined the evidence demonstrating the impact of the ending of free movement on all communities in Scotland, including those in remote and rural areas. A tailored approach to immigration is evidently needed; one which addresses Scotland's distinct social, demographic and economic needs, and specific geographic challenges. The commitment to develop a rural visa pilot proposal was enshrined in the Scottish Government's 2021 Programme for Government following the Expert Advisory Group's evidence to the MAC and their subsequent options paper. The commitment as included in the Programme was to "*develop a Rural Visa Pilot proposal, to support people to move to and work in our rural communities, submitting a proposal to the UK Government in 2022.*"

Scottish Ministers therefore invite the UK Government, alongside the MAC, to explore and implement practical solutions which can help to meet these needs. This document should be seen through that lens, as a practically-focused, operationally workable and proportionate proposal designed to target the needs of specific pilot communities as part of a wider conversation about ensuring the needs of communities are met.

2.2 UK Government position

The Migration Advisory Committee published a recommendation in 2019 acknowledging the distinct challenges facing remote and very rural communities and recommended the development of a pilot to facilitate migration to these areas, stating that:

"The current migration system is not very effective in dealing with the particular problems remote communities experience. If these problems are to be addressed something more bespoke for these areas is needed. The international evidence suggests that such regional schemes can struggle to retain migrants in the areas they were recruited in once they have the freedom to move, so the key question is whether migrants into these remote

³ [UK Immigration Policy After Leaving the EU: Impacts on Scotland's economy, population and society](#)

areas settle there permanently or leave for other parts of the UK. The only way to address this question in the UK context would be to pilot a scheme that facilitated migration to these areas, then monitor what happens over several years and evaluate the outcomes.”

This recommendation was accepted by the then-Home Secretary, Sajid Javid, in a written statement to Parliament in July 2019. Following this recommendation, the EAG published a policy options paper for a rural visa pilot, exploring different models which a pilot scheme could be designed around and which has informed the basis of this proposal development.

The Scottish Government recognises the current position of the UK Government is not in favour of tailored place-based migration solutions, as indicated in correspondence between Kevin Foster, UK Government Minister for Safe and Legal Migration, and Mairi Gougeon, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands, in early 2022. In April 2022, Kevin Foster agreed to consider the proposal, during a meeting with Neil Gray, Minister for Culture, Europe and International Development.

2.3 Committees

In July 2018, the House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee published [Immigration and Scotland](#). This paper set out clearly the demographic challenges facing Scotland, and the need for a tailored approach to migration policy. In May 2022, the Secretary of State for Scotland responded to the *Immigration and Scotland* report, outlining the wish to ‘*ensure we engage effectively in Scotland at both ministerial and official levels*’. The response did not address specifically the challenge that the Committee made in regard to migration policy for rural areas, but did acknowledge the impact of UK Government policies on the Scottish Government’s devolved responsibilities and interests. As part of this, Scottish Ministers welcome Alister Jack’s commitment for the UK Government to engage effectively with Scottish Ministers and officials in areas where reserved policy impacts upon devolved interests, and we view this proposal as an example of the required engagement with the aim of benefitting Scotland’s communities.

3. Migration policy for remote and rural areas

The Scottish Government has already articulated the evidence base that illustrates the case for action to support remote and rural areas. This has been made in detail through a number of submissions to the UK Government and Migration Advisory Committee.

As a whole, in 2019, the share of working age population in Scotland's rural areas was 7 per cent below the Scottish average. These overall population profiles are important, however underneath national statistics, considerable local variation can be found, and in particular a range of acute sustainability challenges that exist in certain remote and rural communities in Scotland. These challenges arise through combinations of critical demographic and labour market shifts (patterns of general ageing, trends of out-migration, and vulnerabilities within particularly shallow labour markets).

The resultant long-term negative impacts of these shifts in affected smaller communities are clear, and according to the James Hutton Institute, carry "serious challenges for economic development".⁴ Fluctuations of skills and labour supply, or long-term inability to attract labour, can carry disproportionately large impacts for these smaller communities for the economy, public services, and for social/community viability. And, as recognised in the UK Government's Levelling Up White Paper, decline can often become a "self-reinforcing cycle", wherein places see "a depletion of skills, businesses, finance, and town centres, with communities and town centres declining for decades."⁵ For many of these smaller communities, their economies rely on sectors such as health and social care, hospitality and tourism, and fisheries – all of which often employ large proportion of migrants.

In recent years, experts have advised that the UK immigration system is not effective in supporting flows of migration to remote and very rural places. Existing evidence showed – even prior to Brexit – migrants themselves were already much less likely to move to remote and very rural areas.⁶ However, recent emerging analysis from the Migration Observatory / ReWAGE suggests the ending of freedom of movement is creating further barriers for rural and remote geographies where industries have long relied on EU free movement.⁷ The evidence illustrating these shifts, combined with new migration solutions emerging internationally, means that now represents an opportune moment for the trialling of a bespoke measure.

How a bespoke measure for remote and very rural communities is designed is now a question for policymakers and experts. Central to any design is the consideration of the interaction between government and the designated local area (or community) in which the intervention would operate. The Levelling Up White Paper indicated "local leaders have lacked the powers and accountabilities to design and deliver effective

⁴ [James Hutton Institute: Demographic change in the Sparsely Populated Areas of Scotland \(1991-2046\)](#)

⁵ [Levelling Up the United Kingdom - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

⁶ [UK immigration policy after leaving the EU: impacts on Scotland's economy, population and society - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#)

⁷ [The Migration Observatory - The end of free movement and the low-wage labour force in the UK](#)

policies for tackling local problems and supporting local people”.⁸ As a result, this proposal suggests a way in which communities and local leaders can be more involved in the process of using immigration to better support development and mitigate against the challenges these smaller economies face.

Migration is not the only solution for smaller communities facing such challenges. However, within a system of policy levers, immigration – and its potential to support growth, development, and resilience – is a crucial component which can be better configured to more closely align with the distinct and varied needs of smaller communities.

More broadly, the Scottish Government is working across portfolios through its Ministerial Population Taskforce to develop a range of initiatives to help tackle depopulation trends, and support communities in maintaining population sustainability across remote and very rural areas. This includes through the delivery of the [Housing to 2040 Strategy](#) and the development of the Remote, Rural and Island Housing Action Plan, the upcoming [National Planning Framework 4](#), the [National Islands Plan](#), and the development of an Addressing Depopulation Action Plan, among others initiatives. Any bespoke migration measure must be seen proportionally, as a supporting measure alongside wider policy delivery being undertaken across reserved and devolved levers – and not as a solution in and of itself.

4. Stakeholder engagement in Scotland

4.1 Working group

The Scottish Government has worked collaboratively throughout the development of this proposal, engaging with representatives from both local authorities and key industry and business sector partners. As set out in a [letter](#) in January from Mairi Gougeon MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands, to Kevin Foster MP, UK Minister for Safe and Legal Migration, Scottish Government officials convened a short life working group during Spring and Summer 2022. This proposal was developed iteratively over the course of these working group meetings, with members afforded the opportunity to feed in both verbally and in writing, to ensure the design of the pilot proposal was shaped as much as possible by their views. In doing so, the Scottish Government has sought to ensure that the needs of the most affected communities are able to be best met within this proposal.

The organisations who have participated in the development of this proposal document are as follows:

Working group membership	
Local authorities	Other partners
Argyll & Bute	Angus Growers
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar	Grampian Growers
Dumfries & Galloway	National Farmers Union Scotland
East Ayrshire	Scotland Food & Drink

⁸ [Levelling Up the United Kingdom - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

East Lothian	Scottish Islands Federation
Highland	Scottish Rural Action
Moray	Seafood Scotland
North Ayrshire	Highlands and Islands enterprise
Orkney	South of Scotland enterprise
Perth & Kinross	
Scottish Borders	
Shetland	

4.2 Policy lessons

The views of the working group focussed on the need for a place-based approach to migration issues, and the opportunity to give a greater degree of decision-making to local communities, who understand their own needs best. Every rural area, every island community – whether it be in Scotland or in the rest of the UK – is different, and evidence from international schemes being delivered suggests that place-based approaches which build in local agency can be effective in supporting local areas, whilst also being secure and subject to clear controls.

5. Proposed pilot: Establishing a Scottish Rural Community Immigration Pilot

5.1 Overview

A Scottish Rural Community Immigration Pilot would be a community-driven, employer-based migration route, operating within the UK immigration framework. The approach would spread the benefits of immigration to smaller remote and rural communities in Scotland, enabling migration – based upon genuine employment opportunities – which have the best fit for the economic needs and service delivery of that specific community (either in respect to acute shortage, potential for future growth/regeneration, or for maintaining crucial local services and ongoing viability of communities).

Participating employers within identified geographic areas referred to as the ‘community’ would be able to advertise for vacancies (using SRCIP bespoke entry criteria). Those employers would assess prospective candidates, before recommending chosen candidates to the Home Office for security checks and final decision. Once a decision was approved, the migrant would be sponsored by their employer. Through the course of their pre-arrival and arrival, community partners - including the employer along with local services and third sector partners - would offer a package of integrated settlement support services for newcomers. Participating employers, in collaboration with Scottish Government and UK Government organisations, would have responsibility for ensuring that terms and conditions of the scheme continued to be met. Newcomers would be required to adhere to clear conditions of employment within the community as set out across the duration of the pilot. These conditions would be gradually eased over a period of four years, with a route to permanent residency with no mobility restrictions upon completion.

Though this proposal sets out how the SRCIP would be delivered in designated community areas, it is **not** within the scope of this proposal to identify which communities they would be. It is anticipated that decisions about the geographic size and boundaries of a participating ‘community’ would need to be taken in a shared forum between the UK Government, Scottish Government, Migration Advisory Committee, and local authorities. However, this proposal makes an initial suggestion that participating ‘community’ areas could be drawn using ‘Travel to Work Area’ (TTWA) geographic units to ensure appropriate size and configuration. It is proposed that between 3 and 5 community areas would be established across remote and rural areas of Scotland for the pilot scheme, and the pilot would run for an initial period of 5 years.

The below sections illustrate how the scheme would be implemented through accountability structures to be established between the UK Government, Scottish Government, local authorities, employers, and settlement partners. They include:

Design and Implementation:

- Pilot scale and length
- Conditions of employment, rights, and residency

- Identification of designated Community Pilot Areas
- 'Strategic Skills Plan' and entry requirements
- Enrolment of sponsoring employers
- Employers advertise vacancies and assess candidates
- Candidates recommended by 'communities' to Home Office for final decision
- Resettlement support provided by community partners
- Monitoring and enforcement

Pathway Summaries (Stage by Stage):

- SRCIP migrant pathway
- SRCIP employer pathway

Evaluation of the scheme:

- How will the scheme be evaluated?

5.2 Proposal design and implementation

5.2.1 *Pilot scale and length*

It is anticipated the scheme should establish between **3 and 5 pilot communities** across remote and rural areas of Scotland, trialled over an initial period of 5 years. This will enable comparisons between different areas during an ongoing evaluation of the pilot.

Caps or quotas on migrants entering the scheme would need to be discussed during the design phase. However, it is suggested that an initial cap of **300 migrants per designated Community Pilot Area** would be permitted to enter via the scheme across the pilot's duration. Aspirational year on year targets for numbers of new migrants entering each CPA should be agreed during the establishment of the scheme. In practice, the pace of the scale up of intake should be gradual, would depend upon the needs of the community itself, and would be monitored as part of ongoing evaluation of the deliverability of the pilots. It is anticipated that much of the cap would be filled within the first 2 to 3 years of the pilot.

A minimum of 5 years is recommended as the duration for the SRCIP model to be implemented, monitored and evaluated, with restrictions relating to employment ending after four years. Following the 5 year period, a review could be undertaken to establish whether the pilot should be extended or be formalised into a wider program. Should the scheme be terminated after 5 years, suitable measures would need to be taken in respect to migrants who had not completed a four years of the scheme – and therefore had not yet achieved permanent residency.

5.2.2 *Conditions of employment, rights, and residency*

Under the SRCIP, participants would be required to adhere to clear conditions of employment at the beginning of the pilot, which would be gradually eased over the first 4 years. These include:

- First 12 months: requirement to stay in the relevant job based in designated Community Pilot Area (guaranteed by the employer).
- First 24 months: requirement to be employed by an employer enrolled in the partnership.
- First 4 years: requirement to be employed within the Community Pilot Area.
- After 4 years: permanent residency, and no restrictions on mobility within the UK.

While the scheme would impose restrictions relating to employment within the designated Community Pilot Area, there would be no absolute restrictions on residency within the CPA during the 4 years of its operation. To enforce residency requirements within designated area boundaries would not only be challenging to effectively monitor and enforce compliance (with risks of over-intrusion), but also may inadvertently prevent migrants from taking up employment in the area, for example due to a lack of available housing. However, as long-term settlement within local communities is a key purpose of the scheme, it would be critical that the partners - as part of the settlement support - were able to remove artificial barriers, such as rigid residency requirements, and enable migrants as much as possible to reside in the designated community area.

A range of rights would be in place for incoming migrants on the scheme, and the exact composition of this would need to be agreed upon its design. However, in line with the recommendations of the Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population, it is anticipated migrants would have an ability to be accompanied by family members as appropriate. The current immigration system adopts a differential approach on the ability of migrants to bring families with them depending on the visa route. The SRCIP would have at its heart a desire for people to come to rural communities and settle. We know that families, and particularly children, are important anchors in integrating people within a community; it will be therefore be important that newcomers would be able to bring their immediate family with them. This would be on the same basis as those who are able to bring immediate family with them through existing visa routes. We would also anticipate migrants having access to public funds after 12 months.⁹

Whilst all employment requirements for those enrolled on the scheme would lift after four years, it is envisaged the provision of settlement and integration support, including the immersion of families into communities via embedding within the school system, would minimise newcomers' desire to move once requirements are lifted.

5.2.3 *Identification of designated Community Pilot Areas*

This proposal does not seek to identify specific communities where a pilot would be implemented. Acknowledging that detailed conversations would need to be undertaken between the UK Government, Scottish Government and local authorities on potential areas, it provides a *methodology* with which the designated pilot

⁹ Evidence of previous patterns of mobility to remote and rural areas suggests that migrants often move on their own for the first one or two years, and are then joined by family once they have a stable income, suitable accommodation, and have worked out where their children might go to school.

community areas might be selected. The definitions of these areas would be of vital importance as they would be the foundation for where migrants on the scheme would be required both to work and supported to live.

Following analysis from the Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population, this proposal recommends using **Travel to Work Area (TTWA)** geographical units as the most suitable foundation to inform the geographic boundaries that would make up the designated pilot community areas.¹⁰ TTWAs identify commuter areas where the population would generally take up employment in a larger town or conurbation nearby, as well as acting as more general 'activity spaces' within which people are likely to carry out most of their day-to-day activities; attending school, accessing public services and leisure facilities, shopping, etc.¹¹ A list of Scotland's TTWAs which contain significant rural or remote geography is included in **Annex A**. However, this methodology could be applied more broadly across the wider UK, given that TTWAs are not unique to Scotland.¹²

As part of the proposal development process, other sizes of geographical units were considered as part of identifying the most appropriate designated area for a pilot to take place within. Amongst these, consideration was given to local authority boundaries (such as Highland Council), but given the scale of such an area, this was considered too broad geographically. Equally, data zone geographies were not considered suitable either, as due to their small size they would be unlikely to adequately capture where both employment and residential opportunities would likely be located.¹³

While TTWAs would be the foundation to identify suitable pilot areas, communities would need to be consulted prior to implementation of the pilot to review these TTWA boundaries specifically in relation to the community locality, to ensure conditions were practical, compatible with the local area, and that localised skills requirements are able to be practically met.

Therefore, in delivering the proposed pilot scheme, between 3 and 5 TTWAs would need to be selected to become designated pilot areas. At the point of identifying and confirming any said area, there would be a series of **tests** to confirm the willingness and suitability of candidate TTWA (*for example, Lochgilphead*), supported by its respective local authority (*in the above case, Argyll and Bute*) to deliver the pilot.

¹⁰ [Travel to work area analysis in Great Britain - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](https://ons.gov.uk/methods/geography/commuting-areas/travel-to-work-areas)

¹¹ TTWAs would provide a suitable starting geographic size and boundary within which a scheme could be built. TTWAs are not linked to local authority boundaries, as for example one local authority may contain more than one TTWA within it and TTWAs can span local authority boundaries. However, for the most part Scotland's remote and rural TTWAs do nest within local authority boundaries (e.g. TTWA of Broadford and Kyle of Lochalsh nests within Highland Council). As part of the designated area identification process, local authorities who are willing to host the scheme would therefore need to agree final boundaries with the Scottish Government and UK Government.

¹² Examples of communities in the Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot launched in 2019 across Canada include Claresholm (Alberta), Altona / Rhineland (Manitoba), and Moose Jaw (Saskatchewan). Many of these areas represent analogous geographies to the TTWAs in remote and rural parts of Scotland.

¹³ Data Zones are a key small area geographic unit nested within local authorities, typically containing between 500 and 1000 people. Data Zone geography covers the whole of Scotland and there are in excess of 6,000 Data Zones.

The suitability criteria for any given TTWA would be agreed formally by the scheme designers. For example, it would likely include criteria around **migration need, remote and rural geography, critical infrastructure** (e.g. available schools, suitable housing and transport), **employer assurances** (demonstrable vacancies meeting standards, willing employer sponsors, assurances regarding enforcement), and **evidence of potential for partnership working across public and third sector organisations for provision of high quality integrated settlement support**. Once it has been established that the TTWA meets the suitability criteria and was agreed by the relevant delivery partners, the TTWA would subsequently become a designated Community Pilot Area (CPA).

5.2.4 'Strategic Skills Plan' and entry requirements

In order to meet the specific needs of individual CPAs, it is anticipated that a Strategic Skills Plan would need to use a **bespoke series of entry requirements** specific to the scheme and the CPA – separate to the nationwide UK 'one size fits all' requirements within the current Points Based System of the Skilled Worker Route.¹⁴ Labour markets in sparsely populated areas are particularly vulnerable, as small increases or decreases in labour supply can have large effects on the viability of the local economy.

This Strategic Skills Plan would be designed with the population, economy and service delivery requirements of the local community in mind. It is anticipated the Plan would need to include bespoke relaxations in regard to salary and skill criteria to give the pilot the best possible chance of meeting the needs of the CPA.

Once a CPA is designated, an independent Strategic Skills Plans would be developed for each pilot community in collaboration with the Home Office, Scottish Government, Skills Development Scotland, the local authority, and relevant community stakeholders – including relevant employers, local development trusts, and community planning partnerships.

Crucially, the Strategic Skills Plan would enable local employers within the CPA to advertise vacancies based on local need – these would include **shortage occupations** as well as other occupations with **potential for local impact / growth**.

Shortage Occupations: Occupations/sectors which – as agreed between local authorities, relevant skills bodies and labour providers in the pilot area – have a disproportionate number of vacancies and/or are unable to sustain their activities due to staff shortages.

Local Impact Occupations: Defined as occupations within significant growth industries for the CPA – as agreed by the developers of the Strategic Skills Plan, and other critical 'resilience' occupations of particular significance for local service delivery.

¹⁴ The Migration Advisory Committee advised in regard to the methodological design of a scheme that 'trying to address these problems through regional SOLs is unlikely to be successful', and that 'something more bespoke for these areas is needed.'

Criteria would need to be defined so that the Strategic Skills Plan could focus sufficiently upon local need, and occupations would need to be defined using the Occupation Coding Tool, created by the Office for National Statistics (as currently used for the Skilled Worker Route).¹⁵

Alongside the skills and occupations that are within scope of the Strategic Skills Plan, candidates would also be required to meet additional entry requirements, as agreed by the UK Government and Scottish Government – including language, educational, and community specific requirements, whilst also demonstrating they have enough money to support a move to the community. Any additional community specific requirements would need to be compliant with relevant equalities legislation.

5.2.5 Enrolment of sponsoring employers

As an employer-based route, once a CPA has been agreed and a Strategic Skills Plan is in place, employers located in the pilot area would have the opportunity to apply to enrol onto the scheme.

Any employer enrolled on the scheme would need to meet requirements set by the Scottish Government and Home Office. These would include:

- aligning with the skills and priorities of the ‘Strategic Skills Plan’
- complying with all relevant employment legislation and the Scottish Government Fair Work framework¹⁶
- demonstrating they are an established employer within the area, and are able to provide at least 12 months full time employment after arrival
- having been in continuous, active operation under the same management for at least two years in the pilot area
- agreeing to support the migrant’s settlement into the community
- passing national security checks

As part of the enrolment on the scheme, employers would be required to undertake training to familiarise themselves with the SRCIP route and their role and responsibilities as sponsors throughout the scheme.

5.2.6 Local employers advertise vacancies online, assess, and recommend candidates

Once enrolled as eligible sponsors on the scheme, local employers based within the community would be able to list job vacancies on community website pages (individual webpages for each community) created for the scheme. These pages would likely be hosted and supported on the website for the upcoming Scottish Government Talent Attraction and Migration Service and UK Government immigration webpages.¹⁷

¹⁵ [ONS Occupation Coding Tool \(onsdigital.github.io\)](https://onsdigital.github.io)

¹⁶ [Fair work and pay - Employment support - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot)

¹⁷ The Scottish Government’s Talent Attraction and Migration Service is anticipated to be launched in 2023. The service will provide support to bring in skilled workers and help them to make Scotland their home.

Migrants would then be able to search for and apply to vacancies within a CPA. As part of its role in supporting the delivery of the pilots, the Scottish Government would provide direct support to local authorities in creating and maintaining these online vacancy boards.

Sponsoring employers would then be responsible for assessing applications from potential international migrants, carrying out (virtual) interviews, and making a decision on the best fit for the role. Once a preferred candidate is identified, the sponsoring employer would need to submit a 'community recommendation' (in partnership with the local authority and Scottish Government) on behalf of the incoming individual to the Home Office for approval.

As in the Canadian Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot, different communities may wish to add different 'community criteria' in the application process to ensure local relevancy and requirements are met as part of the recruitment process, before candidates are recommended to the Home Office. These assessment criteria may be designed to identify candidates who best fit the community's needs and prioritise those who intend to reside in the community.

5.2.7 Candidates recommended by 'communities' to Home Office for final decision

After the application is approved, applicants would then be given a 'recommendation' or agreement in principle of employment from the sponsoring employer and CPA to support their visa application to the Home Office. This would be done through a discrete route set up through UK Visas and Immigration. The process would still require migrants to complete all necessary background information, biometrics, and security vetting checks as part of entering the UK.

Once a candidate's visa application to the Home Office is approved, they would be issued their Scottish Rural Community Immigration Visa, granting them the right to live in the UK and work in the designated CPA.

5.2.8 Settlement support provided by community partners

Once the visa application is approved by the Home Office, the community – with support from the Scottish Government – would lead efforts to provide pre and post-arrival settlement support to newcomers arriving on the scheme. In the first instance, this support could take the form of a detailed information pack provided to applicants before their arrival in the pilot area, or bespoke support provided by the Scottish Government's forthcoming Talent Attraction and Migration Service.

One of the key features of the settlement support will be to advise migrants about suitable local accommodation options, either through the employer or by signposting to other accommodation providers. It is anticipated that employers, as well as local statutory partners within the pilot area, will themselves provide direct assistance to incoming migrants around finding suitable accommodation. As has been highlighted by stakeholders throughout the development of this proposal, housing supply is a critical issue in remote, rural and island areas of Scotland. This will need to be considered in tandem with a rural visa pilot scheme to ensure there is sufficient

supply of quality housing stock in designated community areas for incoming migrants.

The Scottish Government has committed to delivering 110,000 affordable homes by 2032, of which 70% will be for social rent, and 10% will be in remote, rural and island communities. In addition, Scottish Ministers are also developing a Remote, Rural and Islands Housing Action Plan (RRIHAP) which will support our broader rural housing ambitions. As part of this, Scottish Government will consider appropriate linkages with the proposed pilot scheme where possible.

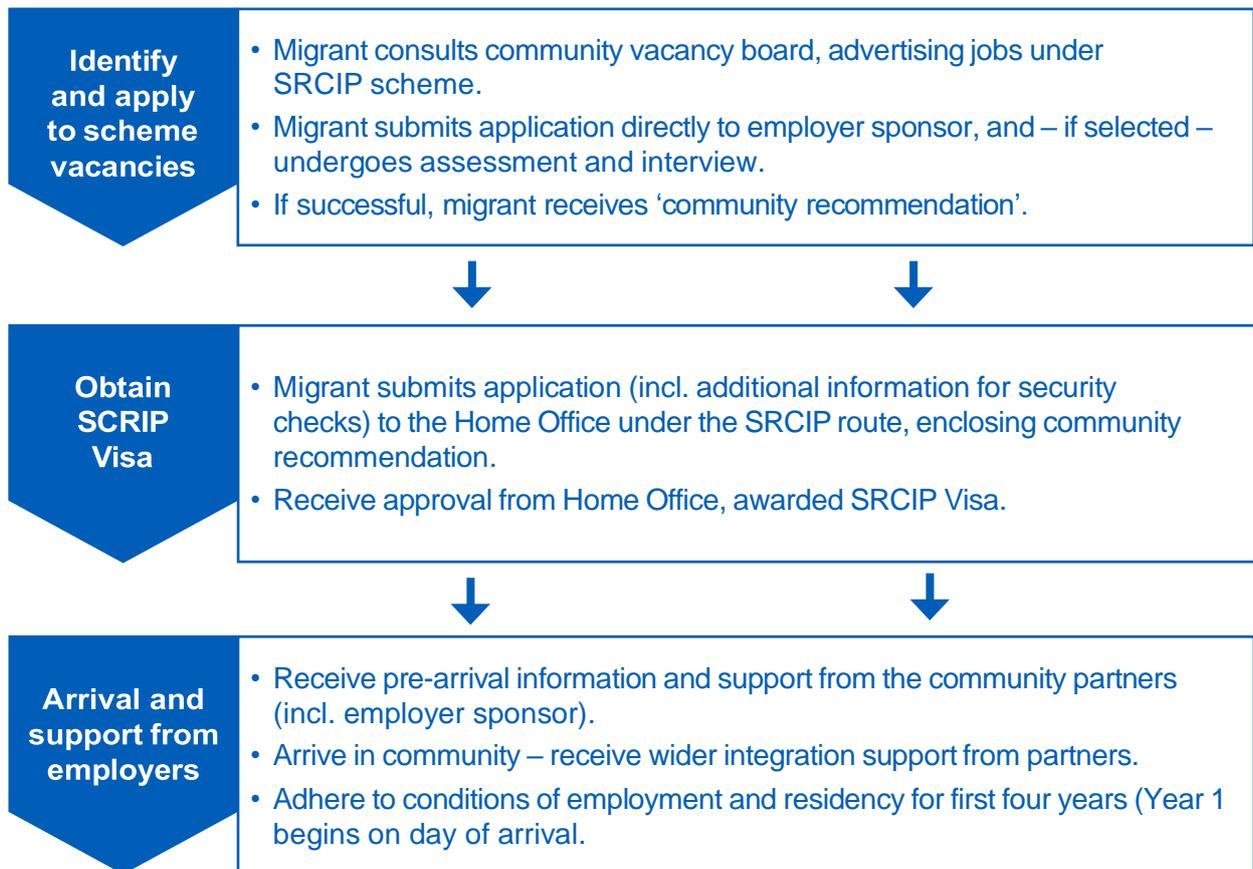
In addition to assistance to find suitable accommodation, the settlement support package may include support for language learning, as well as detailed information on registering for schools within the local community, accessing health and social care services, and what welfare entitlements migrants are entitled to. Information regarding local culture and leisure facilities could additionally be made available as part of facilitating wider community integration.

5.2.9 Monitoring and enforcement

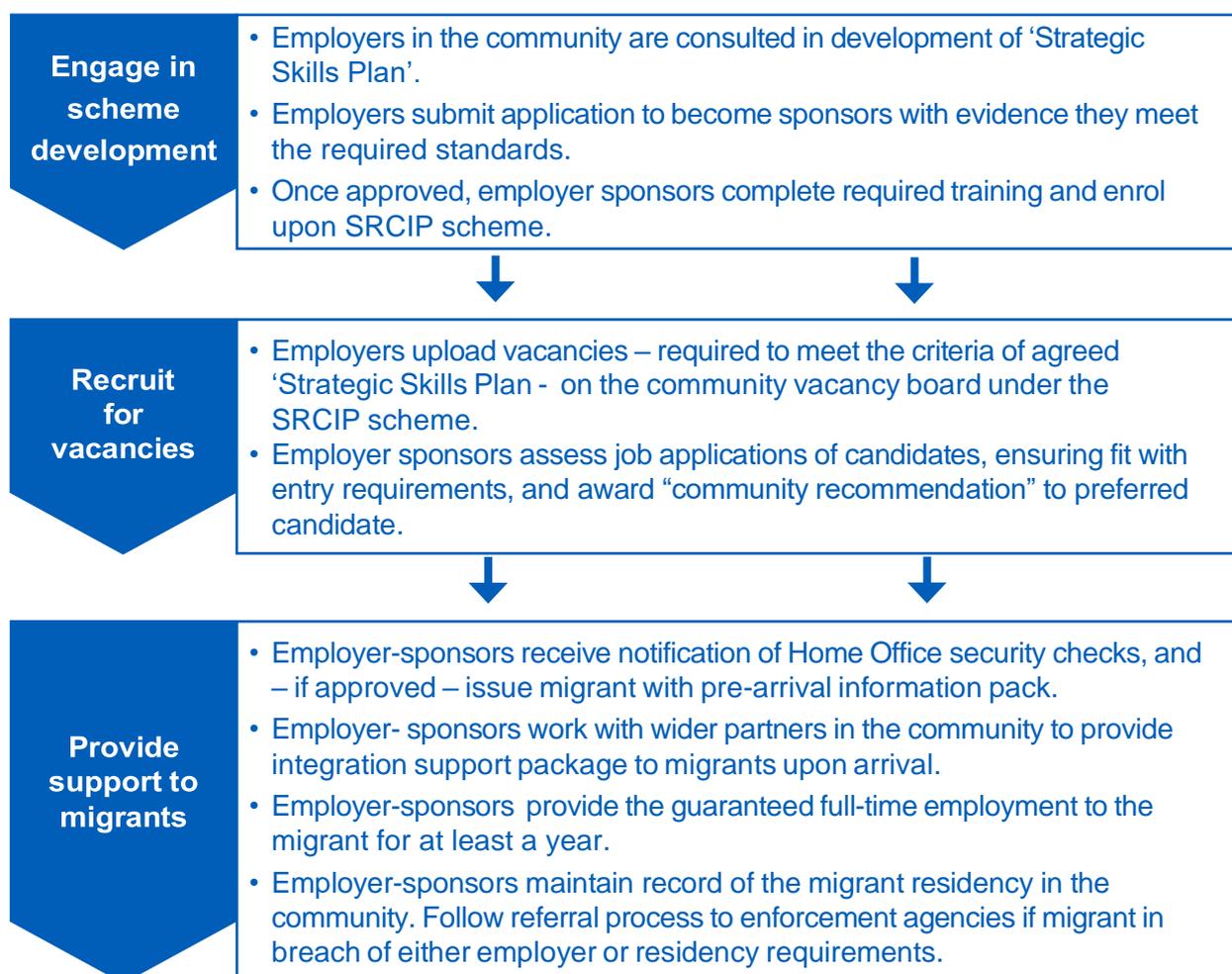
Enforcement is a part of all visa routes, and many visas currently in existence tie individuals to specific companies, universities, and roles. It is vital that such a place-based immigration route, such as the SRCIP, is monitored and enforced carefully to ensure the terms it sets for employers and migrants continue to be met throughout the 4 years of the scheme. These are particularly important in regard to employment conditions within the designated CPAs, as set out in section 5.2.3. Sponsoring employers within the community would have a vital role in monitoring and ensuring migrants continued to comply with these requirements. In addition, the Scottish Government and local authorities will work with the UK Government organisations to ensure relevant controls and enforcement procedures are met in relation to the scheme. It would be vital – given the likely relaxations of particular skills and salary criteria within the bespoke entry requirements in the SRCIP – that the scheme is not abused and is able to fulfil its objectives in terms of meeting the economic and service delivery needs of local communities.

5.3 Pathway summaries (stage by stage):

5.3.1 *SRCIP migrant pathway*



5.3.2 SRCIP employer pathway



5.4 Evaluation

The over-arching and long-term goal of the SRCIP would be to deliver improved outcomes at a community level in remote and rural areas facing depopulation and/or skills shortages, by attracting migrants with the skills and profile that would best address the social and economic challenges created by population decline.

While a pilot duration of 5 years has been proposed, evaluation would need to take place over a longer timeframe to ascertain whether the scheme is successful in retaining migrants in the long term. Additionally, it may be difficult to establish a direct link between the operation of a pilot scheme and said outcomes given the range of other policy initiatives aimed at supporting remote, rural and island populations. The EAG has therefore identified specific medium-term criteria upon which the success of a rural visa pilot could be evaluated:

- To what extent does the scheme attract migrants with the appropriate profile to contribute to the economic and social well-being of the local community in designated areas;

- To what extent does the pilot support and enable the integration and long-term settlement of migrants and their families in these designated areas;
- To what extent is the pilot successful in improving the number of working age migrants, children and young people in designated areas.

In addition to the first of these goals to evaluate how successful the pilot is in attracting migrants to the area, evaluators would obtain qualitative data from employers who had expressed an interest in the scheme but ultimately did not sign up, in order to ascertain the reasons for this and understand where improvements to the pilot could best be made.

Evaluation would be carried out iteratively throughout the duration of the pilot to capture process and implementation data during the pilot, both to gain insights into user experience and how well the process of pilot implementation is going and to track performance against the medium term indicators set out above. The EAG propose that entrants to the pilot scheme would enrol in a longitudinal survey upon arrival for the duration of their participation on the pilot, which would gather data on their residence, work, family status and other relevant indicators on an annual basis. Employers would also be required to enrol in a longitudinal survey to gain insights in to the process and implementation of the scheme from the perspective of those who need to fill specific skills shortages, while additional qualitative research could be undertaken in relation to the wider partnership of local organisations providing settlement support, to assess how efficiently this element of the pilot is delivered and whether the relevant services are sufficiently joined up in the process. Additional consideration would need to be given to how the scheme would be evaluated at the operational level, for example in relation to cost effectiveness and efficiency of implementation.

Data would then be gathered from each cohort of participants at the end of the 5 years – after all residency restrictions have been lifted – to ascertain whether or not they intend to stay in the pilot area, and their reasons for doing so. Analysis of this data will indicate whether the intended outcome of retaining working age migrants in remote and rural communities has been achieved, supported by evidence as to why the scheme has been effective. Extending the evaluation period for each cohort of pilot participants for 1-2 years after they have completed the scheme would provide further data as to whether the scheme has been successful in achieving longer-term retention of migrants within the CPA.

Given the partnership approach taken in the delivery of the scheme, it is proposed that the evaluation would benefit from being delivered collaboratively by all key delivery partners in order to ensure feasibility and agreed levels and processes for information sharing throughout the course of the evaluation, which would be carried out by the Scottish Government. At the end of the evaluation period, the Scottish Government along with input from local authorities and other relevant external partners would be responsible for producing a summative evaluation report, setting out how successful the scheme has been in achieving both the medium and long term intended outcomes, as well as any identified process or implementation issues and how these have been – or could be – mitigated.

6. Scottish Government involvement in pilot delivery

Detailed parameters with regards to the role of the Scottish Government would need to be formally agreed after the pilot was approved to be taken forward. At this stage it is proposed that this involvement would take the form of an 'interlocutor' or point of liaison to facilitate the operationalisation of the scheme between relevant partners. It is anticipated this may include:

- providing support with skills diagnostics for pilot areas to feed into the Strategic Skills Plan;
- facilitating engagement and information sharing between communities, local authorities and the UK Government;
- hosting the SRCIP online recruitment platforms on the Scottish Government Talent Attraction and Migration Service website to support recruitment;
- actively liaising with the Home Office on behalf of local partners to ensure local communities' needs are communicated;
- providing additional support to reduce the administrative burden on partners (including employer sponsors).

7. Baseline ask: Upcoming SOL review

Scottish Ministers are aware of the review of the UK Shortage Occupation List (SOL), to be carried out by the Migration Advisory Committee later in 2022. While we also welcome the establishment of a Devolved Nations team within the MAC Secretariat to engage with stakeholders about distinct migration challenges faced across the UK, given that the MAC has already identified the challenge and a potential solution we are committed to focusing on developing and delivering that solution. As part of the SOL review, we also look forward to inputting with regards to the distinct needs faced by Scotland's communities, including those in remote and rural areas.

Whilst the principal focus of this proposal rests on Scottish Ministers' call for a pilot focused on delivering the SRCIP, the Scottish Government remains open and flexible in regard to delivering additional migration solutions which can improve and maximise outcomes for remote and rural communities. The Scottish Government notes the opportunity, with the upcoming review of the SOL led by the MAC, to make adjustments to better meet the needs of remote and rural areas in Scotland. The Expert Advisory Group's report set out a variety of ways in which adjustments for remote and rural communities could be delivered through changes to the SOL and the Skilled Worker Route. It could include establishing a specific Remote and Rural SOL – with a range of relaxations of certain entry criteria – such as salary, along with adding additional points based criteria for jobs in specific designated geographies. This would require only modest adjustments to current UK immigration rules – which may be operationally quicker to implement.

Though such changes would be unlikely to enable communities to tailor their approach to migration based upon local need, it would likely make a difference in enabling employers in select areas to recruit a greater number of workers across a wider spectrum of skills, salaries and occupations.

8. Conclusion

Both this proposal and baseline ask have been designed to enable the current immigration system to better work for communities, meet their localised needs, and allow them in turn to flourish. It illustrates why a bespoke intervention for smaller communities is necessary, along with a series of operational suggestions for how it could be achieved. Throughout the development of this proposal, these practical suggestions have been discussed with, and met with positive feedback from, stakeholders. Therefore, the Scottish Government makes the following asks of the UK Government:

- To commit to **implementing a Scottish Rural Community Immigration Pilot**, in collaboration with Scottish Government and partners, with a view to launching the pilot in 2023
- To create a **joint UK Government-Scottish Government forum** (with representation from both the Migration Advisory Committee, the Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population, and local delivery partners), to support the design, implementation, and oversight of the SRCIP

In addition, we ask the UK Government to:

- To commit to the baseline ask to consider an adjustment to the existing Scottish Shortage Occupation List to better represent the needs of remote and rural areas in Scotland
- To commit to establish an agreed mechanism involving the MAC, Scottish Government and local delivery partners to effectively and efficiently incorporate the needs and requirements of remote and rural areas into the shortage occupation list, and to monitor and evaluate changes to ensure desired impact for communities is realised.

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Acronyms

CPA – Community Pilot Area

EAG – Expert Advisory Group on Migration and Population

MAC – Migration Advisory Committee

MP – Member of Parliament

MSP – Member of Scottish Parliament

SRCIP – Scottish Rural Community Integration Pilot

SG – Scottish Government

SOL – Shortage Occupation List

TTWA – Travel to Work Area

Annex A: List of Scotland's Travel To Work Areas (TTWAs) with a significant rural component

Below is a list of Scotland's Travel to Work Areas with a significant rural component, from which designated community pilot areas could be identified.

Relationship to local authority classification

Classification A: Nested within local authority, Classification B: Entire local authority, and Classification C: Split across 2 or more local authorities.

TTWA name	Local authority	Relationship to the Local Authority
Alness and Invergordon	Highlands	A
Aviemore and Grantown-on-Spey	Highland	A
Ayr	North Ayrshire, East Ayrshire, South Ayrshire	C
Broadford and Kyle of Lochalsh	Highland	A
Campbeltown	Argyll and Bute	A
Dalbeattie and Castle Douglas	Dumfries and Galloway	A
Dumbarton and Helensburgh	Argyll and Bute	A
Dumfries	Dumfries and Galloway	A
Dunoon and Rothesay	Argyll and Bute	A
Elgin	Moray	A
Fort William	Highlands	A
Fraserburgh	Aberdeenshire	A
Galashiels and Peebles	Scottish Borders	A
Girvan	South Ayrshire	A
Golspie and Brora	Highland	A
Greenock	Inverclyde	A
Hawick and Kelso	Scottish Borders	A
Lochgilthead	Argyll and Bute	A
Mull and Islay	Argyll and Bute	A
Newton Stewart	Dumfries and Galloway	A
Oban	Argyll and Bute	A
Orkney Islands	Orkney Islands	B
Peterhead	Aberdeenshire	A
Pitlochry and Aberfeldy	Perthshire	A
Portree	Highland	A
Shetland Islands	Shetland islands	B
St Andrews and Cupar	Fife	A
Stranraer	Dumfries and Galloway	A
Thurso	Highland	A
Turriff and Banff	Aberdeenshire	A
Ullapool	Highland	A
Western Isles	Comhairle nan Eilean Siar	B
Wick	Highland	A



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