

# SCOTLAND ... FUTURES

## VOICES FROM SCOTLAND

November 2025



Scottish Land Commission  
Coimisean Fearainn na h-Alba



## What we asked, what we heard

**ScotLand Futures is a new initiative from the Scottish Land Commission, asking what it would mean to complete Scotland's land reform journey, and how doing so could help deliver national ambitions for a fairer, greener and more prosperous country.**

Land, its ownership, use, and value, has always been central to Scotland's identity, economy and communities. Over the past 25 years we have seen major steps forward in legislation, policy and practice. But the journey is not complete, and many of the underlying challenges remain. Now is the time to consider again the outcomes we want from land reform, and the kind of future those outcomes could create.

This collection brings together personal perspectives from across Scotland: community leaders, landowners and managers, campaigners, researchers, young people and practitioners. Each contribution reflects on the central question: what would completing Scotland's land reform journey look like, and what benefits would it bring?

Alongside these contributions, we also launched a ScotLand Futures public survey, inviting people across Scotland to share their views on the future of land reform. The findings, published alongside this collection, show the breadth of opinion and experience across the country, and help to place these personal reflections within a much wider national conversation.

These perspectives don't claim a single answer; they invite collaboration, reflect a range of views, and focus on outcomes for people and nature. Several contributions are also available as short video reflections on our YouTube channel.

We hope this collection sparks discussion, inspires action, and helps shape the future of Scotland's land.

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## Ailsa Raeburn

**Ailsa is Chair of the Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust, former Chair of Community Land Scotland, and serves on the boards of Highlands and Islands Enterprise and Crown Estate Scotland. A former Chartered Surveyor, she has extensive experience in property development, regeneration and community land ownership, including leading the Scottish Land Fund at HIE.**



Scotland's land reform journey is far from over. After over 20 years of debate and legislation, it should surely be much further on than where it is now.

As Chair of Community Land Scotland, I am clear that community ownership is one of the most impactful outcomes of Scotland's land reform journey, but also clear that it should not be the only one. Scotland, with its long history of creativity and innovation in the use of all of its resources, be that land, sea, human, natural capital or financial, should be making much more progress than it is now. As a society and nation, we should all be focussed on making the assets of Scotland work much much better for its people and its nature.

For too long we have seen land, the basis of so much power and wealth in our country, hoarded by a very few individuals. The impact this has had on the depopulation of Scotland's rural communities and on our nature and biodiversity, placing us so low in the world rankings, can no longer be denied. For a long time, we all thought that so few having control of so much was normal and unchangeable. The very fabric of society and our economy would collapse should those in control be asked politely to share just a bit of their land-based wealth!

However, what Scotland's land reform journey has done is to give us all clear evidence that this does not in fact happen. The modern world does not collapse. Indeed, land reform results in better outcomes for more people. On Gigha, community ownership enables the community to build their own houses to both retain their young people and ensure their elderly have safe places to live. On Lewis, the community led Point and Sandwick wind farm returns 34 times more income to local people than equivalent private developments. In Viewpark in Lanarkshire, locals saved an important historic green space from being subsumed into more industrial development and are now protecting a critical local nature reserve and creating opportunities for young people to play and explore.

These are all examples of people coming together, on an equal footing, and working together to create more than the sum of the parts for their local communities. Giving people power through owning and controlling the local land and buildings that are important to that community creates a wonderful alchemy that builds and builds. It also allows us to start thinking what a rewired and restructured economy and society could look like. Where wealth and opportunity is shared much more fairly. Where young people have access to housing and jobs in the areas they grew up. Where the profits from land ownership are shared more fairly and used to build stronger local communities, not offshored to faceless corporations or shareholders. Where everyone knows who owns what locally. Where you can only claim subsidies and grants paid for by the Scottish taxpayer if you actually pay taxes in Scotland. Where local people make decisions in an open and democratic way about what happens to land and buildings, the use of which have a significant impact upon them and their communities. And where the total amount of land and assets that any one person or corporation can own, is limited, to make sure there is enough for everyone who needs it. Not just for ownership by communities but for people wanting to buy their first home, small businesses wanting to expand in their local area and create stronger local economies, new entrant farmers or crofters looking for their first start or housing associations wanting to rebuild the supply of affordable houses across all of Scotland. Delivering on these ambitions will demonstrate how land reform has delivered for our country.

Scotland's land reform journey so far has indeed been innovative and groundbreaking but also timid, with its impacts only piecemeal and limited. There is so much further we need to go on this journey to make sure Scotland works much better for its people and nature.



## Alastair McIntosh

**Alastair McIntosh is an academic and activist. A fellow of the Centre for Human Ecology and honorary professor at Glasgow University, he was a founding trustee with Eigg's land trust and is the author of *Soil and Soul*.**



I was one of the leaders of the Isle of Eigg Trust in the early days, back in 1991, when we founded the trust.

There seemed little hope of land reform, but by 1997 the community had raised £1.6 million, and the rest is history.

What difference does it make now that Scotland has some 500 community land trusts, representing very nearly 3% of the land area?

I think it makes a difference in four ways.

One is on housing. A huge difference when young people no longer have to pay extortionate costs just for a housing plot on which to build their home and live in the community to which they perhaps belong.

Secondly, productivity in so many ways. Whether it's agriculture productivity, productivity having land for gardens and allotments, productivity in small business enterprises, ecotourism, high technology, all kinds of developments that are taking place in these communities.

Thirdly, land reform gives communities access to the energy of their own place, whether it's water, wind or solar. But electrical energy is not the only kind, because the most important.

And fourthly, is human empowerment. Land reform gives people a sense of can-do. It enables people to understand what community is, to recognise and process conflict within it, and to move together on the basis of shared togetherness, on what it is that gives life, because that's what really matters. That's what community is about.



Alastair shared his contribution as a video, which you can watch on our YouTube channel.



## The Forge

A poem by Alastair McIntosh

What is the point of land reform  
so that remote communities  
can be preserved  
as threatened cultures  
at a massive social cost  
to the nation as a whole  
of teachers, doctors, police and ferry services  
when most of those raised native from such soil

are now so few and only have two kids  
who've mostly moved elsewhere to stay  
their burns and braes seductive now  
to ever-higher bidders from away  
with little thought or want for joining in  
God's rhythm of the crofters' passing day ...  
and most who 'ever mattered' here  
are dead or spread or going gone  
the beauty of a people's life  
strewn like cemetery flowers  
and even markings on the land  
are fossils fading down the years  
with only gales and rain to carve  
a soaring waterfall, of tears?

Either we turn our faces to the wall  
burn out, sell out  
or jumping from the bridge  
choose at least the honest statement of  
heartbreak hotel's check-out ...  
or else we muscle down  
roll up our sleeves  
and dig from where we stand  
to shovel ruddied muddied ores of melded human sand  
and stoke the glowing hearth anew to smelt and skim and pour  
a precious shimmering stream refined by sense of place and ancient lore  
(like hodden lead ripped off in time from round the ruin's sill  
and fired until it crumbles to a freshened mercurial rill)  
then on the ringing anvil to a meteor shower of sparks  
we strike the tempering ingot, dreaming new and old hallmarks  
... and hammer out the beauty, of the braided crofting way ...  
which is our greatest export, to this world that's gone astray...  
and that's the point of land reform  
in the politics  
of today.

## Andrew Howard

**Andrew Howard is Managing Director of Moray Estates and has led the Tornagrain town project since its inception in 2002. Andrew is responsible for the planning, infrastructure, legal matters, and technical agreements of the development, ensuring the long-term vision and delivery of the new town are realised.**



Like many land managers I have grown weary of the never-ending land reform debate together with constant legislative changes, additional bureaucracy and barriers to the delivery of national growth in the widest sense. This is not because I don't believe that the way in which land is used, managed or even owned should remain static but because the myopic focus on land and who owns it has diverted much needed attention away from the delivery of vital public policy objectives like economic growth, additional housing and the green transition to name but three. The focus has all been on process and "who" not on outputs.

"Ah but", land reform campaigners would say we need land reform to achieve all these things and if it's not worked in the last 25 years then it's because we haven't been radical enough. Well, I disagree. If anything, the land reform "journey" to date has reduced Scotland's capacity to deliver key objectives, not improved it.

Before addressing why, let me be clear the objectives of transparency in who owns land, it's responsible management and use, and appropriate engagement with communities about on-going activities and change, are all positive objectives and about which much progress has been made in the devolution era. And as I said above change is a constant theme of all facets of society and economy and land use and ownership is no different. Anyone that tells you nothing has changed is simply not looking at the facts.

To create maximum opportunities for the delivery of public policy objectives it is the job of government to put in place a facilitative framework to enable the private sector, and it is largely the private sector which is there to deliver, to use it's time and resource as efficiently as possible to create those outputs. Economic growth, more housing and the green transition, to use those three examples, are not created by strategy documents, endless consultation, bureaucratic over-reach and a whole gamut of terminology like "just transitions", "community wealth building" and "land governance" which aren't used outside the public sector. Those objectives will be created

through an economy with proportionate and efficient regulation; a tax system which incentivises employment and wealth generation and one with a stable and well understood legal framework which encourages long term investments. By way of examples of how easy it is to get things wrong. At the start of the devolved era the amount of let land in Scotland was the same as it was in England and provided the best route into farming for new entrants notwithstanding the other barriers to entry. Where has successive Land Reform legislation got us? A sector in steep decline and probably terminally damaged and 30% smaller than in England. Why, because all the focus was on rights and more legislation instead of what would create the output desired – more let land.

The private rented sector has been treated similarly. A combination of additional taxes, added “rights”, more bureaucracy, rent controls and as with farm tenancies unhelpful political rhetoric has resulted in a sector in decline, thousands of build to rent contracts cancelled and Scotland considered “uninvestible” at present.

Scotland is at grave risk of doing something similar to the green transition. Although it has an admirable record on renewable energy generation consents and woodland creation, moves to mandate significant contributions to communities from natural capital schemes, regardless of any mitigation need, threaten to limit interest in such schemes by adding costs and complexity to projects where the path to economic return is often far more uncertain than policy makers appreciate. If you want to look for positive examples of what I mean the renewable energy sector and forestry are good ones. In each the Scottish Government has maintained a stable and facilitative approach to both sectors, unlike elsewhere in the UK, and the result has been vastly more investment in Scotland in those sectors than elsewhere. It's not complicated – make investors feel welcome and provide a stable facilitative environment for decision making and along comes the investment.

What does this all mean for future land reform legislation and policy development. It's straightforward really. Close the Scottish Land Commission, propose no further bills which are just about ownership and bashing it and divert the financial resources and focus absorbed by land reform and use it on something productive like reforming the planning process, supporting local place plans, creating a framework for housing that recognises the need for private investment and create a political and legal atmosphere where investors feel that a long term investment decision made in Scotland isn't either a politically or legally risky one. That means less student agitprop type political discourse (I mean politicians not the Land Commission!) which damages confidence and investment together with less knee jerk political actions such as dramatic rent control measures with no warning which then damage sectors for years. It's a forlorn hope I know but one can but dream.

## Catriona Mallows

**Catriona Mallows is a Research Associate at the University of the Highlands and Islands with a longstanding interest in rural livelihoods, community development, and land justice.**

Land is central to everything. It's not just what exists above the ground – it's everything in between. It's soil, links to the past, organic matter. It's contemporary – it's what we can build houses on, how we grow food, how we sequester carbon and support wildlife. And it's the future, tied to solutions for climate and biodiversity, restoration, human rights, equity, and democratic decision-making.

I grew up in Cromarty, a small town on the north-east coast of Scotland. It is at the end of a peninsula, surrounded by the sea, agricultural land, and native and planted forestry. The town – a former royal Burgh – has a long history of trading with the world in hemp and herring, and latterly with oil rig fabrication and renewable energy. It has a large landowner, with the history of the estate dating back centuries.

My mum's family go back generations there but were cleared from crofts in Strathcarron. My childhood home was built by Mr Barkly, a businessman who received one of the biggest financial payouts with the abolishment of the slave trade in 1833. Every morning on my way to school, I would look out onto a large stone structure, constructed to commemorate those cleared from the land and moved on to the Americas. Cromarty is a place bound up in local complexities but tied into processes of capitalism and colonialism.

I felt the pressures – and still do – of rural depopulation, the housing crisis, ecological degradation, deforestation, the loss of culture, and dwindling local democracy.

When I was 23, I moved to Canada for postgraduate study. It was there that my understanding of land deepened. I learnt about the limited rights Indigenous communities have over their traditional land and waterways, the impact of pipelines through nations' territories, and how my ancestors had been part of these colonial systems. I learnt how deeply connected Scotland's land struggles are to struggles elsewhere.

The question of land reform must be situated in this wider context. Facts that only 421 landowners own 50% of Scotland's private rural land, that land prices are inflated, and that young people can't access land are all related. It's a product of a long history and it's a long road to correct that.



We are still grappling with how we govern, own and tax land. Although there have been pivotal movements with land reform – crofting, land leagues, community buyouts, legislation, we have been tinkering on the edges of change. And all of this does matter, and to everyone. Who owns land matters. How people manage land matters. How much people own matters. I'm not sure if 'completed' land reform is possible, or if it is even the right goal, but there are a few things I would like to see. Socially, a reform of our land might involve more people living in rural and island Scotland. Although 98% of the landmass is rural, most of the population live in its urban areas; many people's connection with the land is broken. Even in rural communities, few people actively manage or have a say in its management. Land reform should mean that 'absenteeism' isn't a word we throw around off the cuff.

Economically, it could mean lower land prices, higher taxes on large landholdings and more equitable wealth distribution. It should mean land is a public good and not simply a commodity.

Environmentally, it means better deer management and more biodiversity. It means working with those who work the land – stalkers, farmers, people restoring peatlands. It means more people in the hills, on rivers, lochs, and the shoreline.

Practically, it means more individuals owning more land and more communities having a stake, say, and agency in the land around them. It means different forms of ownership. It means more support for crofting. It means more housing. It means better policy. It means land is owned and used based on local and national needs, with attention to global justice. It means land reparations. It means urban and rural communities. It means grappling with carbon markets and resisting things which just aren't good for people or nature. It means assessing who is buying up land, considering reducing the size of large estates, and directly tackling the concentration of ownership. As a researcher, a reform of our land also means far better data: we should know who owns and manages the land. And culturally, a reform of our land means more Gaelic and arts and music connected to the land. A reform of land in my hometown might mean acknowledging the town's complicated history and allowing residents a say in its future. It would mean more housing, more allotments, more opportunities for young people, more landownership structures, and less fraught discussions on board the community rowing boat as to where to build a community boathouse!

All of this asks much of ourselves, and our land, but it is the key to a more just, equitable and resilient future.



Catriona shared her contribution as a video, which you can watch on our YouTube channel.



## Col Gordon

**Col Gordon is a farmer based at his family's farm, Inchindown, in the Gàidhealtachd, where he grows heritage grains and raises livestock. He co-produced the "Landed" podcast exploring the past, present and future of the family farm model through the lens of colonialism.**



If we're serious about completing land reform in Scotland, we need to ask a deeper question: What does or could it mean to belong to land, not just own it?

In Gàidhlig, a speaker might, for instance, say "I belong to Skye." Not "I'm from" but "I belong". In Gàidhlig this would be "Buinidh mi do", literally "I belong to." That root word "buinteanais" – belonging – carries the weight of relationship, even blood-relative or blood-relation. It speaks to an older way of being – one rooted in entanglement with place, not separation from or domination over.

So, I want to propose one bold step we could take towards this reorientation – one legal innovation that could help complete this journey.

This way of thinking is ancient but it's not abstract. Take the word Tuath – it means both a territory and the people of that territory. There was no division. The people were the place, and the place was its people. To harm one was to harm the other. This understanding endured for centuries. During the Land Agitations of the 1880's people in the Gàidhealtachd didn't call themselves crofters, but either Gàidheals or the tuath. Their rallying cry "Is treasa tuath na tighearna" meant "the people are mightier than a lord" but it also implicitly carried the notion that the territory was too.

What had changed, what had caused such outrage, was the fact the chiefs had moved from being their leaders entangled in relationship with the land and their people, to owners of the land and above the people. This shift was seen not just as betrayal but as cosmic disorder. It violated a very old belief, first written down in 7th century Irish Brehon laws, called Fir Flathemon, or justice of the ruler. It was believed that a leader was in a sacred marriage to the land. The people, through their leader, were literally married to the territory.

If the land suffered, through for instance famine or floods, it was a sign the relationship – the marriage – had broken down, and the leader had failed in their duties. From this type of sacred ecology comes the idea of dùthchas – the right and the responsibility to care for the place you belong

to. So, here's the thing: The concept of ownership doesn't exist in traditional Gàidhealach thought. There isn't a clean, direct way to express ownership in the language.

So, this idea – that land can be owned outright, turned into property, was and still is, not only foreign, it's in direct contradiction to how Gàidheals understood and still understand themselves and the world.

Yet, for at least 400 years, these relational ways of being have been systematically dismantled – often through legal instruments and policies that were explicitly described as colonial. Today, those living in the Gàidhealtachd are not just increasingly disconnected from these traditions. They're surviving in the ruins of what was taken.

I believe if we're serious about confronting the climate crisis, the biodiversity crisis, the crisis of ever-growing social inequity, the crisis of lack of meaning and belonging, we must find ways to revive and reimagine these suppressed modes of relation.

Across the world, Indigenous peoples – though facing immense pressure – continue to be the ones who steward 80% of global biodiversity. This is not coincidence. It's because of these types of relational worldviews that time and time again are present amongst indigenous peoples.

And in the last decade, we've seen something remarkable happen – A new legal tool emerges from this type of worldview: Environmental personhood. National parks in New Zealand, rivers in Canada and India, even a lagoon in Spain, across the globe parts of the natural world are being granted legal personhood. They are no longer owned by anyone. They are recognised as living beings with their own rights and protections. People don't possess them but steward and tend them.

These aren't just interesting legal tools. They are acts of repair; remembering; of resistance.

This, to me, could be a game changer if granted in Scotland and into Scots Law. Not just because it could help break up the concentration of landownership (although it may have potential here). But more profoundly, to embed key Gàidhealach ways of being into our legal system. To move beyond ownership and into guardianship. To create space for the re-emergence of suppressed relational ways of being and interacting. And to root land reform not only in fairness but in repair.

So, if the question is: what would a complete land reform look like? To me it would look like Right Relationship.

A legal system not built on dominion but built to enable belonging. Not a return to a long gone past, but a return to relation. The language is already here. The task now is to re-learn to live by it.

## David McGilp

**David McGilp is the Member of the Scottish Youth Parliament for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley. As convenor of the Transport, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, he has gained valuable insight into land, environmental issues, and the changes young people want to see.**



As a young person raised in the countryside, now living in the city, I have been able to experience both a rural and urban lifestyle. As a result, land reform is an issue very close to my heart and the hearts of my constituents through my role as MSYP for Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley. While significant progress has been made, we must work together, regardless of age, background or location to forge a path forward in the name of land reform.

Following the Highland clearances of the 18th and 19th centuries, the way land ownership has been so concentrated among such an exclusive group of individuals, families and corporations remains a fundamental challenge to achieving true land equality in Scotland. In order to push for real reform, the movement must unite to empower communities by enshrining their right to communal land in law. The Land Reform Act (2016) came a long way in promoting this right but more needs to be done. For a start, the complicated system that exists currently to allow communities to register interest in land must be simplified and information made more widely





available so as the wider community become aware of their rights and the options available to them.

Land rights do not only extend to communities, however. Agriculture is a cornerstone of the Scottish economy, so the future of land reform in Scotland would look to promote the rights of small farmers, not just the large corporations who own such a large share of Scottish farmland, with 3.2 million hectares of Scottish land being owned by just 433 people and companies according to former MSP Andy Wightman. While some corporations or families may argue they act as environmental protectors, or that ultimately their ownership benefits those who live on or work the land, I am a firm believer that there should be more support and financial assistance in place to allow communities and small farmers to have more say over their land.

Among other issues faced by young people, skyrocketing rent rates is something that affects or will soon affect a number of my constituents. Which is why it is an issue I am dedicated to solving. There is such an imbalance of private land ownership that we risk creating a monopoly where a few businesses own the majority of developments both agricultural and for housing, meaning they may be able to demand high rates of rent with no competition. In my opinion, rent controls go hand in hand with land reform – we must regulate to create and monitor competition and lower the rates of rent for the people of Scotland.

Overall, the fight for land reform has been a long one but it is not over yet. Significant progress has been made but we must continue to work together, cross-party, cross-organisation and cross-community to demand better rights for all, in the name of Scottish land – we must find common-ground.

## Dr Deborah Long

Dr Deborah Long is Chief Officer at Scottish Environment LINK and a Commissioner on the Just Transition Commission. She has a long history of working on environmental issues, with previous roles at Plantlife Scotland and the GROW Observatory. She has held several leadership positions within LINK, focusing on wildlife and land policy.



Scotland's land is steeped in history.

Our history has sculpted our landscape by removing both people and trees over time. Our bare landscapes are, to some eyes, beautiful and wild. To others, they are neither of those things. But however we see Scotland's history, it is clear that our future must be different.

To meet the challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss, how we use our land is fundamental. Right now, it is not fair for humans, or nature.

Rural land ownership in Scotland is today highly concentrated (**who owns Scotland figures**): community owned land and environmental charity owned land accounts for less than 3% each and publicly owned land accounts for just less than 12%. Of the remaining 83%, 50% of it is owned by 433 private rural land owners. This means that local communities often do not have the wherewithal or power to influence what happens on their doorstep. The feelings of being overlooked, unimportant and inconsequential are feeding into lively discussions right across Scotland about what should happen where and who should have the final say. This is fundamental to Scotland's Just Transition, and an example can be found **here**, in Dumfries and Galloway.

Human communities have little say but natural communities of species and habitats – nature – have even less. There is a real crisis in Scotland in our biodiversity – with **Scotland being one of the most nature depleted countries in the world**. But plants and animals do not speak out as their homes are destroyed, their habitats fragmented and changed beyond a state that meets their needs.

This is what needs to change. We need to work towards a future where local communities, both human and natural, influence what happens to and in the places they live.

So, what might this look like?

I will not detail here the **Just Transition options** Scotland has in front of us to empower local communities. But they must have much more influence and

share of not just the natural benefits where they live but the economic and social benefits that come alongside that too.

Instead I will focus on the natural communities, the communities without a voice and whose habitats are today so fragmented and degraded that **1 in 9 species in Scotland is now at risk of extinction**. How we use our land in the future has a powerful impact on that.

For a start, monocultural use of land is driving those declines. Diversity is a strength. Habitat diversity, habitat mosaics, connections between habitats – nature networks, are what we need if our natural communities are to thrive. This means that when land use is planned and executed, there must always be room for nature: whether that is a series of spaces left for nature, hedgerows to link pieces of woodland, bigger woodlands with open canopies bleeding into grasslands and heathlands, rivers with meandering routes and tree and shrub lined banks. The more diversity we require to be planned into, and delivered by, our land use, the more nature will repay. Whether that is in ecosystems able to retain flood waters, filter rainwater into clean water, healthy soils able to produce healthy food without the need for fertilisers or pesticides, or whether just for the sheer joy of hearing bird song and seeing multi coloured carpets of flowers: introducing diversity back into our landscape makes us more resilient into the future. It also ensures that future generations have the chance to enjoy what we enjoy.

Scotland's future is about creating a legacy that is worth having where land is used for the many and not the few, both humans and nature. This is a just land use system that creates homes for wildlife, provides the ecosystem services we need and builds joyful places for us to be.

Getting there is not easy but having this clear vision for Scotland's people to buy into is fundamental. Who doesn't want to see woodland spangled with flowers and ringing with bird song? Who doesn't want to see healthy grasslands, buzzing with life and changing kaleidoscopically through the seasons?

To get there we need to protect responsible access, to support farmers and land managers to do more for nature, to require businesses in forestry to build nature into their plans, to protect what's left and help it expand and to enable communities to have a say in what happens on their doorsteps through effective and fundamental land reform. We can only do this together, with coordinated land policy able to deliver our vision.

## Dee Ward

**Dee Ward owns and manages Rottal Estate, a Wildlife Estates–accredited property in the Angus Glens. It is a mixed upland estate focused on biodiversity, traditional land uses, and environmental restoration. Dee is also Chair of Scottish Land & Estates and has a background in business.**



I own Rottal Estate in the Angus Glens. It's about 3,000 hectares and goes from the River South Esk at the bottom of the valley up to the top of the hills.

The key element to me about land reform is what is it trying to achieve.

I'm going to focus really on the access to land bit because by access I don't mean just being able to walk across land. I mean forming partnerships with people to allow, for example, new entrants to farming. I think some of the problems we've had is we've had a landlord and tenant agreement and that really creates an adversarial situation.

What I've done on Rottal Estate is I've tried to build partnerships where, for example, Nikki and James, who run my cattle, but don't have land, but they have expertise in cattle and we work together in partnership.

Nikki and James Yoxall work in partnership with Dee Ward on the Rottal Estate.

I'm Nikki Yoxall and my husband James and I recently moved here to start working in partnership with Dee Ward. We are calving 50 this year. That's a mix of cattle that we've brought here, but also there were some existing Highland Cattle. There's a sheep flock on the estate as well, which are currently under our management too. But for us, it was about increasing the proportion of cattle here to be able to deliver some of the really positive environmental outcomes that we've been delivering on other estates, working in other shared access arrangements for the last five years.

There are massive issues around land access in Scotland, particularly for new entrants and young people who are keen and willing and well-equipped to get into farming, but who don't have the opportunities either to buy land because it is now so expensive or to find tenancies because they so rarely come up.

This sort of approach, where there is a much more cohesive joint plan for land management, where both parties have committed to a sort of buy-in, whether that's capital asset or related to knowledge, or ongoing operational expertise with an outcome of a profit share and the ability for us to grow our business as new entrants, really, really does offer that great opportunity.

I think it's very important that we get together and work on what land reform looks like in 50 years' time and how do we get there. And I think it should be a partnership. I think everyone should work together. It shouldn't be a zero-sum game where one party wins, and one party loses. It should be, how do we all work together for common goals. And there's massive national common goals. Climate change is one. Biodiversity loss is one. Producing sustainable food is another. Repopulating rural areas with rural housing, with rural jobs, with rural businesses. Allowing people to set up businesses. All of these things surely can work together in a virtuous circle. And that's what we should be looking at in my opinion.



Dee shared his contribution as a video, which you can watch on our YouTube channel.



## Derek Rankine

Derek is Head of Policy & Strategy at Built Environment Forum Scotland. With over 20 years' experience in place-based regeneration, including as Policy Manager at SURF, he has contributed to national policy engagement, research and partnership activity to improve communities, and continues to champion place-based approaches across Scotland.



Earlier this year, I took up a policy position **at BEFS, a charity and umbrella body for organisations working in the built environment in Scotland.** In my initial months, I have been busy meeting with our **40 Member organisations,** and engaging with the thematic Working Groups that BEFS facilitates, to learn more about the built environment sector's views, experiences, interests and initiatives around contemporary policy and practice.

These interactions have illustrated the massive breadth of fields and specialisms in the sector. They have also demonstrated a remarkable unity of shared interests on challenges and opportunities in five core themes: culture and heritage; net zero; planning and placemaking; repair, maintenance and retrofit; and training and skills.

Land reform aspects have featured prominently in BEFS Member conversations, and have relevance across all of these themes. How well land and buildings are looked after by owners and managers, and productively used for the benefit of the people who live, work and visit, is where much of the sector's attention is focused.

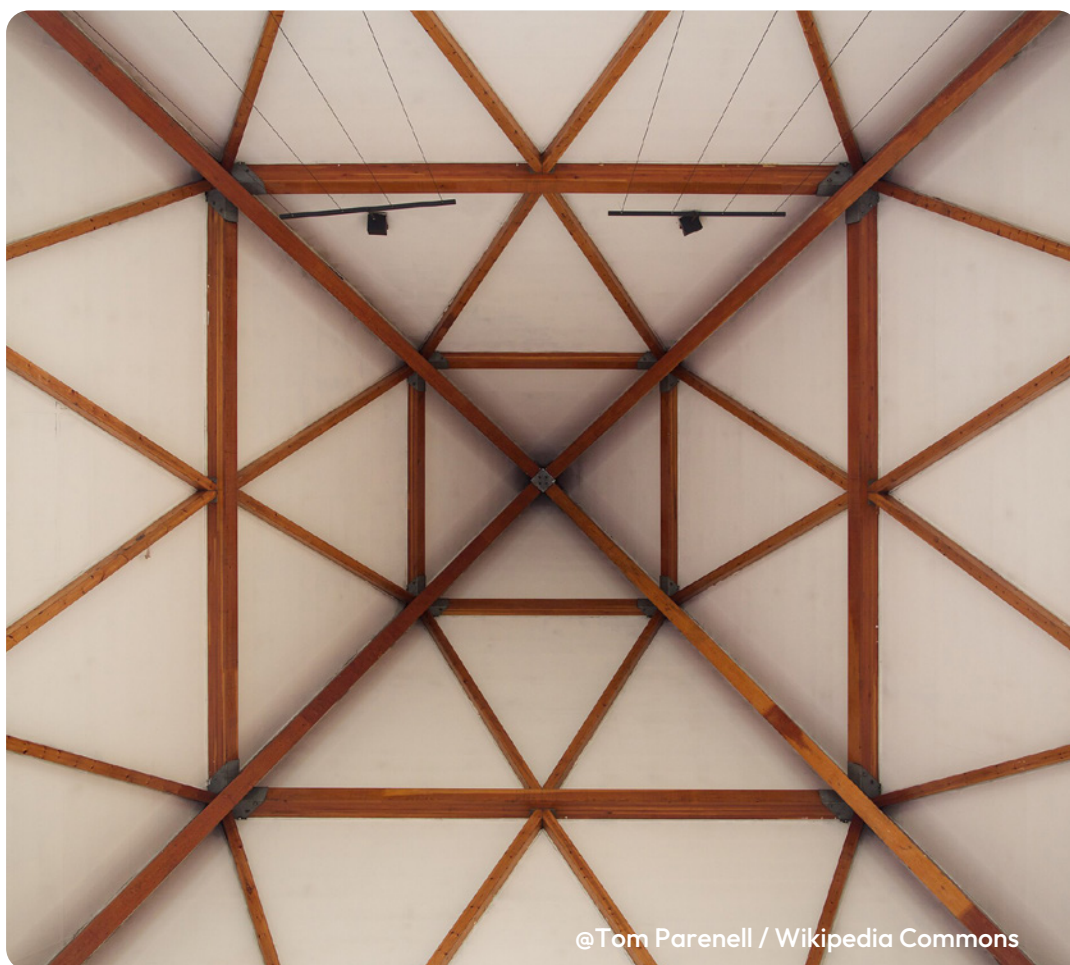
For multiple reasons, including skills capacity gaps, climate change impacts, difficult economic realities and pressures on public finances, the sector's message is clear that too much of Scotland's land and buildings is not adequately maintained nor used productively. I have tracked developments and engaged with **land reform policy** for more than 20 years, and I am keenly aware that ownership diversity and community led initiatives can have a role to play in making progress.

In my previous role, for the regeneration charity **SURF – Scotland's Regeneration Forum,** I followed with interest the impacts of the 2003 and 2016 Land Reform (Scotland) Acts and the 2015 Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act, and the creation of the Scottish Land Commission. I have also been mindful of evolving national targets, including to have one million acres in community ownership by 2020, to replicate the success of rural

community land ownership projects in urban Scotland, and to “normalise” community ownership of land and assets.

The SURF Awards for Best Practice in Community Regeneration has highlighted a wide range of successful case studies. These include, **in the 2024 iteration**, a community purchase of a disused stone farm building, Kirkhope Steading near Ettrickbridge in the Scottish Borders, which was converted into affordable housing, and Bute Community Forest’s extensive contribution to the local economy, recreation, tourism, environment, and education.

BEFS Members have also highlighted case studies, one being **the Pyramid in Anderston**, a former Church of Scotland complex in central Glasgow, which was sold to a local community trust in 2019 and refurbished into a multi-functional community hub. On 27 August the venue will host a BEFS Conference on **Places of Worship: Planning Forward**, which will bring planning authorities, religious denominations, funders, community ownership support bodies and heritage stakeholders together explore the future of buildings that currently serve as Places of Worship, or have previously done so, in all parts of Scotland.



@Tom Parenell / Wikipedia Commons

The built environment sector is keen to celebrate and promote all community ownership successes alongside others that have brought life and purpose back to important and previously unused or under-used built assets. Exemplar projects are matched, however, with a strong realism that community ownership of vacant or derelict land and buildings is not always appropriate or viable. There are many open questions including:

- Are community groups with aspirations to take on ownership of historic buildings, fully aware of the costs, risks, challenges and responsibilities this entails? An example of a challenge that may have relatively low awareness levels is a recent spike in buildings insurance. This has seen some community owners in the BEFS network receive unaffordable quotes of up to £30k per year in the context of rising repair, inflation and climate-related risk calculations.
- Are good policy intentions let down when owners of vacant and derelict land and buildings simply don't engage with public bodies or local communities?
- Especially in urban areas with high market values, is expensive community land acquisition the best use of scarce public sector resources, compared to alternative approaches towards reuse and refurbishment?
- Could community leasing partnership arrangements – in which a public body with maintenance expertise looks after a community hub building, and local community organisations collaborate on provision of activity – become more common?
- Do we ultimately need to build a stronger land bridge to bring together the often disconnected landmasses of resources, strategy and practice around the maintenance and use of built heritage assets?

These are all important questions with mixed views and live discussions in BEFS meetings and events, and across the built environment sector. As to the ScotLand Futures question: What should the future look like?

In our forthcoming 2026 BEFS Manifesto, centred on the five themes listed at the start of this blog, BEFS will argue that the next Scottish Government should implement a range of policies – including compulsory owners' associations, five yearly building inspections for tenements, establishing a Ministerial Oversight on Retrofit, making investments in data and research, and scaling up heritage funding programmes – to build strong foundations for the coming decades.

A vision for protecting, enhancing, sustaining and making full use of Scotland's land and buildings for the benefit of people and places, needs strong policy action and serious investment.

## Di Alexander

**Di Alexander has over 40 years' experience helping communities, particularly in the Highlands & Islands, secure good solutions to their affordable housing problems. He was instrumental in creating Lochaber Housing Association, the Highlands Small Communities Housing Trust and Rural Housing Burdens. These days he sits on various rural housing and fuel poverty boards.**



My focus is on the land a rural community requires to secure the locally affordable housing it needs to survive and thrive. I first started to think about it back in the 1970s when, newly married with a babe in arms, we went to live on the Island of Colonsay, population 125, three ferries a week, weather permitting. Our new home was a cosy cottage rented against the run of play from the local estate which owned every last inch of the island and every house save the Doctor's and the schoolteacher's. There was zero Council housing and nowhere else to go to except the Estate.

Eleven years later - including three in the Uists where, unlike Colonsay, new houses were springing up everywhere thanks, I came to understand, to the much more encouraging pattern of land tenure (crofting) -, our family was growing, we lived in rural Lochaber and I worked for Shelter Scotland's Rural Housing Initiative. Rural needs were acute but "hidden" i.e. largely unrecorded and overlooked by those in authority. Locals well understood the damaging household and community consequences so a group of us decided to try and set up a Lochaber Housing Association and 38 years later it's going strong with nearly 800 good, secure and locally affordable homes delivered in most but not quite all of its rural communities as well as in Fort William.

The unmet needs, however, remain as great as ever, not least in the landward communities, most of which have experienced big declines in their school rolls - underlining the inextricable link between the availability of good, locally affordable housing and a rural community's well-being and capacity for renewal. Though these days more widely appreciated, the affordable housing supply gap remains. Why though and where does land reform policy come in?

As my experience grew, I became convinced that the key to increasing affordable rural housing provision lay in strategic landbanking so that, ideally, each needy rural community had a well-located, affordable-to-



purchase and equally affordable-to-develop site ready and waiting to provide the housing mix their local needs dictated - and it should be owned by a body which unequivocally guaranteed that the community could rest assured that the site's onward development purpose was secure. To this end, The Highlands Small Communities Housing Trust (now CHT) was established in 1998 - and it worked. It was backed by a revolving landbanking fund which replenished itself when, with the agreement of the community concerned, the landbanked site was sold on to a bona fide affordable housing provider, either a local housing association for rented new build or a local who wanted to build a modest home but couldn't afford to unless they could buy the plot at a significant discount.

That presented another problem: how to ensure that neither the local landowner selling the site nor the local community wouldn't then feel "ripped off" by a plot purchaser building their house but then selling it on at full market value and pocketing the profit derived from the much lower valuation the landowner had generously sold it to the Trust at i.e. on the understanding that it was for the best long term interests of the whole community and not the short-term financial one of any subsequent plot owner.

So, when the Scottish Government (SG) introduced its 2003 Titles Conditions (Scotland) Bill, the Rural Housing Burden (RHB) was included to give the Trust and other such 'SG-designated' affordable housing providers a pre-emption right in perpetuity on any affordable house plot they sold, thus ensuring that the percentage discount/subsidy provided by the original landowner would also benefit all subsequent plot/house purchasers and not just the first one.

RHBs have since proved their effectiveness in reassuring many landowners and communities, though they could do with greater backing from SG, as could the critically important ‘rural housing enabler’ services which most rural communities turn to for the free but trustworthy advice and support they need for their learning curve journeys towards securing the affordable sites and houses they – and other key stakeholders – know they need.

I believe, every rural community – having completed a thorough and inclusive place-planning process – should then have the inalienable legal right to not just identify but ensure that the key site/s they have located for the future provision of key community infrastructure, particularly affordable homes, cannot then be sold on for any other purpose. Moreover, such sales must only be to community-approved developers at not more than DV’s valuation and within a strict timescale for the conveyancing so that delays and squabbles over the transaction and purchase price are outlawed.

Back in Colonsay the Community Development Trust, with tireless support from CHT’s tireless housing enablers plus public and other funders, bought a prime site for a mix of locally affordable housing provision – both rented and house plots protected by RHBs. It all took an exhausting amount of time and angst but they got there in the end and the first phase of this development now provides a mix of 12 secure and affordable homes for permanent residents with room left for another 12 to come. This is what long-term community development is about but also why it still needs improvements to public policy legalities and financial support programmes.



## Hugh Raven

**Hugh Raven is Managing Director of Ardtornish Estate Company. He is founder and Chair of the Open Seas Trust and chair and co-founder of the Highlands and Islands Environment Foundation. He has previously served as environment adviser to the UK Foreign Secretary and as a board member of NatureScot, RSPB, Crown Estate Scotland and other organisations.**



When talking about land reform with other land managers and owners, I am often puzzled at how much it upsets them. I don't feel that myself – because I think owning and managing land has significant public impacts, putting responsibilities on us to the public. It is a matter of legitimate public interest.

Some say that private land, being private, is not publicly answerable – that consideration of the public interest is an erosion of their land rights. I don't agree. As has clearly been set out, to their credit, by the Scottish Land Commission (SLC) and Scottish Land and Estates, land comes with rights but also responsibilities.

It's not realistic or fair for private land owners to think that they are not answerable for those. Many are in receipt of public subsidies – even if that is just by virtue of the fact that land (unlike other property assets) is free of non-domestic rates. Nor is it fair at a time of Climate and Biodiversity emergency. The latter, in particular, is substantially as a result





of landowners' prior actions. Biodiversity in Scotland is in crisis because the land on which species dwell has been managed in ways inimical to their needs.

So we cannot pretend that private land does not have a public responsibility. Whether the Scottish Government is serious about land reform also seems in doubt. Our Party of government set an ambitious target for land to be brought into community ownership – but when a golden opportunity presented itself to take the largest step to date towards that target, the Scottish Government preferred ownership by a Gulf-based business mogul over community ownership of several large estates in Lochaber. The 114,000-acre Killiechonan, Inverlair, Inverlochy, Mamore and Glenshero Estates were passed to Sanjeev Gupta for £5 – not, to their great disappointment, to the community bodies that had expressed an interest.

With respect to this exercise by the SLC, perhaps this collection is published prematurely, because we do not know yet the outcome of debates on the current land reform bill. When it's enacted we may have reached a just settlement. My own view is that the process of land reform was desirable, and has so far been largely benign. The draft legislation holds no great fears for me. More worrying is the dysfunctionality of Scotland's public services. They have been centralised and under-resourced. The agencies with which as land managers we daily deal – SEPA, NatureScot, the enterprise agencies, Transport Scotland, the Marine Directorate, besides our local councils – are all much diminished, under-resourced and politically browbeaten. Their failures concern me more than questions of whether I, as a manager of private land, am showing sufficient public accountability.

Because as a landowner, I should be publicly accountable. Those who say otherwise are living in the past.

## Johanna Boyd

Johanna Boyd is Chief Executive of Revenue Scotland, the body responsible for collecting and managing Scotland's devolved taxes. She was previously Chief Executive of Planning Aid Scotland (2022–2025), where she led the organisation through a period of growth, innovation and its 30th anniversary celebrations.



Land reform in Scotland is about more than who owns the land, it's about who shapes the future of the places that we live and work in. It's about power, access, and opportunity. As someone who leads an organisation that supports communities to influence how their local areas develop, I see every day how land reform links directly to Scotland's wider ambitions, creating a greener, fairer, and more prosperous country.

When communities are supported to have a voice in land use, we see better outcomes. Greener ones through local stewardship of land, climate-conscious place planning, and sustainable land management. Fairer ones by giving people a say in decisions that affect their daily lives, and by building equity into a system that has long felt out of reach. And more prosperous outcomes as communities are empowered to create local enterprise, attract investment, and build resilience.

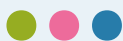




But achieving this vision isn't automatic. In many communities the barriers are not just financial or legal, they're about confidence and capacity. That's where Planning Aid Scotland often come in to support and help. And we do that through supporting community-led planning and through our best practice community engagement training called SP=EED. We help people articulate their vision and turn it into something that can influence decisions and attract investment and support.

So, land reform is not just about land ownership, it's about relationships. The quality of dialogue between communities and landowners can make or break local ambitions. Where there's openness and trust the potential for collaboration is enormous, and we've seen great examples of this across the country. Joint land management plans, shared investment and local priorities and long-term partnerships that genuinely benefit both parties. I believe we need to see more of this, more partnerships, more shared planning, and more spaces for communities and landowners to work together towards common goals. Showcasing good practice is key, there are powerful stories across Scotland of what can happen when landowners engage meaningfully with local people. Not as a statutory obligation, but as a shared opportunity.

Land reform at its best is not about division, it's about co-creation. Because ultimately communities want to have some influence over the places they live. That doesn't mean taking on everything, but it does mean being heard and being part of the journey. And if we are serious about building a greener, fairer and more prosperous Scotland then partnership, collaboration that's genuine, long-term, and respectful must be part of the answer.



Johanna shared her contribution as a video, which you can watch on our YouTube channel.



## Dr John Watt

**Dr John Watt OBE has worked across the Highlands and Islands for nearly 40 years. He helped establish the Community Land Unit at Highlands and Islands Enterprise, chaired the Scottish Land Fund for nine years, and served as vice chair of the Land Reform Review Group. He is currently a board member of Community Land Scotland.**



Land reform is, to use the Land Reform Review Group's definition, 'measures that modify or change the arrangements governing the possession and use of land in Scotland in the public interest'.

Before looking at what outcomes land reform should seek to achieve, we should acknowledge the developments which have occurred over the last 25 years: several pieces of Scottish Parliamentary legislation (some directly focussed on land reform, others having partial impact), several rounds of funding through the Scottish Land Fund (both National Lottery and Scottish Government money), significant numbers (if not acreages) of acquisitions of land and property by communities.

But despite these steps forward, land reform outcomes appear modest. Communities own only about 3% of the Scottish land area, and recent research indicates that ownership of land in Scotland is getting more concentrated, not less, despite long held Scottish Government aspirations for a more diversified ownership pattern.

In the land reform debate, there are those who see no need to significantly adjust the status quo, that the current structure of ownership and management is optimal for producing the goods and services which land can provide. Others seek change but towards a 'completion' of land reform, an identifiable 'destination, a 'job done'. And yet others believe land reform is a process, continually changing, adapting to wider economic, political and environmental conditions, like cost-of-living challenges, national security, changing resource needs and climate change in an increasingly turbulent world. I find myself in this last camp.

While there are many factors at play, it is hard to disassociate current land ownership and management patterns from major issues facing communities including housing shortages, poverty, environmental degradation, urban dereliction, biodiversity decline, out-migration from rural areas, failing infrastructure.

In the community land ownership sector, where innovative ownership patterns have been introduced, there is now sufficient experience and evidence to show that this particular approach to land reform has had positive local outcomes such as job creation, population growth, house building, renewable energy provision, enhanced amenity and improved services, as well as contributions to the national economy.

But all journeys should have a goal and outcomes or milestones, by which to measure progress towards it. I believe that land reform should result in resilient, sustainable rural and urban communities, contributing to local and national wellbeing and economic prosperity in environmentally sustainable ways.

Land reform is the relationship between people and the land. Land reform can be seen to have progressed significantly in Scotland when more people:

- own more land: communities, private individuals, charities, hybrid partnership ownership models
- have affordable access to land to rent: more tenants, more crofters
- know who owns land and what those owners intend to do with it
- who intend to purchase land are subject to public interest tests, in the same way as communities are
- are resident on the land and not absent
- have more opportunities to contribute to how land is managed
- develop a link and sense of belonging to land they feel is theirs not somebody else's
- share in the wealth that land creates, in, for example, carbon sequestration and the production of renewable energy.

And land reform can be seen also to have progressed when the land:

- is less concentrated in its ownership pattern
- builds wealth, more of which is which retained and reinvested for local benefit and not extracted or expropriated to other places, including abroad
- sustains more affordable housing and larger populations
- is financially accessible for new entrants and particularly young people
- supports new, innovative and sustainable uses
- is used to increase biodiversity and where appropriate absorb carbon
- is increasingly managed for public not private benefit.

The challenge for Scotland is to continue to introduce the radical legislation, policies, fiscal arrangements and funding required to ensure progress is made in achieving the milestones listed above. There are fewer more important priorities.

## Max Wiszniewski

**Max Wiszniewski heads the work of the REVIVE coalition for people, wildlife and environment.**

Land is so important to life, our economy and the wellbeing of our communities. Yet in Scotland, just 421 people and companies own half of our private land. It's a concentration of power that distorts our democracy and holds back our nation's potential.



### **The Economic Cost of Concentrated Ownership**

To start a business growing food, developing forestry, or creating jobs by building factories, tourism attractions, shops and even homes, you need access to land. When ordinary people can't buy land, they can't build the businesses that drive economic growth. Scotland's economy suffers as a result. The numbers tell a stark story. According to Scottish Land and Estates' own research, private estates occupy over half (53%) of Scotland's landmass. The majority of those estates (78%) allow country sports like intensive grouse shooting, pheasant shooting and deer stalking, which can lead to disastrous consequences for our wildlife and environment.

"But it's good for the rural economy," is so often the claim. Yet these estates contribute just 2% to Scotland's total economic output and provide just one in ten rural jobs. Most telling of all, despite controlling 57% of rural Scotland, these estates provide just 3% of rural homes.

Without access to land, rural communities cannot grow or provide homes for the next generation. The power imbalance at the heart of Scotland's land ownership chokes the aspirations of our communities and the hopes of our young people.

### **The Environmental Cost**

Poor land management imposed by concentrated ownership carries devastating environmental consequences. Vast swathes of Scotland are managed for intensive grouse shooting, a practice that epitomises everything wrong with our current system.

Hundreds of thousands of native animals are killed annually to boost grouse numbers for wealthy shooters. Vital peatlands are burned through muirburn, releasing carbon and destroying biodiversity. Scotland's landscapes are scarred while our climate crisis deepens.

For all this destruction, what does Scotland gain? "Country sports"

contribute a paltry 0.03% to Scotland's overall economy. In other words, if Scotland's economy were the height of Ben Nevis, country sports would contribute the height of a bottle of Irn Bru.

### **The Democratic Deficit**

Powerful landowners and their industry lobbyists don't just control Scotland's land, they control Scotland's future. They lobby against reform, claiming to represent rural Scotland's interests. That's easy to say when you own 57% of rural Scotland.

These narrow interests seem to consistently override the public interest, with landowners appearing to be taken more seriously than landless communities seeking change. This is why Scotland's vision for land reform must be bolder than anything attempted before.

### **What Scotland Wants**

Scottish people want more say over where they live, and land reform should give them that power. Scotland wants:

- Tens of thousands more landowners to break the current cartel holding back our nation
- Community ownership and influence in the land around them
- Homes in rural areas near places where people can work and make a living
- Land, habitat and wildlife managed for public benefit, not private sport
- Restored and rewilded landscapes accessible to all

### **Reform Land For Good**

To achieve this vision, we must create intentional disincentives for harmful land use. We need to:

- Tax large estates to make concentrated ownership less attractive and bring land prices within the reach of communities and cooperatives
- Reform subsidies to steer landowners away from intensive sport shooting and the exploitation of nature toward environmental stewardship
- End outdated practices just as we did with snares and the unlicensed killing of our native mountain hares
- Mobilise the Scottish National Investment Bank to fund land reform

It's time to use every legal lever available to make this vision a reality. Scotland deserves land reform that benefits all our people, our wildlife, and our environment, not just the privileged few who inherited or purchased the power to hold us back.

Next year's incoming Government will find that Scotland stands at a crossroads in its land reform journey. Let's form a coalition of the willing and make real change happen. Scotland's future depends on it.

## Mike Staples

**The existing pipeline of homes currently being planned by community organisations across Scotland exceeds 1000 in number. Delivery would make a significant contribution to our national Housing Emergency, particularly across rural Scotland.**



South of Scotland Community Housing (SOSCH) is the Community-led Housing enabler working across Southern Scotland. We collaborate closely with Communities Housing Trust (CHT), our equivalent organisation in the North, and work in partnership at a regional, national and international level. Our technical support helps groups to secure assets in community ownership, providing permanent stewardship of affordable homes that meet local need.

Land Reform enhances social justice by enabling more equitable patterns of land ownership – particularly the stewardship of Scotland's land by the communities who live and thrive here. Without appropriate housing for people to remain, return or relocate to repopulate our communities, our rural places face continued decline. We must, therefore, ensure that communities are genuinely empowered to make these critical decisions and, most importantly, act upon them.

**The provision of high-quality homes by communities is an integral part of the Land Reform journey, not a byproduct of Land Reform.** In fact, from the outset of community ownership in Scotland, large-scale buyouts of land have been inclusive of housing or, at least, land for homes and crofts.

But, in policy terms, the Community-led Housing approach can be regarded too narrowly, simply as a means of delivering affordable homes where others are not; this is just part of a critical equation and – in our rural places – big impact can derive from the delivery of a small number of homes integrated with effective Place Planning. This is a positive model that should be promoted, not simply reserved for instances of market failure.

Our national Housing Emergency requires a broad mix of housing to be delivered – urban and rural, affordable and market, flexible, accessible and future-proofed. Community-led Housing is part of this and can be a significant contributor. But this important housing story is also part of our Land Reform journey, with much wider benefits for communities and society at large, and must be regarded as such by policy makers, stakeholders and communities alike.

Scotland's Community-led Housing sector is not limited to the provision of affordable homes. Housing is fundamentally about people – communities need these homes to retain and attract younger people, key workers, families. Suitable and appropriate housing is required to enable our older population to remain within the communities they call home.

Communities are best placed to understand their own needs, but also to align these considerations to a more holistic view of creating sustainable, vibrant, resilient, low-energy places. This includes the relationship between locally affordable housing, the provision of critical services and the capacity for economic growth. Our research, undertaken in collaboration with a range of partners, has concluded that the model can continue to grow at pace in Scotland and, indeed, that growth can occur via the delivery of the pre-existing pipeline of projects. To achieve this, a robust and flexible policy framework is required that places Community Empowerment at the centre of decision making and entrusts community organisations to plan and deliver the best outcomes for their place.

This is not to say that Community-led Housing has not been well supported – it is prioritised within the Rural and Islands Housing Action Plan, and the Rural and Islands Housing Fund has been in place for eight years (and extended, in principle, to March 2028). Many communities across Scotland have delivered groundbreaking projects. The level of innovation tends to be groundbreaking and award winning – Closeburn, Langholm, Whithorn, Ettrick and Yarrow, Gairloch, Staffin, Colonsay to name a few. But these projects are never straightforward. It often feels we are to believe that Community-led Housing is supposed to be “difficult”, least of all to ensure risk is fully understood and absorbed at a community level.

In Southern Scotland, a positive collaborative framework has formed around the South of Scotland Housing Action Plan, led by the efforts of the Regional Economic Partnership. Community-led Housing is regarded as no less of a contributor than those delivering at scale, but instead as a key mechanism to align housing delivery to Place Planning, resilience and growth. The capacity for communities to partner with Housing Associations, landowners, employers and others is recognised and encouraged with SOSCH, as an enabler, considered a key stakeholder within an impressive mix of organisations. We welcome this approach; partnership is critical to empowering communities and ensuring much needed homes, vested in community asset ownership, are delivered.

To complete this journey, housing owned and delivered by communities must be regarded as a key element of Land Reform, integrated across policy domains and underpinned by empowerment. To ensure fair distribution of delivery and access to decent, locally affordable homes, we must ensure a substantial proportion are in the control of local communities, removed from market speculation and locked as permanently affordable.

## Morag Paterson

**Morag Paterson is an environmental artist and campaigner based in Dumfries and Galloway. She works on land justice and nature restoration through collaboration, advocacy, and storytelling.**



Over the last couple of years, I've spent a lot of time in Liguria, northern Italy, where you can walk for hundreds of miles without coming across a single fence — maybe just the odd strand of temporary electric tape. There's very little visible sign of who owns what. The land there is split into small parcels, held by thousands of different people. The maps of ownership form a dense, beautiful patchwork. People still grow food, raise animals, cut hay, manage woods. More than 60% of the region is forest, much of it naturally regenerated. There are hunting rights, foraging rights, protected zones. And what really stands out — apart from the lack of fences — is that no one interest or estate dominates.

Because the land is so widely held, it doesn't feel captured by the usual pressures of power or speculation. It's so loosely connected to wealth that it can seem almost incidental. I've heard of people buying houses and discovering the deal included an olive grove or a hillside of forest.

But it's not just about ownership. Each cluster of villages has its own municipality, with a mayor and local powers over services and taxes. That means real, local control. It's not a rural utopia. It's just everyday life.

That close-knit relationship between people, place, and decision-making shows that other ways are possible. It got me thinking about what land reform in Scotland could look like. And, as usual, I ended up with more questions than answers:

- Can we imagine a future where everyone who wants to access land can do so easily?
- What if land in Scotland was defined not by who owns it, but by who looks after it?
- What if rights to land came with expectations — not just responsibilities — to communities, to nature, to future generations?
- Could we create a culture where communities help shape land decisions, even if they don't hold the title deeds?
- How do we decentralise democracy and governance, so decisions are made closer to the people and places they affect?

- Could the right to a healthy environment become a foundation of our planning system and rural economy?
- Could landowners be required to collaborate — with each other, with communities, and with the land itself?

In the Glenkens, where I live, we've started exploring this. We created a Land Use Vision based on local values. At its heart is a simple idea:

**“Everyone who takes value from the land gives something back to it.”**

It's about give and take. About finding ways for people and land to thrive together. This principle is now part of our Community Action Plan and is being taken into Local Place Plans. But whether it actually shapes decisions still depends on how planners, officials, landowners and government respond. Will they work with it — or work around it?

To change that, communities need more than just consultation. We need to be at the heart of decision-making. That means real collaboration, not top-down policies. It means building relationships that are grounded, practical, and rooted in place.

Giving back at least as much as we take. Thriving together — humans in the living world. If we want a future that works, these can't just be nice ideas. They need to guide how we use and share land.

We're past the point of waiting. Fixing our damaged soils, cleaning our rivers, restoring ecosystems — these could be shared national goals. And the evidence is growing, when local people are involved in looking after the land they live on, the outcomes are stronger, more lasting, and more meaningful than anything delivered from a distance.

Access to land is often restricted by who can afford it or who holds the power to decide its use. But land isn't just a commodity — it's the foundation of our communities and our future. Everyone should have the right to secure space where they can grow, build, and live. In many places, people who want to farm, create small businesses, or simply live sustainably struggle to find affordable land. We could change this. Land could be a basic right for everyone who is willing to care for it and the future it holds.

Around the world — and in our own past — we can find other ways of living with land. Not just as property, but as something we share responsibility for. Countless small stories of care and connection. They remind us that the way we live with land isn't fixed. It's something we shape together, through culture, policy, imagination, and care.

Scotland can be a place where looking after land matters more than owning it. Where land is shared, not hoarded. Where communities help shape the decisions that shape their lives. And where belonging to the land is no longer the exception, but the norm.

## Naomi Mason

Naomi Mason leads the Centre for Local Economic Strategies' (CLES) work in Scotland, bringing over a decade of experience in economic development across the public and third sectors. She has led work for the Scottish Land Commission and on CLES's research into land, energy, and ownership in Scotland.



Land. The definition of land states that it's part of the earth's surface that isn't water or it's a state or a country. And I don't think either of these capture the nuance of connection culture and history that our land contains. It represents our past, our present, and our future and it once binds our people to our places. In Scotland it holds memories and ties to our heritage and our aspirations.

Land reform in Scotland is an agenda which has been underway for 25 years and which the Scottish Government describes as being an ongoing process by which the ownership of land, its distribution, and the law which governs it is modified, reformed, and modernised. In many ways you could say this process has been a slow one and by some measures unsuccessful. Despite our communities now owning 2.7% of land the public sector share has decreased to 11.7% so private interests still dominate with 83% of rural land in private hands. And the concentration of ownership of that has been growing not shrinking and this matters. Ownership of our land is an expression of power both political and economic.



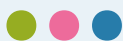


In community wealth building terms, land and assets is one of the key pillars. It matters because community and public ownership of land is more likely to benefit the many, not just the few. And we've seen this through the work that we at the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES) have conducted for the Scottish Land Commission last year looking across the world at how places secure value from natural resources.

There are many different approaches to harnessing that value from different sources in different places. But the fact remains that the greater economic, social and environmental benefits come from public and community value. And I've seen this in action myself. I used to work for the Huntly Development Trust and their acquisition of land just out outside of Huntly enabled them to begin a journey of energy generation which led to financial flows and supported town centre regeneration projects. Owning the land has allowed them to use it in a way which has benefited the local community. That site is a lot more than just a means to an end though. It's also supporting biodiversity, offering training and skills and it's accessible to the local community to use and to connect with.

So, coming back to definitions then and moving from land to landing, from naming to doing. Landing means to come to a destination, to touch down, to arrive. And that is what settled land reform means to me. To put in place transformative legislation which allows Scotland to arrive in the 21st century. Moving beyond historic land laws and allowing land in Scotland to be owned by the public sector for public value, and by communities to support their own needs and aspirations.

We've started the journey of land reform. Can our forthcoming community wealth building legislation help us to complete it?



Naomi shared her contribution as a video, which you can watch on our YouTube channel.



## Peter Peacock

**Peter Peacock is a former Member of the Scottish Parliament and Minister for Education and Young People. A long-time advocate for public service and land reform, he now focuses on promoting more diverse and equitable land ownership as a key to economic opportunity, community empowerment and long-term change in Scotland.**



Scotland stands out for its many progressive achievements down the centuries, but also for something less progressive, its enduring concentrated land ownership patterns. Seldom anywhere do so few own so much.

Recent research suggests a current drift toward even fewer owning even more, and this despite 25 years of consistent policy favouring greater ownership diversity. A policy aim shared by all the governing parties since devolution. Policy that hasn't delivered intended outcomes in over a quarter of a century is in need radical reappraisal.

Much debate about land focusses on land use and not the more fundamental question of ownership. Land use is of course important, and government both has and uses many instruments to influence or control aspects of land use, but they have few tools to impact ownership or have chosen not to use some they do have. Debate on land use diverts attention from a land ownership debate and is of course the preferred focus of the interests who own most land. But to fail to address the ownership question is to fail to address the major economic consequences that flow from highly concentrated ownership, the concentration wealth, power, influence, and economic opportunity in very few hands.

This limit to greater economic participation constrains the liberation of enterprise and creativity that would come with greater ownership diversity, constrains opportunity and choice. The challenge to achieve greater land ownership diversity is fundamentally an economic challenge and sits at the heart of how a thriving and more inclusive economy could develop. Significantly more community ownership should be part of the ownership mix and a key means to increase participation, promote enterprise and develop community wealth, but a future with much more private, public, co-operative ownership should be the aim, with environment NGO ownership continuing its distinct contribution – a truly vibrant, diverse, colourful, mixed economy of ownership bringing fresh initiative and widened opportunity. New forms of collaborative ownership between key actors need to develop

to maximise opportunities. We need to see more land tenancies emerging as an aim of change.

To achieve all this, we need to place the economic opportunity real change can deliver at the centre of policy thinking. Change to the way current ownership patterns corner the economic advantage of land ownership for the few through local land monopoly, a rentier economy and capital gain underpinned by massive public subsidy. Diversifying ownership as a cornerstone of developing a more inclusive and enterprising economy is a legitimate aim and needs to be supported by a range of policies. It also needs to develop from just a policy aim to a legislative aim, giving real power and drive to its achievement.

Within the policy framework needed, regulation, taxation and public subsidy regimes need to positively encourage wider ownership. A more interventionist state has an increased role it can play in both owning and facilitating greater ownership diversity. Regulating the land market should be seen as virtuous in advancing the public interest in achieving greater ownership diversity, not dismissed as burdensome. Within regulation, land valuation reform and even price controls could have a role to play. Local authorities, beyond just their physical planning role could be charged with systematically assessing demand for land (owned and tenanted), reporting publicly, and charged with taking steps to meet assessed demand.

Legislation will be needed, defining regulatory arrangements, public body responsibilities, framing taxation rules. Overarching such detail needs to sit a legislative framework for driving progress rooted in the legitimate aim to progressively achieve materially greater land ownership diversity, using all means at the disposal of government to deliver expanded economic goals. Regular parliamentary accountability will be a vital component of successful delivery.

Proponents of the status quo will see many threats from such an agenda and should be expected to defend their economic interests. Those interests enjoy property rights but these need to be balanced with the public interest in achieving the greater economic diversity constrained by an historic ownership legacy. In a country with uniquely concentrated land ownership patterns any change requires that those who own most will need to own a bit less in future if others are to be given opportunity, if wealth is to be more equally shared, if communities themselves are to build wealth.

The Land Commission's promotion of the ScotLand Future discussion is timely, and they should have a key ongoing role at the heart of delivering progressive change. We owe it to future generations to face up to the land concentration question, to test the boundaries of the law and land rights to their fullest extent, to bring about the much fairer distribution of opportunity, wealth, power, and influence I am clear the majority in Scotland would favour.

## Dr Robin McLaren

**Dr Robin McLaren is an independent consultant specialising in land reform and land administration. With over 35 years' experience, he has advised organisations including the World Bank, UN-Habitat and UN-FAO, supporting land reform projects in countries such as the Philippines, Albania, Hungary and Kenya.**



Scotland is currently undergoing one of the most important reforms in our modern history—how we manage, own, and use our land. But despite this progress, we lack something fundamental: a National Land Policy.

Now, you might ask—why does that matter? Well, let's look at countries that have recently undergone major land reforms—places like Kenya, Jamaica, New Zealand and Lithuania. These countries created National Land Policies to guide change, build public consensus, and ensure all land sectors were working toward the same goals. The results were guides for the sustainable use, management, and development of their land resources.

In contrast, Scotland's land governance is fragmented. Yes, we have individual reforms and consultations, but no single vision that ties it all together. No roadmap that says: here's how we want our land to be owned, used and managed over the next 15 to 25 years. And without that, different policies often conflict. Some promote environmental goals, others drive development—and they don't always align.





@ilyacreate / Unsplash

So, why does Scotland need a National Land Policy? There are four main reasons.

First, it provides a foundation and policy framework for how we manage land. From ownership and planning to taxation and conservation, everything becomes clearer and more coordinated.

Second, it helps us meet our commitment to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Land plays a crucial role in addressing climate change and biodiversity—and a national land policy would give us the tools to act responsibly and sustainably.

Third, it strengthens the connection between people and land. Right now, most of us only think about land during a house purchase. But land is so much more—it's community, identity, and opportunity. A national land policy process would bring more people into the conversation and give them a sense of ownership.

And fourth, it ensures decisions are based on solid evidence. Scotland still lacks a Land Information Service – a comprehensive, definitive and joined up set of land and property information and associated analysis and insight services. A National Land Policy would help build one—and ensure it informs every decision we make on land.

Now, creating a policy like this isn't easy. It needs political leadership, grassroots engagement, and coordination across many sectors. But the reward is worth it: a fairer, more sustainable, more transparent land administration and management solution that works for everyone.

So, I'll end with this: Scotland's land is one of our greatest assets. It deserves a clear vision and strong governance. That starts with a National Land Policy. Let's make it happen.

## Theona Morrison

**Theona is Chair of Scottish Rural Action and lives on a working croft in Uist. A founding director of CoDeL, which led research on rural resilience and the island economy, challenging dominant narratives on peripherality. She regularly shares insights at national and international rural forums.**



Scotland is a rural country, with 98% of its land mass and more than 90 inhabited islands defined as rural, we are very rural!

Our land is a much-prized asset, not just by those who live on it, but by others who view it as an opportunity to capitalise from it; from her suitability to grow trees, to host wind turbines, battery storage, solar panels and for the carbon she has kept locked up for millennia. Increasingly her fresh water will also be valued.

I recently watched a play called 'The Fallen Angels of the Moine' by George Gunn.... Mòine can translate as peat but without the accent, money.... It was performed in the Highlands and Islands in 2024, I saw it in Harris. It featured two young women who meet by chance while walking the Moine. They share with each other what they see. The one wearing a white coat, is a scientist, raved about the lichen and other flora across the Moine. The other, who has a young child, looks across the same land and says she sees the workings of





her forebears, the ruins of her grandparent's home, the places where they worked the land to feed themselves and where they celebrated life anns na Gaidhlig.

It is said that the vast amount of biodiversity that is left in the world is in the hands of indigenous people, the Gaels don't yet have that status. Arguably those who have inhabited Scotland's land for millennia have been subject to clearance and extraction for centuries, those who remain, although sucked into a market driven global food production economy to survive, some still practice the old ways of using seaweed on the land, a mixed model of low intensive agriculture, which contributes to Scotland's Larder in a biodiverse and sustainable way. Crofting, also roots people in communities as Professor Jim Hunter has previously stated. When Scotland's rural and island places have a demographic deficit of young adults, we see a resurgence of young people embracing crofting which sits alongside other occupations in a pluralistic economy that is resilient to market shocks and arguably could contribute more to feeding us in the context of food security in the face of geopolitical tensions and climate change.

In the Agriculture and Rural Communities Act, Scotland has rural communities embedded in the Act. Without rural communities we would not have agricultural or any other land-based communities, which like everyone else require all the services that sustain life from schools, to health services, to hairdressers, plumbers, mechanics etc.

Scotland imports 40% of her food, surely a country so rural should be able to feed itself. Of course, the prize of whisky is powerful and we can grow that too....

How many countries would desire the land: urban ratio, along with the climate we have in Scotland, which has some of the richest pastures from Dumfries and Galloway to the precious habitat of the Moine in the north. Is it a colonial history, economic hardship which coloured the view of our land as of little value that we are happy to sell to those with large pockets across the globe, ringfence for carbon capture based on nebulous calculations and even more tentative rates of success in the tree growing business.

The wheel is turning, young able people crave access to land, to grow food, build their lives in a more sustainable model. The Scottish Oxford Real Farming Conference held at Comrie Croft in October 2024 hosted around 60 young people all keen to be involved in a food economy – if only they could get access to land. We know that 70% of the world are fed from small parcels of land of under 2 acres. In England the old mantra ‘give me 3 acres and a cow’ illustrates that land that is cared for, not exhausted by monocropping, can be very productive.

In the Islands Revival Declaration 2019, it was cited that influencing factors which contributed to addressing depopulation was people having a sense of ownership of assets, primarily the land. I live in the Outer Hebrides where 80% of the land is in community ownership and in research published in 2024 by Scottish Government in relation to all of Scotland’s islands, it was reported that the highest number of young people returning to any of the islands is to Uist and Barra.

Sometimes I wonder if Scotland realises what she has... the land to feed us, to provide energy, fresh water, wellbeing affirming access to the natural world, cultural identity in all its linguistic diversity. Scotland’s land should be in the hands of those who work it and live on it. In ‘Sea Room’ by Adam Nicholson, whose father ‘bought the Shiant’s’, small islands in The Minch between Harris and Skye, Nicholson writes that on a foray on his way to visit the islands he ‘owned’, he visits MacLeod’s Bar in Tarbert Harris, he comments that he was already aware ‘the English landowner is an alien, part joke, part irritant, a tourist who thinks he has some claim on the place’ so when a fellow, somewhat inebriated, commented ‘Are you the man who says he owns the Shiant’s?’, Adams replies, ‘I am actually’, to which the man says ‘you can no more say that those islands belong to you than I can say that I am the landlord of the moon’ He goes on to say, gesturing towards another man in the bar ‘Well, this is the man who should say he owns the Shiant’s anyway. He’s got sheep on the place. He does the work there. And he looks after it. And what have you got to say about it? What do you do to say that the Shiant’s are yours?’



Ma tha sibh ag iarraidh lethbhreac den sgrìobhainn seo sa Ghàidhlig, cuiribh post-d gu **commsteam@landcommission.gov.scot** no cuiribh fòn gu **01463 423 300**.

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