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Dear Mark,

Thank you for your letter dated 16 September regarding rural and island proofing. Please see below for my response.

Rural Proofing

Rural considerations are mainstreamed in the Scottish Government, meaning that our best practice approach to policy making considers the impact and outcomes that policies will have across the whole of Scotland, including our rural areas. We are committed to ensuring that our policies work effectively for rural communities, recognising both the distinct challenges they face and the opportunities they offer.

In 2025, we introduced a new approach, called the Rural Assessment Toolkit, to support policymakers while they develop policy, strategy and services, helping to support a consistent approach to considering rural impacts during policy development.

Initially conceived as a tool to support delivery of the National Strategy for Economic Transformation (NSET), its scope was subsequently broadened to help ensure rural needs are considered across all Scottish Government policy development. The Toolkit and accompanying guidance were developed in collaboration with rural stakeholders, researchers and policy experts, before being externally peer reviewed. It was then user tested with policy teams across Scottish Government, and feedback from this process informed the final Toolkit, guidance and supporting learning resources which were made available for use in April 2025.

Successful rural proofing relies on three things: gathering and sharing relevant data; involving stakeholders to bring the rural voice into the policy making process; and delivery of clear, tailored information at the earliest possible stage. Through engagement, assessment and evidence-based decision-making, the toolkit helps policy teams to:

- understand the strengths and challenges of rural communities and businesses
- identify potential policy impacts, both intended and unintended

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- ensure that outcomes are fair and reasonable, while meeting the aspirations of rural areas

In practice, the Rural Assessment Toolkit encourages policy teams to embed rural considerations throughout the policy cycle, from development and implementation to monitoring and evaluation.

Alongside the rural proofing guidance shared on internal staff networks, we also provide internal learning opportunities for officials to further their understanding of rural proofing and the Rural Assessment Toolkit.

While officials are encouraged to use the Toolkit to strengthen policy development, it is not mandatory.

With regards to further developing our rural proofing practices, our immediate priority is to share the Rural Assessment Toolkit with local authorities and public bodies, raise awareness, maintain supporting data, and provide support to teams to undertake effective assessments, including timely engagement with rural communities.

We have spent this summer engaging with people, communities and organisations across rural Scotland on a Rural Renewal Bill, helping us ensure that any legislative proposals are rooted in evidence and informed by the experiences of rural communities across Scotland.

Through this Bill, we will aim to support rural communities and businesses to thrive. Our engagement has given us a good understanding of the challenges faced across policy areas such as planning, housing and transport.

In relation to your point about the Rural Delivery Plan, the decision was taken in February 2026 not to publish the Plan, instead focusing resource on strengthening rural proofing across the Scottish Government.

Islands proofing

The Scottish Government recognises the importance of the effectiveness and consistency of Island Communities Impact Assessments (ICIAs). . An ICIA is intended to identify and assess whether a policy, strategy or service is likely to have a significantly different effect on island communities and, where such impacts are identified, to consider opportunities to address, mitigate or improve outcomes.

The Scottish Government supports officials undertaking ICIAs through the *Island Communities Impact Assessments: Guidance and Toolkit*, which provides a structured approach to assessment, alongside the '*Island-Proofing*' your work leaflet, which promotes awareness and understanding of island-proofing responsibilities. Advice and support are also available from the Scottish Government's Islands Team to assist policy teams and promote a consistent approach across government.

Enhancing island proofing is a priority within the recently published National Islands Plan. Through the Plan, we have committed to identifying practical improvements and setting out clear, targeted actions to support the consistent and robust application of ICIAs across relevant areas of work.

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As part of this commitment, we will work with relevant authorities and island communities to embed island considerations more systematically within policy development and decision-making processes and to improve understanding of the ICIA process. We have commissioned the Scottish Islands Federation to identify and promote best practice in community engagement, with a particular focus on involving young people. This work will produce practical guidance that will be shared across the Scottish Government and made available to other relevant authorities.

We will also continue to promote existing guidance and support available to policy teams and strengthen how we report on the Scottish Government's use of ICIA's through National Islands Plan reporting. Alongside the commitments in the National Islands Plan, these actions will help to improve awareness, consistency and the effective application of island proofing across government.

Yours sincerely,



JIM FAIRLIE

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