RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

SOUTH OF SCOTLAND ENTERPRISE BILL

SUBMISSION FROM COMMUNITY LAND SCOTLAND

Community Land Scotland represents the interests of Scotland’s community landowners, who collectively own and manage over 500,000 acres of land in Scotland for community benefit.

We welcome the creation of South of Scotland Enterprise as an agency with the specific remit of furthering the economic and social development of the south of Scotland and improving the amenity and environment of the region. We particularly welcome the inclusion of a social element in the new agency’s remit as that is integral to ensuring the sustainable development of the south of Scotland as a whole. Community Land Scotland also welcomes the Bill’s inclusion of “supporting community organisations to help them meet their communities’ needs” as one element of furthering the economic and social development of the south of Scotland. However, we consider that the Bill should include an explicit commitment to supporting the advancement of community land and asset ownership in the south of Scotland by establishing a Community Assets Unit within South of Scotland Enterprise similar to that contained in Highlands and Islands Enterprise. We explain the reasons for that in the remainder of our evidence submission.

The Policy Memorandum accompanying the Bill rightly notes that the south of Scotland has “significant land assets”. It also outlines a list of potential activities the new agency may undertake to help sustain and grow communities. Supporting community land and asset ownership is not included on that list. That is a surprising omission given the increasing focus on community land and asset ownership as a cross-cutting area of public policy of significance to both rural and urban Scotland. Legislative instruments including the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 and the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016 have simplified existing Community Rights to Buy land and assets and introduced new Community Rights to Buy in relation to Abandoned, Neglected or Detrimental Land and in relation to furthering Sustainable Development. Financial support is available to enable communities to purchase land and/or other assets via the Scottish Land Fund and Empowering Communities Fund. The Scottish Government has also introduced a target of getting one million acres of land into community ownership by the end of 2020.

The introduction of these legislative and financial policy instruments, together with the ‘one million acres’ target reflects the central importance of community ownership of land and other assets as a driver for effective community-led regeneration and enterprise in support of place-based sustainable development. It is now well established that community land and asset ownership helps retain and increase population in rural areas. Community ownership contributes to local economic development in both rural and urban settings by generating business opportunities, employment and income streams for reinvestment by communities for their collective benefit. It helps communities to improve the environmental quality of their places through sustainable land and asset management. Crucially too, community
ownership adds to the social wellbeing and resilience of communities by empowering them to take control of land and assets which help safeguard their own futures.

Data published by the Scottish Government indicate that, as of June 2017, there are 562,229 acres in community ownership, comprising 2.9% of the total land area of Scotland. The data indicate that there are 492 land parcels/assets in community ownership, owned by 403 community groups. However, the data also confirm there is a distinct geographical concentration of community land/asset ownership in Scotland with the vast majority of that acreage and number of community owners being located in the Highlands and Islands. Specifically, there are 527,252 acres of land in community ownership in the Highlands and Islands. The region contains 163 parcels of land and/or other assets in community ownership, owned by 140 community groups. In contrast, the Scottish Borders and Dumfries and Galloway (the area that South of Scotland Enterprise will serve) collectively has 794 acres of land in community ownership. The region contains 35 parcels of land and/or other assets in community ownership, owned by 33 community groups.

The above data highlight a glaring discrepancy regarding the extent to which community land and asset ownership has penetrated the south of Scotland as a focus for sustainable development in comparison to the Highlands and Islands. They also underscore the need to provide co-ordinated and dedicated institutional support for community land ownership in the south of Scotland to fully enable that ownership model to contribute to the policy ambitions articulated for the new agency in the Bill's accompanying Policy Memorandum. A key strategic issue, both in economic and wider sustainable development terms, is how to renew rural areas in the south of Scotland that have low population densities and challenging demographic trends. How land is owned and used, and to what purposes, are central factors in addressing that strategic issue.

The institutional support for community ownership provided by Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) through its Community Land Unit (now Community Assets Unit), established in 1997, has been a key driver in enabling community land and asset ownership to become an increasingly mainstream activity in the Highlands and Islands, as illustrated by the above data. HIE’s Community Assets Unit provides start-up and technical assistance for community groups at pre-acquisition stage; community engagement via networking, information exchange and visits and skills training; land and asset acquisition support via capital funding; post-acquisition project support; and capacity-building, training and development. The creation of South of Scotland Enterprise offers an opportunity to produce a ‘step-change’ in the prevalence of community ownership in the south of Scotland as a means to support the sustainable development of the region. Integrating a Community Assets Unit, similar to that contained in HIE, within the new agency is central to ensuring that opportunity is grasped.

For the above reasons Community Land Scotland therefore strongly advocates making explicit reference on the face of the Bill to providing support for community ownership of land and other assets though the establishment of a Community Assets Unit within the new South of Scotland Enterprise.
Community Land Scotland would be happy to discuss any aspect of our submission with the Committee if that would be helpful.