

# Scotland's Land Reform Futures project: Stakeholder Advisory Group

Summary Report – 2024-2025



*(Photograph from Comrie Croft, Courtesy of Naomi Beingessner)*

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## Context

The Scottish Government Rural and Environment Science and Analytical Services (RESAS) division funds the [Strategic Research Programme 2022 to 2027](#) to advance the evidence base in the development of rural affairs, food and environment policies. One of the themes (Theme E) of the Strategic Research Programme 2022 to 2027 is on **Rural Futures**. This theme has three research topics: rural communities, rural economy, and land reform. There are two projects within each topic, led by the James Hutton Institute (JHI) and Scotland's Rural College (SRUC). This publication is one of a series of publications from this theme.

Within the land reform topic, the two projects are:

1. [Scotland's Land Reform Futures](#)
2. Impacts of Land-Based Financial Support Mechanisms on Land Values, Landownership Diversification and Land Use Outcomes

Previous publications from the Scotland's Land Reform Futures project are:

- [Understanding community access to land data](#)
- [Alternative Land Tenure Models: International Case Studies and Lessons for Scotland](#)
- [Understanding public values of land: A developing typology](#)
- [Review of Land Ownership Data in Scotland](#)

A **Stakeholder Advisory Group** was convened to incorporate a transdisciplinary, deliberative knowledge exchange-based dimension into the research process. The project seeks to **facilitate learning between and within Scotland's landownership and land use sectors**, and to create spaces for different kinds of knowledge to inform future land reform policy development. The project also adheres to **an open science approach**, involving practitioners, policymakers, organisations and community members throughout the research process. With these aims in mind, through a process of purposive sampling across land sectors, and drawing on knowledge and contacts within the research team, **14 participants were recruited to the Stakeholder Advisory Group**. The participants have been drawn from across the land ownership and land use sector in Scotland and include: land reform-focussed academic researchers; representatives of communities that own land or have an interest in issues around land ownership and use; organisations engaged in issues relating to land ownership and land use; relevant government agencies or public bodies (e.g. the Scottish Land Commission and NatureScot); and relevant Scottish Government policy teams. The members of the Stakeholder Advisory Group are listed on the [project website](#).

Since the project's inception in 2022, the Stakeholder Advisory Group (SAG) has met three times a year, both online and in-person. During these meetings, the SAG is offered information about the progress of the Scotland's Land Reform Futures project. Space is made for feedback and discussion relevant to ongoing research activities. This summary report outlines the main points discussed in the Stakeholder Advisory group meetings over the course of its third year (April 2024 – March 2025).



## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all those on the Stakeholder Advisory Group for the Scottish Land Reform Futures project who have given their time to participate in the meetings that are summarised in this report. This research has been supported by the Scottish Government's [Strategic Research Programme 2022 to 2027](#).

## 1. Key themes of discussion during SAG meetings

### ***Spatial Data and Land Ownership Analysis***

Over the course of the year, there was ongoing discussion surrounding land data in Scotland, specifically relating to the issue of availability and usability of land data. This was highlighted in the [‘Review of Land Ownership Data in Scotland’](#) published in March 2024 (including policy recommendations), and was the focus of the SAG meeting March 2025, in light of ongoing analysis relating to the Land Reform Bill. During this meeting, Keith Matthews and Dave Miller (JHI), mentioned a potential new Scottish National Polygon dataset, which is currently under development at Registers of Scotland.

Keith also presented on the spatial analysis of landownership data in response to policy requests relating to the development of the Land Reform Bill. The SAG learned about and discussed the ongoing Spatial Contiguity Analysis, which centres on the question of: ‘Should fragmented landholdings under single ownership be treated as separate entities?’ For example, do large estates crosscut by roads or public land require separate land management plans (as proposed in the Land Reform Bill)? Keith highlighted the challenges associated with the integration of land records and limitations of available spatial datasets that are relevant to land reform policy. Additionally, existing mapping methods do not effectively have the capability to capture real-world complexities such as land that is managed by multiple stakeholders.

SAG members noted their interest in how data access and integration can be improved to support land data analysis. There was a discussion around the possibility of establishing a Trusted Research Environment (TRE) for data sharing. This initiative would advocate for the creation of a centralised data sharing system that can streamline access to land data for researchers and was the first recommendation from the Review report. This is a point of ongoing discussion between the research teams, RESAS and Scottish Government.

### ***Co-developed citizen science project***

Sam Poskitt (JHI) and team led discussions on the developing ‘citizen science’ research and the process of relationship building with potential participant community, including their research interests and desired involvement with the research process. In discussion with one community trust, the team developed a research proposal exploring the question, ‘What land and what kinds of land-uses are needed to help maintain a sustainable community?’ Alongside this, the team developed and presented a ‘menu’ of possible citizen science activities, including a visioning activity. Due to staff changes, this original community trust was unable to pursue their involvement with the citizen science project, but another community organisation reached out to Sam and were keen to become involved. In Year 4, the process of co-developing a



citizen science, land-related research project will commence with this second community trust.

### ***Community Landownership research***

Throughout the year, there was continued discussion of the community land ownership project led by Annabel Pinker (JHI). The key research question guiding the project is, 'How have those living within and/or variously involved with community-owned estates experienced the effects of transitioning to community landownership?'. The project aims to learn more about how those living on or connected to community-owned land understand the social, economic, political and environmental impacts of community land ownership. Four case studies of community landownership were selected based on geographical spread, duration of ownership, and to ensure that a mix of mainland, island, crofting and non-crofting communities would be represented.

SAG members reflected on the list of potential case studies, offering insights into specific community landowners and emphasising the value of including a crofters trust (i.e. not only a community trust with croft land), to address existing research gaps. SAG members also expressed their positivity regarding the two studies addressing community landownership in the Scotland's Land Reform Futures project (led by Annabel and Sam respectively). They suggested that future research could incorporate different types of community ownership, focussing on urban-rural interfaces.

### ***Community Values for Land***

Sam Poskitt (JHI) and team have led scoping research on 'community values for land'. A high-level survey has been developed and distributed to community trusts who have either been successful in acquiring land or are in the process of doing so. The survey builds on the typology of land values that was developed in the first year of the project, in collaboration with members of the SAG, and aims to explore changes in how local people value land during and after the process of acquiring or trying to acquire land. SAG members provided feedback and suggestions for improvement to survey design, reflecting on personal experiences (e.g. that land can take on a more strategic value following community acquisition). SAG members were interested in how values change on community land acquisition, ongoing acquisition processes (i.e. communities buying more land, and why they are not buying large land areas), and the differences between land and other asset purchases.

### ***Ethical research protocol when engaging with community landowners***

During the September 2024 meeting, a member of the Stakeholder Advisory Group (Catriona Mallows, UHI) gave a presentation on the ethics of engaging with community landowners, prompting a rich discussion. In 2023, the Community Landownership Academic Network (CLAN) conducted a survey that stemmed from reports of 'research fatigue' amongst community landowners. The survey reported that 10% of the total members of Community Land Scotland had received over 200 requests for collaboration on research projects over the previous 5-year research period, and that the most common requests were coming from academic institutions. Community representatives reported that they were not routinely asked for input on the planned research and its focus, that surveys were being sent out that were long and difficult to complete, and that they regarded many researchers as being uninformed. Currently, Catriona is working on developing an ethical research protocol, outlining expectations and best practice in community landownership research.





Many of the SAG members resonated with this issue, with several raising that they want to contribute to research, but that small staff teams and limited time mean they are not able to keep up with constant requests for input into projects (e.g. from Masters and PhD students in particular). SAG members emphasised that student supervisors had a duty of care to the communities targeted for research and suggested that the CLAN library be made available to University students.

### ***Long-Term Land Management Agreements***

Naomi Beingessner (JHI) presented updates on the scoping study of long-term land management agreements (LTAs) (led by Acacia Marshall and Annie McKee). The objective of this research was to inform Scottish Government policy around biodiversity, particularly the 30x30 target (i.e. that 30% of land to be designated for the enhancement and protection of biodiversity and protection by 2030). A [policy briefing report](#) was published in November 2024, based on a desk-based literature review and interviews with 13 stakeholders, generating a land management agreements typology, which details the range of agreements that are being used in Scotland. The report summarises perspectives shared on how best to engage landowners in LTAs to help enhance biodiversity and highlighted barriers to uptake and makes suggested policy recommendations. This scoping study was of interest to several SAG members. One member expressed the value of considering the role of tenancies and crofting and that the study would be useful in considering the challenges around land tenure types and facilitating environmental land management. They also found the research to be a useful thinking tool when considering the 30x30 target.

### ***Multi-Scale Case Studies***

Over the course of the year, the SAG received several updates on the multi-scale case studies research being carried out by Naomi Beingessner (JHI) and team. The research has offered insights into how landowning organisations can be supported to embrace policy changes; the importance of social capital, peer-to-peer learning and knowledge sharing in bringing about successful outcomes; and the role of planning processes in slowing down or impeding the achievement of landowners' objectives for land. Naomi highlighted that planning processes, and governmental processes more broadly, can both support and work against innovation. SAG members noted their interest in this issue and suggested that future research could be conducted on conflicting government policies.

### ***Ongoing role of the Stakeholder Advisory Group***

Throughout the year, there were ongoing discussions regarding the role, form, and impact of the Stakeholder Advisory Group. The research team reiterated the value of the SAG's input into the research process, in orienting research, honing research questions and making case study selections. Key examples of SAG-project team knowledge exchange during this year were a presentation by Catriona Mallows regarding best practice in community landownership research (as summarised above), and an update on the Land Reform Bill progress by Nye Todd (Scottish Government). The project plan includes further opportunities for SAG input in the final two years of the Scotland's Land Reform Futures project.

## **2. Next steps**

Meetings of the Stakeholder Advisory Group will continue in Years 4 and 5, following an established routine of late summer, early winter, and spring meetings, held both online and in-person (with hybrid options). The next meeting is planned for September 2025, although the



SAG has been invited to optional interim meetings regarding ongoing activities within the Scotland's Land Reform Futures project. In particular, a central activity during Year 4 is the organisation of an 'International Symposium' on land reform, a report of which will be available by the end of March 2026. In discussion with SAG members (during the March 2025 meeting and an optional meeting attended by SAG members in April 2025), it was agreed that the research team (led by Naomi Beingessner and Annie McKee, with support from Ellie Rennie, JHI) would develop plans for a Scotland-based two-day symposium involving invited international experts in land reform as well as key Scottish stakeholders. If the project budget allows, an optional fieldtrip for SAG members will be coordinated by the project team (led by Hannah Budge, JHI) to learn about alternative land tenure models in an international context, and for lessons to be shared during the Symposium. All stages of the Symposium and Fieldtrip plans are to be shared and approved by SAG members, and several have indicated their willingness to contribute to a working group.

The JHI and SRUC research teams would like to reiterate their thanks to all members of the SAG for their ongoing commitment and support for the Scotland's Land Reform Futures project.

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