



Official Report
Aithisg Oifigeil

DRAFT

Rural Affairs Committee

Comataidh nan Cùisean Dùthchail

Wednesday 28 October 2026

Session 7



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RURAL AFFAIRS COMMITTEE **8th Meeting 2026, Session 7**

CONVENER

*Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Andrew Baxter (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Dawn Black (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP)

*Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)

Jamie Langan (South Scotland) (Reform)

*Laura Mitchell (Moray) (SNP)

*Emma Roddick (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Dr Josh Doble (Community Land Scotland)

Sarah-Jane Laing (Scottish Land & Estates)

Ewen McLachlan (Development Trusts Association Scotland)

Hamish Trench (Scottish Land Commission)

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament

Rural Affairs Committee

Wednesday 28 October 2026

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:15]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Mark Ruskell): Good morning, and welcome to the Rural Affairs Committee's eighth meeting in session 7. Please ensure that all electronic devices are switched to silent. We have received apologies from Jamie Langan.

Our first item of business is a decision on taking items 3 and 4 in private. Item 3 is consideration of the evidence on land reform that we will hear this morning. Item 4 is consideration of the evidence that we heard on pre-budget scrutiny at our meeting on 7 October. Are we agreed to take those items in private?

Members indicated agreement.

Land Reform

09:15

The Convener: Item 2 is an evidence session on land reform, for which we have scheduled around an hour and a half. As always, I will be grateful if questions and answers are concise.

This is the committee's introductory session on land reform, and I welcome Dr Josh Doble, director of policy and advocacy at Community Land Scotland; Sarah-Jane Laing, chief executive of Scottish Land & Estates; and, joining us remotely, Ewen McLachlan, chairperson of the Development Trusts Association Scotland; and Hamish Trench, chief executive of the Scottish Land Commission.

As ever, I remind our witnesses that they do not need to operate their microphones, as our broadcasting team will do that for them.

I will ask the first question, which is a broad one about what you see as the priorities for land reform in this session of the Scottish Parliament.

Hamish Trench (Scottish Land Commission): Good morning. We had significant legislation in the previous session, so the focus now needs to be on delivery. The Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2025 introduced regulation for large-scale landholdings, which is welcome and necessary. We now need to move to implementing that, so that people feel its impact and benefit in practice soon.

However, it is also clear—from experience over the past few years, it is very clear—that land reform needs to be more than just one big bill every decade or every few years. It needs to be a co-ordinated programme of reforms that spans many Government portfolios.

There are practical ways to deliver changes—for example, through tax and fiscal policy, using public land ownership actively, and the local government reform opportunities that are coming up. However, our priorities at the commission involve helping to implement the 2025 act. In particular, we want to deliver the new land and communities commissioner functions as they come on stream. We want to deliver those well and effectively, and we want to make the most of the new measures on large landholdings that are coming through.

It is also important for all of us to look beyond the current act. On other priorities, there remains a need to refresh momentum on community land ownership through legislative improvements and increasing the land fund. We are keen to look at opening up opportunities for more people to own and use land—in particular, small-scale landholdings. Land reform is not all about large-

scale landholdings. There is a huge opportunity and a huge appetite out there for people to access and own small-scale landholdings.

The third area to flag for the next few years is the real opportunity to make progress on delivering a joined-up land information system. There is a huge opportunity to improve land data and, in doing so, to underpin so many of the other reforms that the Parliament and the Government are looking for.

The Convener: Thank you.

Sarah-Jane Laing, what are your members' priorities for land reform?

Sarah-Jane Laing (Scottish Land & Estates): There is quite a lot of synergy between what Scottish Land & Estates would like and what Hamish Trench has mentioned. I will run those off first. The land data issue is critical. When it comes to an evidence-based approach to future land reform, land use policy and land legislation, we do not, at the moment, have enough evidence to allow us to make informed decisions in all areas. Having a comprehensive land data set is really important.

We would like the session to focus very much on what land is delivering for Scotland. During the previous parliamentary session, there was a focus on ownership. During this one, I would like the focus to be on how we use land, land use policy and land legislation in order to deliver what Scotland needs when it comes to new homes, economic growth, climate resilience, woodland creation and biodiversity. Quite a lot of that will be done outwith legislation. It is about how to embed the principles of land reform, in its widest sense, in areas such as public sector reform, planning reform and the potential new rural renewal bill, whatever that ends up being called.

It is about how we embed the principles of good, productive land use, which is at the heart of land reform, into some of the other things that we would like to do. Hamish Trench has already touched on the implementation of the 2025 act. It would be great if that formed one aspect of what we do in the parliamentary session but did not become our whole focus. We should also look at the great work that has been done to create opportunities for community groups, joint ventures, new entrants and all the other new things that are starting to happen outwith legislation and consider how we can support them through training and good practice and by sharing exemplars. In this parliamentary session, we would like to ensure that there is a big focus on the non-regulatory initiatives that are making a real difference in rural Scotland.

Ewen McLachlan (Development Trusts Association Scotland): The Development Trusts

Association of Scotland—DTAS—would like Scotland's natural assets to remain locally managed and controlled using tools such as tax policies and natural capital regulations. So many of our members own assets and land, and they would like long-term financial support to enable communities to buy land and to cover the ongoing costs after acquisitions. It is great to be able to purchase land or assets, but we need support to generate sustainability. We would also like communities to be given access to affordable legal and technical guidance throughout the purchasing process, including help with existing leases. We would like high land prices to be addressed and a framework to be created that stops land ownership being concentrated among a few buyers. We would also like there to be stronger ownership laws, and we would like the committee to hold the Government to account in its implementation of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2025, so that it delivers real opportunities for community ownership.

Dr Josh Doble (Community Land Scotland): Good morning, everyone. I could give quite a long answer, but I will try to be as succinct as possible. Before answering some of the technocratic points, I will take a step back and speak about the purpose of land reform, why we are having a conversation about it and why successive Scottish Governments have attempted to deal with it. To pick up on something that Sarah-Jane Laing said, land reform is fundamentally about changing who owns, manages and uses land. It is about looking at how land is delivering in the public interest, which the Land Commission has focused on extensively since it was first established.

In this session of the Parliament, I do not want us to lose sight of the fact that it is incredibly important who owns land in Scotland. Legislation that was introduced in the previous parliamentary session has taken small steps towards addressing that, but we have not really had a meaningful discussion about it, nor is there a policy or legislative framework to change who owns land in Scotland. You will all be well aware of the statistics that are in your briefings about the high concentration of land ownership in Scotland. The figures are thrown around a lot, but it is a tangible issue for the public priorities for our land. We have a housing crisis and a depopulation crisis, and there have been weak attempts to address biodiversity loss and the climate emergency—that all comes back to the fact that a small number of entities control so much of our land. We are an international anomaly in that respect and it needs to be addressed. Two weeks ago, the United Nations produced a report that focuses specifically on the increasing concentration of land ownership globally. I want committee members to hold in their minds the fact that that is the pressing issue that

rural Scotland faces. Land reform underpins all the different areas that you will be looking at during the session. You need to think about issues such as subsidy reform, housing and depopulation through a land reform lens. Until we change who owns the land, we cannot start to address those issues.

The Convener: What are your priorities, then?

Dr Doble: I agree with what Sarah-Jane Laing and Hamish Trench said. Data is important, and we need a land information service with a complete land register, which has been spoken about for a long time. The register of controlling interests in land needs to be meaningfully fulfilled. We agree that the implementation of the 2025 act is important and that it needs to get up and running. However, in order for that to happen, the Scottish Land Commission needs to be properly resourced at commissioner level as well as at staff level, so that it can deliver its new functions.

In order to deliver some of the land reform outcomes that we need, we need a Scottish land fund that is fit for purpose and enhanced. We will see whether that fund gets protected in the upcoming budget. There were previous commitments from the Scottish Government that it would be £20 million per year, but it is currently £7 million and we do not know what is going to happen to it next year. At the moment, that is the primary vehicle for land reform in Scotland.

Similarly, there has been a community right to buy review in relation to the land rights that communities can use to access land. That issue has been widely consulted on and there is, I think, broad agreement about it being a positive step forward. However, we need to see legislation on it that is not in a rural renewal bill but is a discrete piece of legislation.

I will make a couple of other points in relation to things that the committee will be looking at. When you are thinking about rural support plans, you need to look at subsidy reform through a land reform lens. How are subsidy payments—whether forestry grants or agricultural payments—increasing the concentration of ownership and rewarding large-scale land ownership without necessarily delivering the public benefits that a public investment should deliver? There is other big-picture stuff, but we can come to that.

The Convener: Yes. We can come to the detail of some of those points later.

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con): Here we go again. When I first stood to be an MSP, my predecessor, Alex Fergusson, said to me, “There are two things you want to avoid: deer management and land reform.” I am into my third session and, sadly, once again, we have a

Government that seems to be obsessed with land reform—we are seeing it again.

As Hamish Trench said, we did a significant piece of work on land reform last year. Surely we should be spending the next few years ensuring that legislation is implemented in the best way to deliver outcomes.

When it comes to outcomes, should we really be measuring success by who owns the land or in terms of changing ownership patterns from large to small? In some people’s book, it appears to be a measure of success if there is change. However, surely it should be about delivering outcomes, particularly when public attitudes suggest that healthcare, housing, economic growth and the cost of living always outrank land reform as priorities. Should we be focusing on who owns the land or on ensuring that our farms and estates deliver the outcomes that we want as a population?

Hamish Trench: Who owns the land is absolutely important, and we should focus on both who owns land and how land is used, because the two are inextricably connected. We can debate forever what balance we might put on those, but the fact is that the two are inextricably connected.

Ownership brings the power to make decisions about land use. It brings a bundle of rights that give people the ability to direct decisions about land use. That gets to the heart of land reform in relation to how decisions are made, where the power lies and how the public interest is built into that framework.

Land reform is not, and should not be, about individual landowners; it should be about the system of ownership—how our land is owned, how decisions are made and how that is done in a way that maximises the public interest. With that in mind, the answer is yes, we should focus on that.

I would suggest that the reason why Government and Parliament keep coming back to land reform is that it remains an issue both in practice on the ground and in public debate. All the work and engagement that we have done over the past few years—we did a wide engagement last year called Scotland futures—to look at where land reform should go tells us that it is still an issue and that people see the impacts of ownership patterns and decision making on land use very much in their communities.

For us, success is about confidence. Success would be people feeling confident that our land system is fair and fit for our time now, and confident that they are able to access and own land. It would also, indeed, be those who own land feeling confident in making decisions and investing.

Finlay Carson: Can I just ask, when it comes to—

The Convener: I am sorry, but we will hear from the other witnesses as well.

Ewen McLachlan: I will go back a little bit, to what Josh Doble was saying. I am not just a development trust chair; I am a part-time development officer with the Assynt Development Trust, in the north-west, up in Lochinver. We live in an area with the most concentrated private land ownership, and we are facing a depopulation crisis. I have to say that Scotland is an anomaly among modern democracies in that the majority of our population are squeezed into the central belt while the vast majority of the land is in the hands of a few. Rather than contributing significantly to the Scottish economy, it is contributing to the wealth of the few individuals who have ownership of the land.

Around 5 million of us live in roughly one eighth of the country's land, while the other seven eighths is under Europe's most concentrated private land ownership. We need to open that land up to communities, to enterprise, to sustainability and to improving the infrastructure. The inadequate infrastructure, both north and south of the central belt, has contributed to this interconnected crisis in housing, depopulation, declining health and social services and democratic participation.

It is not down to geography—we need only look at Ireland. A century ago, the Irish faced the same challenges, but they systematically redistributed ownership and control. Therefore, as I have said, it is not about geography—it is about bold governance. If this is not coming up as a priority, it is because people are not fully grasping our desperate need for housing north and south of the central belt. There is so much more that we could be doing that would put trust into our communities and build sustainability into the system.

Dr Doble: I fundamentally agree with what Ewen McLachlan has just said. One of the reasons for land reform perhaps not emerging as a public priority is that it is a hidden issue. It is hidden from public perception, and people do not necessarily join the dots naturally between all the issues that Ewen has just described and its being a land issue.

I am not surprised to hear that Finlay Carson was warned against deer management and land reform—the two things are the same. You cannot manage deer properly until you address the ownership and management of the land. Indeed, with both issues, you are also taking on incredibly powerful vested interests. It will be a thorny political issue to grapple with, which is why, in its successive attempts at introducing some form of land reform, the Scottish Government has never

meaningfully pushed the dial on changing how land is owned or managed.

I agree that outcomes are absolutely vital. If we look at the situation in rural Scotland that Ewen McLachlan was just describing, the state of our peatland and the state of our deer numbers, the outcomes show that the status quo is not working—and the status quo, as Ewen has just said, is concentrated private land ownership. This is about monopoly private land ownership. As Hamish Trench said, all of us would welcome growth in a diversity of types of ownership—small-scale private ownership, co-operative ownership and more public ownership. Private enterprise is absolutely to be welcomed, but, in situations where very large landholdings are held by a few people, it strangles the life out of rural development, and the outcomes that we are seeing are the poor outcomes that we have around rural Scotland at the moment.

Sarah-Jane Laing: It will not surprise you to hear that I am going to disagree with quite a lot of what Ewen McLachlan and Josh Doble have said, because it takes us back to the argument about the correlation—or the perceived correlation—between large-scale land ownership and negative outcomes. There is no evidence to support any direct correlation; indeed, the Scottish Government could not find any such evidence. That is why it decided that its policy objective was to address concentration as a policy objective on its own, instead of its being linked to measures of success.

The realities are that the bulk of the peatland restoration happening across Scotland is happening in large-scale landholdings, and the two new towns that are being built in Scotland—at Tornagrain and Chapelfton—are being delivered by large-scale landowners. The bulk of things that are happening in rural Scotland—river restoration, job creation, woodland plantation and so on—are actually being delivered at scale. The scale issue is also why the estates that are also community owners have held on to the bulk of those that they bought at time of community ownership, and it is why the Scottish Government is also the largest landowner in Scotland and an acquirer of land, adding to that in terms of scale.

Finlay Carson picked up on a really important point about public perception. Josh Doble suggested that the public do not really understand what they are being asked when they are asked to give their views on land reform. I find it quite interesting to look at the research that has been carried out by what are now—dare I say it?—the vested interests, which are those people, agencies and others pushing land reform. The question that the Scottish Land Commission asked was, "What would you like to change about how land is owned

in Scotland?” not “Do you want changes to be made to land in Scotland?”

We have worked with NFU Scotland, the Diffley Partnership and others on a new piece of research that we are about to publish, and the results that we have, from a sample almost twice the size of that of the Scotland futures research, suggest that concentration of ownership is way down the list, with about 6 per cent of people thinking that it was a priority for the Government. The priorities were affordable energy, jobs, transport, accessible health services and housing. People also feel excluded from local democracy, which I think is an area that we have not looked at. This is not about land—it is about rural people looking for solutions to rural depopulation, and, as I have said, it feels as though many of the solutions to the issues that we are facing are coming from large landowners.

I feel that we are rehashing some of the issues that we have gone over before, but it is really important to put on record that what has been said does not actually reflect other public attitude surveys and it certainly does not affect what is happening on the ground with regard to wildfire resilience and so many other issues.

The Convener: We have a lot of questions and a lot of members who want to come in to unpack some of those issues.

Emma Roddick (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP): Good morning. I want to talk about patterns of land ownership and the increasing concentration of ownership despite, as we have heard, many attempts to bring in stronger land reform legislation. What is causing those patterns? Is it a matter of the previous laws not being the right ones, or is it that it is difficult to turn that principle into reality on the ground?

The Convener: Let us start with Hamish Trench again.

Hamish Trench: It is striking that the pattern of ownership has, if anything, become more concentrated in recent years. There are a couple of factors behind that. One factor is economics; there are undoubtedly economic factors driving the scale of ownership—that is very clear. Another factor is that, in the past few years, there has been the emergence of new buyers acquiring land in Scotland. For example, there was a brief flurry of activity by natural capital buyers back in 2022-23. We thought that that was going to become a big pattern, but that has not worked out and they are not currently buying land at quite that rate.

Nonetheless, that showed that the land market is vulnerable to those kinds of speculative changes precisely because it is open. There are very few public interest guardrails on who is able to buy how much land in Scotland, and the land market is

open and vulnerable to those kinds of trends and the speculative bubbles that come along. Fundamentally, the problem is that there are very few restrictions on how much land anyone can own in Scotland. Therefore, the land market is open to economic drivers. It is also open to personal motivations. If someone simply seeks to acquire more land, it is very easy for them to do so—there are no regulations preventing that at this point.

Emma Roddick: Would you suggest any particular regulations?

Hamish Trench: The commission has proposed a public interest test on the acquisition of significant amounts of land. We think that that would be a meaningful way of intervening—not in the vast majority of land acquisitions, but in significant ones that may pose a risk to the public interest. However, if we really seek to reform the pattern of land ownership, we need to consider the wider question of policy measures such as taxes and fiscal policies that would have a significant influence on ownership and acquisition decisions.

Sarah-Jane Laing: Two factors are causing those land ownership patterns. One is the land market, as Hamish Trench said. The reality of the land market is that more than 90 per cent of landholdings that have come on to the market in the past five years are small-scale landholdings, so large-scale landholdings are not coming on to the market that often. There has not been a churn, so we would not expect there to be massive changes in that period of time.

However, even within those 90 per cent of landholdings, farmers and land managers are acquiring land to add to their existing landholdings. Government policy is driving scale—for example, there is more peatland restoration and planting. People are looking to acquire land to increase their activity, often at the catchment level and in response to changes to things such as the rural support plan. Farmers and land managers sometimes seek to acquire more land because of the fragility of their current economic model but also because of opportunities. It is about understanding the interplay between Government drivers in other areas and how those affect the land market.

I also note that, as Hamish Trench said, there have been some new players on the land market. It is quite interesting to look at the work that the Land Commission does on the land market—it is one of the most valuable pieces of work that we have available. That work has shown that the trends and spikes that occurred were pretty short lived. Again, we need to be careful, because what we saw in the past few years with some of the natural capital buyers was not normal. It was certainly not normal in relation to the prices that

were paid for land, and land values have since cooled in several areas.

Even where there are large-scale landholdings coming on to the market, there are more and more small disposals being made prior to the whole holding coming on. There are discussions with local community groups, sitting tenants and existing businesses, but none of that is captured in the figures. A 9,000-acre estate could go down to 8,500 acres, but only by getting rid of a few acres here and there. That is changing the nature of the landholdings that come on to the market, but it all slips under the radar when we consider the changing market. Because there is no granular data about what exactly is happening in our land market, we cannot quite get behind those headline figures.

However, you are absolutely right that people who own land in Scotland are operating in an open market, and everyone is able to participate in that market to varying degrees.

Dr Doble: I will pick up on that final point and some of the good examples that Sarah-Jane Laing talked about. This issue is one of the reasons why lotting—the provisions that are coming in through the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2025, which you might well be scrutinising over the coming years—might be a helpful way to break up estates in the way that Sarah-Jane mentioned. Rather than that being based on good practice, there will be more regulatory oversight.

Before I come back to your question on the reasons for the increase in the concentration of land ownership, I will touch on the point about scale, because it is an important point. Across Europe, there are many examples of nature restoration in places where there is collaborative work across smaller landholdings and where there is much greater food security and resilience than we have. The idea that scale delivers what we want is a fallacy. Instead, there is a single point of failure. If a big landowner says that they do not want to do something, they do not have to do it, and that thing will then not happen on a huge scale.

There is an idea that a huge amount of activity happens on private estates. Some 83 per cent of rural land is privately owned, so, of course, economic activity happens on those estates. We do not have access to the counterfactual, because ownership is so concentrated in a few hands. It is important to get those points on the record.

There has also been a slight misrepresentation of what I said about public perceptions. Those perceptions relate to the fact that land reform does not touch enough people's lives, so they do not join the dots. As Ewen McLachlan said, there is a huge concentration of people who live in the central belt

and who do not have the opportunity to see these land reform issues play out on a day-to-day level.

To come back to your question on the concentration of land ownership, I agree with what Hamish Trench said about the proposals that the Land Commission has put forward for a public interest test. The land market might be cooling, but the trend of concentration is increasing, which is happening for many of the reasons that Hamish provided.

We also need to think about the global trends. I mentioned the UN report that came out two weeks ago, and this is a global issue. Investors, natural capital players—although less so here—and asset management organisations are moving money around globally, and they are looking for countries that have low regulation and where there is a medium-term prospect of the regulatory climate not being too disastrous, because they are seeking to keep their money safe. That should be on the record. The public and the Parliament should have a close look at the growth of asset management organisations buying up land in Scotland and trying to gain vertically integrated systems when they buy agricultural or forestry land. They are essentially acquiring our natural resources and future proofing their investments, whereas the land should deal with the public interest concerns that are coming.

I also want to get the issue of land taxes on the record. There seems to be some political movement towards land taxes, and a motion on land taxes was put forward by two ministers at the Scottish National Party conference a couple of weeks ago. Land taxes have been spoken about in Scotland for a long time, and I hope that there might be some movement in this parliamentary session towards thinking about how fiscal reform, taxation and subsidy reform can deliver some land reform outcomes and ensure that the land is working in the public interest.

Ewen McLachlan: I will give the committee my lived experience from the perspectives of DTAS and the Assynt Development Trust. We are an anchor organisation for the NorthWest2045, which is a collaborative non-constituted entity that comprises community owners, environmental owners such as the John Muir Trust and the Scottish Wildlife Trust, private landowners, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and Highland Council. We have all come together to tackle the polycrisis that concentrated land ownership has created for our area—a crisis across housing, childcare, health, infrastructure, transport and nature restoration.

The concentrated ownership of land has driven us to the lowest population density in all of Europe. There are roughly 3,200 people from Coigach, in

the south, up to Durness and across to Bettyhill, which is an area of roughly 3,000km². There is a population of 1.6 people per square kilometre, which is the lowest density in Europe—it is lower than in Lapland, which is where Santa lives, for any young people who are listening.

In the past 25 years, our population has dropped by 10 per cent and our school roll has fallen massively. Kinlochbervie high school was built in the 1990s with European Union funding and has capacity for 160 children from first to sixth year. However, the current school roll is in the low 30s and is forecast to fall to 25 pupils by the end of the decade. Moreover, many of our townships have more over-90-year-old residents than under-fives. Therefore, if you are looking for evidence, you will see it in the falling school rolls and in people moving away because the infrastructure and housing are not there.

09:45

The biggest barrier to providing attainable housing is access to land. We work regularly with all the landowners, but I have to say that I found Sarah-Jane Laing's comment about the Scottish Government being the largest landowner in Scotland interesting. In Scotland, we have an overseas individual who is the largest private landowner not just in Scotland but in Europe. He is the largest landowner in Scotland because we have legislation that allows him to buy the land and not to contribute anything at all—or, at least, not much—to His Majesty's Treasury or the Scottish economy. According to the last records that I saw, he had announced an £8 million loss, so there really are no capital gains coming into the Treasury.

It is a bourach—it really is. It is a complete mess. We are struggling to survive here, yet, if we had some form of greater support for community ownership, we could address things and become sustainable. The area north and south of the central belt is an entrepreneurial one, but we are not giving the people outside the central belt a fair crack of the whip, and that has to change.

It is good to hear the different views coming from the committee, but I think that we have to be bold in our governance and actually introduce a land value tax that is fair and comparable to those in other countries.

Emma Roddick: I want to come back to you on that, Ewen. I am familiar with NorthWest2045 and the work of the Assynt Development Trust. Not all of the challenges will be resolved just by resolving the issue of ownership. On the point that you have just made about requiring taxes to be paid and the public benefit that comes from that, are you confident that, with people who can very well afford

to pay such taxes, the benefits would be felt by the community, or do we also need a cohesive policy that allows the community to take forward purchases and take control as well?

Ewen McLachlan: Totally. We are looking for a fair crack of the whip, to allow us to work with the estates. It is a mutual interest thing. I was speaking to one land manager recently and it was pointed out that their estate needs staff. Now, their staff might have children, but if there is no school or no houses for staff, their business will not grow as well as it could.

It is all about working together to address the imbalances. For a start, we have Victorian infrastructure. I will just mention three-phase electricity, for example. The east coast might be getting £22.9 billion to take renewable energy away, but the north and west coasts have only pockets of three-phase electricity and, without it, there is no enterprise. Our communities need a level playing field, to allow us to work with the estates and turn the place into a sustainable entrepreneurial area, so that we do not have to continually come back with a begging bowl.

Emma Roddick: In that case, Josh Doble, what else is needed? You mentioned taxes, too. How can we ensure that, alongside any fair land taxes, communities would still have a chance to take ownership of land and do what is needed for their local area?

Dr Doble: Hopefully, the Government will design such a tax, but it will all depend on how it is designed. If you want taxation to change behaviour or raise revenue, you need a clear line of taxation in this area, with a budget line going from it to a particular outcome, be it the land fund, a rural development pot or whatever. That will allow you to join the dots. We have previously had proposals for levies on particular things, so that the money raised could go into the land fund. It allows you to close the loop, as it were: you see an issue, you introduce fiscal reform around it and the money raised goes directly into what is seen as a solution. Something akin to that would be sensible.

I should say that the committee can play an important role in scrutinising the plans that the Government might be developing and, indeed, in asking the Government to see those plans. This could be a genuinely transformational intervention that I think should be absolutely welcomed, but the committee has a role to play in ensuring that it picks up exactly those kinds of issues and makes any plan work for the people in those areas who might be impacted.

The Convener: Do you want to comment, Sarah-Jane?

Sarah-Jane Laing: There are a few things to come back on, but I will quickly pick up on that last point about land tax. Again, it is important to ensure that we do not see things in isolation. We are dealing with a rural economy that has been hit with non-domestic rates rises that are untenable. We have rural businesses folding every week. We have businesses of all types, including community businesses, that are facing increasing costs of doing business. Looking at the input costs that those businesses have, I could not agree more with Ewen McLachlan about us all working together.

The reality is that depopulation is happening in areas where we have fragmented land ownership and in areas where we have high levels of community ownership. It is happening everywhere in rural Scotland. If we put that down to one form of land ownership, we are doing a disservice to rural Scotland. Depopulation has to be tackled by us all coming together and looking at what levers we have and what we can do.

Ewen McLachlan talked about WildLand, which is the largest private landowner in Scotland, and mentioned the perceived lack of money going into the public coffers from that. However, I suggest that you look at wages bills and how much is being spent on local contractors. Money is being ploughed into the rural economy on the back of that, regardless of your views on whether one non-Scottish individual can or should own that land in Scotland.

Josh Doble talked about lotting as a provision in the new act that would deal with the situation that I mentioned, which involves communities being aware of what is happening before something comes to the market and having the appropriate conversations. That is prior notification. It has nothing to do with the forced fragmentation of estates. It is about ensuring that positive conversations are happening. As Ewen McLachlan said, we need to think about where we work together to maximise the opportunities that might be available, either with current ownership or at the point of a change of ownership. I completely agree that there is more that we could all do on that.

Hamish Trench: I want to go back briefly to Emma Roddick's question on taxation. There is a sound case for taxing land and land value better than we currently do. The direction that Government has set out for local government reform brings with it the opportunity to ensure that that would benefit local economies in a way that it does not currently. Fundamentally, the Scottish Land Commission has looked at tax options and tax proposals ranging from carbon land tax and taxes on vacant and derelict land, through to the wider question of land value tax and international

experience. The common theme across all that work is that, for those options to be viable policy options for Government, we need to do the groundwork now on the land data and information that would allow us to implement reforms. Before we even get to the point at which we debate the finer points of the policy choices or decide how to better target current taxation, we need a much better information system to underpin those discussions. That is work that could be done in this parliamentary session.

The Convener: I want to ask about Scotland's land information service—ScotLIS. The original target date for that to be operational was 2017, but we are now in 2026. What do you see as the main barriers to that being implemented?

I am also interested in the register of controlling interests. That was a major part of land reform two sessions ago, but there is evidence to show that there is not great compliance with that. Again, there does not seem to be the level of transparency that we want in Scotland.

Sarah-Jane, you seem to agree with those points. Do you want to kick off?

Sarah-Jane Laing: I am old enough to remember the first ScotLIS, which was an awful lot longer ago than 2017. I would say that the issue is a lack of resources and of joined-up political will across all the portfolios.

ScotLIS could underpin our work in many areas that we are trying to deliver on for Scotland, but Registers of Scotland would have to be resourced in a way that ensures that it can meet demand. My members are trying to have land registered, and Registers of Scotland cannot meet that demand. We are doing fascinating work with Scotland's Rural College and the James Hutton Institute that brings together all the layers of data that are already available in disparate places. However, there does not seem to be any cohesive plan from the Scottish Government about how that work can be taken forward. There is willingness on the part of those who own the data, those who are collecting it and landowners, but we need that central Scottish Government funding and will in order to make progress.

The issue of the RCI is interesting. As you know, there is also misunderstanding around the different pieces of legislation regarding issues such as what goes in the register of overseas entities and what goes in the register of controlling interests. I am not sure that the RCI will ever do what some people thought that it would, which is why we are keen to see things such as land management plans address the things that people want them to, such as who the people are that can be contacted and who owns the land in a certain area.

We are all for transparency, but I believe that some of the issues that we are having with the RCI were mentioned by lawyers and others at the time of that legislation going through. Again, the issue goes back to some of the conversations that we had during the passage of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2025. When the legal sector tells us that there are deficiencies in the legislation that is being considered, we should listen to that advice at an earlier stage, because, if we do not, we will end up with things not doing what they should do.

There is no excuse for non-compliance with the RCI. We are clear about our position on any compliance issue that has to be addressed. However, I suggest that there are deficiencies in terms of what is required by the RCI and its interaction with Companies House legislation on the register of overseas entities. It is all to do with the definition of a beneficial owner.

Dr Doble: Sarah-Jane and I are in danger of agreeing almost entirely on that point. She and Hamish Trench have covered the fact that there is a lack of joined-up thinking across Government about the importance of having a more complete land data service. We have pockets of different regulation and requirements, which makes it quite confusing to work out how that should all be brought together. I suggest that there is a lack of resourcing in Registers of Scotland and in the Scottish Government, as there should be a team that looks specifically at how to bring all of that together.

This committee should examine the issue of land management plans with the aim of coming up with a way of ensuring that the mapping of ultimate ownership and beneficial ownership could be included in that system, which would provide transparency. That would create another data set, which would then need to be integrated into a more complete system, which is where the resourcing point comes in.

It is remarkable that many of us, including the Parliament, use the data set that has been created by Andy Wightman, a private citizen. He has done incredible work, but, as I say, it is remarkable that that is the resource that we have to use in the 21st century. I hope that there is an opportunity to address that. Transparency International has looked into the issue, because the Government has an anti-corruption drive and is looking at trying to make sure that it closes loopholes around things such as oligarch ownership of assets in Scotland. That anti-corruption work, which the Scottish Government is making a priority, provides the committee with an avenue to look at the issue in that context, because the Government's efforts to try to close those loopholes could be a way of getting some Government resource to address the issue of land data transparency.

I will quickly touch on a couple of points, to get them on the record. Community land ownership has a strong record of addressing depopulation. Community acquisitions are often driven by an attempt to stop depopulation, and the totemic buyouts in west Harris, Knoydart and Eigg have reversed depopulation. Populations have doubled because, when the community is the landowner, the priority is making those places viable places for people to live in.

On WildLand, it is true that there might be some trickle-down economics happening there, but you have to look at the stifling impact that that kind of ownership has on local democracy—

The Convener: Sorry, but can we stick with the questions?

Dr Doble: Sorry, convener. I just wanted to get that on the record. I apologise.

Hamish Trench: On the land information service, I agree entirely that resourcing and joined-up delivery have been the challenge. Particularly in the context of public service reform, we have a big opportunity to make progress on that. We are collaborating directly with Registers of Scotland and Revenue Scotland, and the Scottish Land Commission will convene a land data implementation group, which we will use to drive forward the practical changes that organisations can already implement and see how far we can take that.

We looked at international practice on land information services and how other countries use land value and tax valuation for land and so on, and it is striking that the countries that have joined-up information systems are the ones that are most responsive and adaptive and can change their policies to reflect current practice, which creates not only efficiency but public and commercial value. They have a valuable data set that their private sectors and Governments can make the most of. That represents a hugely valuable investment for the Government to make over the coming years.

The Convener: Ewen McLachlan, do you want to come in on transparency of ownership?

Ewen McLachlan: All that I can say on that is that the land register is a good idea, so why has it not been implemented after 27 years of devolution?

To go back a little, Sarah-Jane Laing talked about land and housing. Again, I can talk from a position of lived experience. In Assynt, we managed to purchase 55 acres of bog and rock to build 10 houses, but we have seen an abdication of responsibility from the Scottish Government and the local authority in terms of building houses. We are building those houses because we know that

there is a depopulation crisis. We see our school rolls falling and people leaving the area.

The issue is access to land. As I said, the land that we have is bog and rock. In Scourie, which is just up the road from me, they are trying to build on a slope, yet we see accessible rural houses being built within sight of Edinburgh airport. We are creating commuter belts rather than opening up land in the north and the south for communities.

10:00

I am part of the community-led housing alliance, and we are struggling. The prices that we are being quoted for building homes are crippling because of the costs that are associated with rebuilding infrastructure and the difficulty of accessing suitable land to purchase. In Assynt, we are talking about between £620,000 and £700,000 per unit. In Scourie it is about £600,000, and in Durness it is about £500,000. It is appalling.

If we could work with the estates to open up some land at market rate for development near or on their estates, close to the townships, that would be transformational. That is really what we need. Both north and south, we need Buccleuch estates and others to open up more land for housing, to stop the congestion of the central belt.

Dawn Black (Angus North and Mearns) (SNP): I want to bring us back to something that Sarah-Jane Laing mentioned earlier about the community right to buy, how groups can find out about sales and how the incoming rules on pre-sale notifications and lotting are working for communities. I will just get all my questions out there and then the witnesses can answer as they wish.

To build on what Sarah-Jane Laing said, what capacity do communities and community groups have to come together and develop such bids? It is a lot for a community group or a development trust to be constantly looking to do those things.

With regard to the funding from the Scottish land fund and the grant cycles that will be coming forward, how will that work to ensure that those communities that manage to put a bid together have the funding ready to take that bid forward? What further support needs to be put in place to facilitate communities to buy into the plans that have been put forward?

Sarah-Jane Laing: It took a number of years for the prior notification and lotting arrangements to come into force. At the moment, the routes that communities can take are either to have voluntary discussions with estate owners and other landowners or to register their interests through the existing community right-to-buy process. Scottish Land & Estates is clear that we would like

to make the process easier for communities to register an interest in land, so that everyone is clear about which areas and buildings they would like to bring into community ownership, should they ever come on to the market. Let us make that process a little bit easier through the review that Josh Doble mentioned.

I will probably let Josh and others say a little bit more about the funding. However, lots of things are happening that do not require the change of ownership. We are seeing increasing numbers of joint ventures and long-term leases. There is also growing innovation in access to land involving community groups, communities of geography and communities of interest working with owners of all sizes and types. We are seeing everyone from farmers and crofters to large estate owners considering how they can work in partnership in ways that open up opportunities and unlock community funding that they, as individuals or businesses, cannot access themselves.

There is a great example of that in the south-west at the moment, where a large estate is considering creating incubator units. It is quite a significant commercial risk. The estate owner is saying that they will underwrite the initiative if the community comes on board and acts as a partner in delivering the facility. For the time being, however, the estate owner will retain ownership and underwrite the liability associated with providing the incubator units. If, in the future, the development trust wants to take the project forward itself, that could be achieved through a negotiated sale.

Lots of things are happening on a negotiated basis at the moment. As I said, it took a number of years before prior notification and lotting came into force. We should always hope that opportunities for people to work together and make the best use of land and property do not rely on legislation. The more initiatives that we see like the negotiated sales protocol that CLS and Scottish Land & Estates introduced—my goodness, that was almost 20 years ago—the more that will happen.

Somebody mentioned Buccleuch, which at one point was jokingly referred to as the poster boy of land reform because it sold to sitting tenants and community groups. Those things were happening before the legislation was introduced. I will leave it to others to talk about the realities of funding for community groups.

Ewen McLachlan: The community right to buy is great, and communities take ownership of assets. Often, development trusts are run with one or two staff and a group of volunteers—as is the case with my trust—and we have massive volunteer fatigue. When you have a small population and an asset, it becomes more about

asset management and how to pay staff and maintain, expand, grow and develop the asset without support. We therefore look to the Scottish Government to consider multiyear funding for development trusts. How can we expect a small social enterprise to become a community-led housing development with a 12-month salary contract for its employees? There is much that we could be doing better, and multiyear funding has to be part of that.

Dr Doble: I agree with Ewen McLachlan on multiyear funding. I also agree on the points about joint ventures and the good examples. We should be speaking about some of the exemplars, and Buccleuch's progressive way of negotiating with the community in Langholm should be celebrated. However, we need to be mindful that we cannot just rely on the largesse of one or two individuals to provide a systemic programme of reform. We need to champion those examples and then think about how we can mainstream that approach across the board, so that more private landowners have to do that.

On negotiated sales, the community right to buy is a wonderful tool, but it is worth bearing in mind that it is largely a negotiating tool and that most transfers happen due to a negotiated sale, rather than as a result of following the legislation right the way through. There are many reasons for that, and a negotiated sale is often a very productive approach. However, I flag that the community right to buy reform could be a piece of very straightforward and widely agreed legislation, which should, in the next 12 months, sail through Parliament—well, maybe. I would welcome the committee pushing the Government on that.

On the challenges facing communities, the Scottish Land Commission has recently published very good research on that, which I will let Hamish Trench speak about.

On community capacity, our members have the same experience that Ewen McLachlan spoke about—there is a huge amount of volunteer fatigue. Community capacity is a challenge. We would like the language to change so that the public investments involved, be they from the Scottish land fund or something else, are seen as seed funding community wealth building projects and not as handouts. They are about local economic regeneration and public money being invested to deliver public goods. That is how Government needs to think about it and how the public discourse needs to shift. We are not talking about grants and handouts; we are talking about seed funding for economic regeneration.

If we have long-term multiyear funding for things such as development officer roles, communities get into a position in which they are standing on

their own two feet and have revenue-generating assets, be they renewable energy, business units or whatever, and then they can start paying back and leading local economic regeneration. We have suggested proposals for the Scottish National Investment Bank and the ScotWind wealth fund that is to be set up about seeing that investment as patient capital. We are not asking for handouts; we are asking for patient capital to be invested in communities to get capacity to take on revenue-generating assets and then to pay back the public money that has come in, just over a longer period.

On volunteer fatigue, we have to bear in mind that community land ownership and community development are seen as the only kind of land reform route in Scotland at the moment, and we must be the only country in the world that is trying to deliver a programme of land reform through volunteers. That is kind of insane when you think about it. Rather than have a strategic state-led approach to land reform in which communities are one of the strands, we have volunteer and community groups trying to deliver what should be national-level change. If the Government is continuing down the route of communities being the primary deliverers of land reform, they need to be properly resourced to do that.

Hamish Trench: To pick up on the last point that Josh Doble made, that is a point that we drew out strongly in our report last year entitled "ScotLand Futures: Next steps for land reform", which came out of the Scotland futures process. It is clear internationally that any programme of land reform requires significant financial and state-led action to deliver it—there is no question about that.

Prior notification is one of the important measures coming through from the 2025 act. It will make a big difference to some communities and it will avoid communities being caught by surprise by sales, so we are keen for that to come into practice and to fruition and to start benefiting communities.

Dawn Black is absolutely right to raise the issue of community capacity. That of course goes across all the measures in the legislation. In order to make the most of land management plans, for example, landowners and communities need the capacity to do those things well and engage and put the time into getting the benefits from what is a significant and welcome measure.

On community ownership and communities looking to take the step of acquiring land, in July, we published a report looking at next steps to re-inject a bit of momentum into community land ownership. Like others, we welcome the Government's conclusions from the right-to-buy review and we would like those to come forward in legislation in as simple and quick a way as possible, to provide benefit on the ground.

Likewise, we have advised strongly that that should be accompanied by a strengthened and increased Scottish land fund. It is clear from the research that we have done with communities over the past year that the land fund is absolutely central to delivering the extended community ownership that we have and that it will continue to be central to expanding and growing that.

The Convener: Dawn, do you want to come back in?

Dawn Black: No.

The Convener: Sarah-Jane wants to come in with a quick point.

Sarah-Jane Laing: Very quickly, one area that we probably have not mentioned enough is public sector ownership and its role in providing strategic leadership on community ownership. The Scottish ministers have extensive landholdings. There are some discussions about that, but I have to say that there has not been much leadership and there is no strategic view on how ministers' landholdings could contribute to their ambitions.

With another hat on, I am a member of a local development trust. In many areas, the community asset transfer powers that are in place, which are linked to community wealth building, are about disposal of liabilities, rather than assets, to community groups. We find that really frustrating. In my local area, there are things that I and my fellow development trustees think would make a real difference—things that we could make a real go of in terms of community wealth building—but those are not the things that the local authority wants to transfer ownership of. However, the local authority is happy to transfer things that are falling down and have huge repair liabilities. If we are serious about community wealth building, the public sector, including local authorities, has to take a look at what is happening on community asset transfer and rethink its approach.

Laura Mitchell: I want to go back to some of the points about capacity, which is crucial if any project is to be a success. It is quite easy to measure the extent of community ownership, but how do we practically measure its success, the impact that it is having on the ground and the change that it is delivering for communities?

The Convener: Ewen, can we start with you?

Ewen McLachlan: We can, but I would like to go back a little to the point about community development trusts. It is great to hear that Sarah-Jane Laing is on a development trust. DTAS has 400 members and we are the largest community-led development organisation in the country. Seventy-seven per cent of our members own at least one community asset, and 83 per cent of them generate earned income, which shows that

development trusts are significant economic actors and not just grant-dependent community groups. To labour the point, every one of them is dependent on a voluntary board, whether you call it a social enterprise or the inclusive democratic business model. Development trusts are proving that they can take on assets and make them work. We just need a little bit of support to get to sustainability.

That is all that I wanted to say—no, actually, there was another point, on liabilities. In the past couple of years, the Church of Scotland has, to put it politely, dumped a number of churches on communities, which is putting pressure on the Scottish land fund and on communities who want to restore and save their churches. That is a liability that needs more Government support.

Dr Doble: It is an excellent question. We would love to receive funding to carry out research on that, or we would like the Scottish Government to resource the Land Commission to do that kind of research. We have done bits and bobs of research with our budgets to look at the difference between pre-acquisition economics and post-acquisition economics in population, jobs and gross value added. There are absolutely ways of doing it, but we also need to think about community wealth building and a wellbeing economy. Applying neoclassical gross domestic product economics will not be a good way of capturing what happens in a community ownership situation in which capacity, confidence, local governance and a sense of local agency are also a key part of the story.

If we look at examples in places like the Western Isles, where there has been a whole string of community acquisitions, we can see the knock-on effect of being able to look at neighbouring landholdings and what is possible when a community comes together and community organisations are able to support each other to negotiate with big multinationals, as has happened on the west coast of Lewis. How do you capture that kind of community confidence in an economic data analysis?

We absolutely need more data on that, and I would welcome input from the Scottish Government and the Scottish Land Commission. We have been working with academics to pull together resourcing to do a proper longitudinal analysis of that. It takes time and money. We have evidence, but not as much as we would like. I suppose that the key thing to think about is how we capture those more intangible aspects of community ownership.

Hamish Trench: I have very little to add other than to say that it is a proven model—we can see the benefits and what it enables. I agree that it

would be very good, at this point, to be able to capture that in a fuller study. Fundamentally, though, it is about what it enables and the jobs and opportunities that it creates, and that is very evident when we look across existing practice.

Sarah-Jane Laing: It goes back to the point that I made at the start, which is that it is about the outcomes that are delivered from community ownership or any other type of ownership. People will remember the 1 million acres target announced by a former First Minister, which was all about the number of acres under community ownership and not what was delivered by it. It was a really welcome step when Community Land Scotland and others started looking not just at the hectareage but at research focused on outcomes.

Josh Doble mentioned the wellbeing economy, and we were the first organisation to look at how land managers were delivering across all the wellbeing economy indicators. Scottish Land & Estates is not just about large landowners and private landowners. When we looked at our entire membership, the social capital was high but was kind of hidden. Regardless of whether you are a community owner, a private owner or a non-governmental organisation, many indicators of success in delivery at a local level can be missed by headlines and, as Josh said, some of the traditional measures of success.

There is work to be done there, but we have models that have already been very successful at illustrating the impact at a local level and the impact of the delivery of national targets.

The Convener: Going back to the point that you made, Hamish Trench, about the community right to buy reforms, there was an expectation that some of those might have been included in the Land Reform (Scotland) Bill in the previous session of Parliament, but they were not. Are you suggesting that it would be acceptable to put those reforms into the rural renewal bill, or do you believe that there is another legislative route to introduce them sooner? It would be good to get a sense of how quickly, in a practical sense, those reforms could come through.

Hamish Trench: We would like the reforms to come through as quickly and simply as possible. If there is an opportunity for a small stand-alone bit of legislation that would do that, that would be ideal.

The Convener: Andrew Baxter, should we move to you?

Andrew Baxter (Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch) (LD): With respect, convener, you have just asked the question that I was about to ask about timescales.

The Convener: Okay. Is there anywhere to go with that? Finlay Carson wants to come in on some aspects of what we have heard.

Finlay Carson: We have covered a lot in the past 15 to 20 minutes. Something that stands out to me is that voluntary negotiation partnership tends to work better than when legislation kicks in and forces sales or whatever. We heard about the Church of Scotland dumping churches on communities. Maybe we should also look at the impact of the Royal Bank of Scotland and the Bank of Scotland dumping buildings on our high streets. We cannot ignore that, but do we need a review of what has been done to see where we have had successes and failures?

In Dumfries and Galloway, we have great community trusts. They bought a lot of assets because capital funding was available, but, I am sad to say, they have been failing within a few years because the revenue capacity does not exist within communities and they have not hit critical mass. Do we need to review that, to see whether we need to change the land fund and make a significant amount of revenue funding available for pump-priming, to get over the initial costs?

I will give an example. We have a fantastic state-of-the-art bunkhouse. It takes time to build up the customer base, but, during that time, you have to pay your manager £40,000 a year and the revenue is not coming in. Does the land fund need to focus not only on capital purchases but on pump-priming initial set-up costs and covering the revenue in order to make such organisations successful in the long term?

Dr Doble: That is a very good question. Some failures or challenges emerge, but community land ownership is an incredibly resilient model. There are roughly 560 community landowners around the country, and only a small handful of them have failed financially. That does not mean that there are no challenges, such as those that you set out, but it is a resilient model, because the people are trying to make it work in any way possible and are volunteering their time.

You are absolutely right that pump-priming or revenue funding needs to be provided. Ideally, that would happen through the land fund. We are aware of the public financial situation and are in a defensive position of trying to ensure that the land fund is kept at £7 million of capital funding to buy assets. With a pipeline of around £23 million, we do not want to eat into that £7 million at all, so we are encouraging the Government to increase the budget significantly and to provide multiyear funding, so that communities have security, and revenue funding. That would provide a community that has bought an asset with at least a year or two—ideally longer—in which it has a

development officer or site manager to get the asset up on its own two feet.

Equally, the Government needs to be a little bit more inventive and not rely only on the land fund but think about other funding mechanisms. Whether that is a wealth fund or the National Investment Bank, the Government should think about other forms of public investment that could be paid back—I am not seeing it as just handouts. We need to get a bit more inventive with funding. If we all broadly agree that community land ownership is a successful model and builds community wealth, we need to think about it holistically and not leave communities that buy assets on their own, but provide long-term security.

On forced sales and the community right to buy, the part 5 powers in the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016 have been used a couple of times recently. They are really important rights to have as a backstop. A negotiated sale is always more straightforward and much easier to deal with, but it is important to have such mechanisms for bringing to the table absentee owners or owners who are not willing to negotiate or, if need be, for taking the land off them in the public interest.

Ewen McLachlan: Mr Carson answered his own question. Yes, we need more support, whether it comes directly through the Scottish land fund or from the enterprise agencies—HIE, SOSE and Scottish Enterprise—whose budgets have already been cut.

In the experience of communities that buy or take control of assets, whether land or buildings, it is almost as if we are saying, “The capital has been released. You now have ownership. You’re on your own. Good luck.” There are no tax incentives or national insurance breaks.

We could tinker with many things to make community ownership more sustainable and give those community organisations a proper chance, as we would when attracting new businesses. We should use the enterprise agencies and local authority enterprise agencies to support community ownership organisations as new businesses and help them through a five or 10-year programme. It should not be a handout. We should put in timelines and measurable outputs against them. That is the way to go. At DTAS, we are saying that, when there is that little bit of support, communities thrive. That is what we are looking for.

Sarah-Jane Laing: I agree with what has been said. We need to consider the funding as a package. The renewable energy sector has been a game changer, but only if you are in one of the areas that can access the funds. The Scottish Government could look at things differently.

Dumfries and Galloway has a more centralised pot, and that is fairer than the approach in some other areas.

Ewen McLachlan mentioned ongoing support, which is provided by agencies such as DTAS. South of Scotland Enterprise is doing a great job of providing the required support not just for new community owners but for new business owners and new entrants. We need to understand where the support comes from and the form in which it is provided. The support cannot all come from the Scottish land fund—none of us is naive enough to think that all the money that is required will come from that—so we need to be a bit more inventive in how we access the money that is available.

The fact that a community owns an asset does not mean that it cannot form a partnership with businesses, private owners and others in the area. We could do more to show people what is possible through joint ventures that bring in investment from other areas but retain decision making and ownership within the community development trust. There is more that we could do if we had the time, because we are grappling with other things. As Ewen McLachlan said, a lot of the work is done by volunteers.

Agencies such as SOSE and HIE must be funded in a way that allows them to continue to support new businesses and community groups, because that is such an important part of their work.

Hamish Trench: I agree with everything that has been said in response to the question. I confirm that the specific issue that Finlay Carson has raised has come through strongly in our engagement with communities over the past year on community ownership more generally. Getting post-acquisition support is as important as getting initial capital support. I have no doubt that part of the issue relates to the land fund, but I strongly support the point that a much wider ecosystem of support needs to be in place.

Andrew Baxter: The programme for government indicated that the last provider fund would be established in this financial year, but the details are still quite sketchy. How should the fund be designed to help a community to retain essential facilities without leaving volunteer-run organisations facing unsustainable financial liabilities, as Ewen McLachlan has described? Should the fund’s scope be widened beyond rural shops and pubs, which we have been told about, to encompass, for example, the last petrol pump or community space in a rural community? That might address Ewen McLachlan’s point about redundant churches being brought back into community use.

Sarah-Jane Laing: I can address the second point. You are absolutely right that the scope of the last provider fund, which is about maintaining some resilience in a local rural area, should be widened. In relation to wildfires, for example, if there is no community muster point because there is no longer a community asset, that will be detrimental for many areas of Scotland. We should think about the anchor assets—business or community assets—that are required. That is what the last provider fund should be about. At the moment, the fund is too restrictive in what it covers.

Dr Doble: I agree entirely. It might be more helpful if, instead of being called the last provider fund and seeming quite desperate, it was reframed as something about rural resilience. Resilience looks different in different communities and different places, so it would be wise for the fund's scope to be as broad as possible. We should not fall on the idea that the shop or the pub must be the crucial community asset to ensure that a place remains resilient; the asset should be determined by the community. We should keep things broad and not go down the cul-de-sac of focusing only on pubs and shops, as has been the case with some of the land reform measures in England. We have a much broader concept here.

From what I have been hearing, I think that the eligibility should be announced fairly soon, but who knows? The eligibility requirements should be broad, and we want it to be a community-led process, with community governance and community control over the asset to ensure that it stays under local control. I am not sure what the Government is thinking in relation to how wide the scope should be on eligibility.

Hamish Trench: We have not looked specifically at the last provider fund. However, with regard to the wider principle, there is a risk that individual funds take quite a narrow view, and what we need to be doing is linking that effort up with, for example, the community wealth-building plans that local authorities will be obliged to bring in and the devolution of decision making to a local and regional level. From a land reform point of view, let us join up those things, so that we are not just empowering that level but providing the resource to make it happen.

10:30

Ewen McLachlan: I agree with what everyone has said so far, but I want to make a point about rural resilience. Sarah-Jane Laing mentioned the wildfires, and, a few weeks ago, the village hall—the former drill hall—in Coigach went on fire. We could not get our fire tender to it because we did not have enough volunteer firefighters available. By the time the fire brigade arrived from Ullapool

and Lochinver, the building had burned to the ground.

The Assynt Development Trust is also the only community organisation-led regional land use partnership, which we run through NorthWest2045. We have put together a wildfire group, working through the RLUP, bringing in estates and community and private land. There is a feeling that people are joining together to tackle things that, previously, we would have depended on our statutory services to provide. Rural resilience is a wonderful aspiration—can we have some, please?

The Convener: Andrew, do you want to follow up on that?

Andrew Baxter: No—that was a comprehensive answer. Thank you.

Laura Mitchell: I want to move on to land management plans and the consultation that the Scottish Government has published. I am quite interested in our witnesses' initial views on that. Are there any specific views on the practical criteria that secondary legislation could establish to prove that landowners are engaging meaningfully with local residents to ensure that land management plans genuinely reflect community co-design?

Hamish Trench: The land management plans are a really welcome development in the bill and will be an important measure for landowners and communities. Like others, the commission will respond to the consultation, but we will also engage quite widely in the meantime to take views. We are keen to look at how the plans can work most effectively and how we can make the most of this opportunity, as well as how the land and communities commissioner role plays into that. It will have an enforcement role—that is how it is framed in the 2025 act—but it will also be hugely important in building a culture that works well and in supporting people to engage and do things well.

There is a lot of detail in the consultation, which we will work our way through, like others, but there are a couple of principles that are clear to us. One is that the process of engagement is going to be as important as the resulting plan. To go back to where this issue came from in Parliament, it is about engaging communities and giving them a more meaningful voice in decisions about land.

Concentrating the focus on the format of the plans will be part of what needs to be done, but as important is the process of engagement and finding practical ways that that can happen in a range of different circumstances. The plans will have to be flexible in order to take account of different circumstances in geographies, communities and landholdings, but there are some

fundamentals to consider. It will be important for the commission, in terms of the enforcement role, but also for others, in terms of their expectations, to have a clear benchmark of what is expected, what is reasonable and what good practice looks like.

Sarah-Jane Laing: Like Hamish Trench, we are looking for flexibility, because we want to ensure that various situations are addressed. For example, there is not always a linear relationship between one large landholding and one community, and there are large landholdings that have communities within them that have very different ideas. We need an engagement process that allows all of that to be considered.

We are also keen for the development of the land management plan and the community engagement that goes alongside it not to be done in isolation. We would like to see more formal linkages with local place planning, because we think that embedding a local management plan within a wider local place plan is the best way to deliver on aspirations for a local area. If we can get to the stage that Ewen McLachlan described, at which all of that is feeding into an RLUP, so much the better. The wider that you can take engagement, so that you can look at catchment-scale issues and aspirations and landscape-scale change, the better. We are quite keen not to limit the scope to just what is happening on a specific landholding but instead to look at what is happening in the area and how that feeds into the considerations.

The issue goes back to resources. Too many communities are missing out on local place plans. There are pockets that some local authorities are really prioritising, but, although that is great to see, other local place plans seem to be well down the priority list. We would like that to be addressed, as there are really important tools that could be game changers for rural resilience in many areas if there were a number of LMPs feeding into a local place plan, which could then feed into the RLUP. We have all the building blocks. We should not look at them in isolation but should instead make them work together.

Dr Doble: I agree with the previous comments. Land management plans are potentially an important tool for engagement, collaboration and transparency. As Hamish Trench said, the process is important. There should not be a tick-box exercise involving a one-off engagement event with a land agent coming in to speak to a community. Instead, there should be a proportionate, ongoing process of discussion and collaboration between landowners and communities.

Naturally, I will say that we have an established model of that in community land ownership. We would not expect private landowners to do the continuous community engagement that community landowners do, but there is a lot of learning to take from the community land ownership sector. Obviously, we will submit a full response, which will be produced in collaboration with our membership, to reflect that point.

I agree with Sarah-Jane Laing's points about local place plans. If I am not wrong, the legislation says that local place plans have to be considered in the production of land management plans, which is to be welcomed. There is an uneven split in terms of how local place plans are being developed around the country, and the way in which local authorities are engaging with them as statutory tools is also uneven, which is putting some communities off. That is an important point.

I agree that we would not want to be too prescriptive about exactly what needs to be in land management plans but that they should include some of the things that we spoke about earlier, such as mapping of boundaries and ultimate ownership. They should also include significant land management issues, such as renewable energy plans, housing plans, plans for data centres and other things that are going to be controversial. The LMPs provide an opportunity for early and transparent engagement to make sure that people in the community can state what their views and needs are and to generate some of the joint working that Sarah-Jane Laing has spoken about.

Another important point is that the land management plans must be made publicly available and should be kept somewhere that is accessible to the public—not just the local community, but the wider public. Going back to the point about land data and transparency, it would be beneficial for researchers and for those interested in land issues to be able to see the land management plans around the country. There is no reason for the plans to include commercially sensitive information or personal information. We are talking about stuff that should be in the public domain anyway.

Ewen McLachlan: I would just add that communities need to have genuine influence rather than simply being consulted after key decisions have already been made. They must be involved earlier in the decision-making process. Effective participation requires access to information, resources and support, as Josh Doble said. When communities have meaningful influence over the outcomes, that builds trust.

Through our RLUP, we are working constructively with communities, estates, crofters,

environmental interests and businesses. That early engagement reduces any potential conflict. Too often, we hear weaponised language and talk of “us and them”, which harks back to 19th-century lairds. Collaborative planning achieves much better long-term outcomes. The challenge is not whether communities are consulted, but whether their voices are genuinely heard and they get to influence decisions that are made about the area that they live in.

The Convener: It is good to hear the positivity around land management plans from all our witnesses. I am particularly interested in how you would see land management plans improving planning around access, wildfires and so on. If they are rolled out in this session of the Scottish Parliament and they work, do you see them potentially being expanded to holdings that are smaller than 1,000 hectares?

Sarah-Jane Laing: I do not think that land management plans are a necessary tool in relation to some of the wildfire work that we are doing. If you look at the work that is happening in some of the local fire response groups and deer management groups that are being used as a model, and in the RLUP, there is no scale limit on that work. I would not want to say that such things cannot happen without land management plans; they are already happening. Land management plans might help us to do things such as identify future wildfire preparedness and consider strategic fire breaks, but let us not make them something that they are not, and let us not repeat work that is being done elsewhere.

From a proportionality point of view, if work is being done in other areas, we would not want a community engagement process to be replicated as part of an LMP. I would not want there to be a situation in which the local authority did core path planning while separate community engagement had to be done on the core paths in each of the holdings as part of an LMP. Let us ensure that LMPs play a part but that they do not replicate existing activity. In addition, we must not wait for them before doing work on issues such as wildfire preparedness and management.

Dr Doble: We need to be conscious of mission creep. If LMPs are to be meaningful and purposeful, it is important that they pick up the land management challenges on estates and that they refer to the existence of cross-cutting issues, such as wildfires, at a more regional level. We would expect access to be covered as part of a land management plan. Mention should be made of any core paths and how access might be improved, especially if that is an issue that has come up for communities. Protecting, strengthening and consolidating access rights is an important issue for the committee to look at in this session.

In thinking about the future of land management plans, what will be important is the relationship development that comes out of them. We hope that they will lead to collaborative working and will provide a sense of transparency, so that communities feel as though they genuinely have a voice because, as the 2025 act intended, they can see how the engagement that they have had with the landowner has had an impact on the land management plan.

From our point of view, a fruitful sign that land management plans were working would be sites of interest to the community, to tenants or to new entrant farmers being opened up to ownership. We are starting to see a much more collaborative process whereby private landowners are willing to lot or to break off parts of their estate because, through the land management plan process, they have gained an understanding of the community's needs. It goes back to the need for a process of collaboration and relationship development.

That is the best-case scenario that I see for land management plans. They are a small tool for changing the dynamics and some of the ownership structures, but we need to be clear about the fact that they will not deal with the big structural stuff.

Hamish Trench: I agree that a realistic view needs to be taken of what land management plans will do in the wider landscape. Their purpose is not to replace other mechanisms that are already in place, but they provide an important opportunity to enable a joined-up conversation to take place. They should offer a means of joining up the conversation in relation to a particular place and a particular community. While individual issues might well be dealt with through, for example, forestry plans, deer management groups or wildfire plans, land management plans should become the natural vehicle for joining up the discussion, understanding the implications and looking ahead at how things will pan out and affect people.

In that sense, I think that it will be natural for issues such as wildfires to be part of land management plans, but very much from the point of view of joining up the discussion about how those issues will impact people, communities and businesses in a place. In that context, the reporting element of land management plans—the feeding back against progress—will be extremely important. We are seeing positive examples of landowners in the private, non-governmental organisation and public sectors starting to develop impact reporting approaches, and we are keen to encourage that as good practice. As part of the land management plan approach, it will be important to think through what can reasonably be expected by way of regular reporting, so that

people can understand how things are progressing.

Ewen McLachlan: I would like to see land management plans being able to evidence a reversal of depopulation to create sustainable, thriving communities. The partnership and collaboration that we are talking about, particularly with the RLUPs, which act almost as a form of mediation, is doable, but we need our communities to be supported, so that we can work with the estates to realise the goals.

The Convener: We are really tight for time. There have been some excellent contributions, but we still have a few more questions to get through, so I will allow the session to run on slightly. I will bring in Finlay Carson.

10:45

Finlay Carson: I appreciate it, convener.

As we have heard, a number of planning and community engagement processes are already in operation, one of which is the local development plan. However, I think everybody agrees that land management plans can play a role in addressing depopulation, too. I know of a community in which the local development plan identified some land for housing but there were other parts where that was not identified. The people who want to build houses are keen to do so, but they cannot because that is not in the local development plan.

I am all for cutting red tape, but I wonder whether land management plans should be required not just when land is sold. Should they be part of a requirement to encourage better use of land?

Sarah-Jane Laing: They will be—they will not be something that happens just at point of sale. The way that the legislation has ended up means that every large landholding will have to produce them.

Finlay Carson: And should that apply just to large landowners?

Sarah-Jane Laing: I would say so, given the requirements. There are other processes that smaller landowners can feed into, such as the call for sites, but what you are talking about involves costs, especially when it comes to community engagement. If you are going to impose such a requirement on all businesses, we must be really cognisant that it might come with a significant cost.

Dr Doble: I guess—and this brings me back to your question, too, convener—that it all depends on how we define the term “large-scale landholding”. We spent a lot of time discussing that during the passage of the 2025 act. At that time, the threshold was 3,000 hectares; it is now 1,000 hectares. We and others proposed that it should

be 500 hectares, and we are still of that opinion because that is still a significant amount of land by any international standard. Much economic and community development can happen on 500 hectares.

The approach does need to be proportionate, though. I know that there was a lot of discussion about the impact of the proposal on family farms, which, under the international definition, are agricultural enterprises that employ only people from one family. I think that we need to have a bit more nuanced discussion about what constitutes a family farm in Scotland. Nevertheless, we think it perfectly proportionate that businesses and landowners with more than 500 hectares should produce land management plans. If we are talking about upland ground with not many communities nearby, you might have a more straightforward land management plan that looks at peatland restoration, nature restoration, grazing numbers and whatever. It would be proportionate to the particular situation, but we just need to have a bit more of a realistic grasp of what a large landholding is. The 3,000-hectare proposal was way off. In our view, 500 hectares would be much more proportionate.

Hamish Trench: Under the 2025 act, some 1,100 holdings will be required to produce land management plans, regardless of whether a sale is involved, and those will require to be produced and reviewed within five years. That is a very good start, but we need to bring the change into play as soon as we can and get the experience from it.

That is not to say that that we would not recommend that other landholdings follow a similar process. It is just good practice; indeed, the Land Commission already provides guidance that any landholding should engage locally and develop—and share—a clear plan of what that landholding is about. There is absolutely nothing to prevent that from continuing. In fact, we want to ensure that we can support other landowners who are not within the scope of the 2025 act to take such a good-practice approach.

The Convener: Thanks. I will bring in Andrew Baxter now.

Andrew Baxter: I want to move on to the rural renewal bill. The cabinet secretary has told us that she has an open mind about what should be included in it, but we know that it is the Government’s intention to remove barriers to economic growth, housing and rural population. If you could identify one specific legislative change that should be included in the bill so as to make a measurable difference to our rural communities, what would it be, and what outcome should we expect from it?

Sarah-Jane Laing: I sense that we are all struggling to narrow it down to just one change—I think that that is our biggest issue.

Scottish Land & Estates feels that renewal is about resilience and prosperity. Our view is that so much is being held up by the planning system at the moment. Ewen McLachlan mentioned some of the aspirations for house building, but the length of time that the process takes and the costs associated with bringing small sites forward for either commercial properties or housing mean that that it is just not possible to progress them. Therefore, there are specific changes that we would like to make to the planning system, and we think that the bill would be the way to bring them forward. I am happy to share those in more detail, because they relate to a number of places.

In connection with that, I suggest that the bill could look again at rural standards. We know that there are urban standards for roads, lighting and housing, including aspects such as the requirement to have enough turning space for a bin lorry, but those things are not conducive to rural prosperity and resilience. Perhaps we could do that here, because some issues will require regulatory change. However, they will also require cultural change, and you cannot legislate for that. We have been quite clear that the bill is one thing but that we also need a change in the culture of decision making in local development.

The Convener: Ewen, I can see that you are itching to come back in.

Ewen McLachlan: There can be problems when the often poorly thought-out legislation that is created in Edinburgh meets rural reality. The issue of bins is a perfect example. Dannie Onn, the chair of the Colonsay Community Development Company, told me that they managed to build 10 new houses on the island but that Argyll and Bute Council insisted that they have a bus stop at the cul-de-sac there even though they do not have a bus. It is futile to impose measures that work great in urban settings if we have no need for them in rural ones.

In answer to the deputy convener's question, rural communities should be given the tools that they need to prosper. It is as simple as that. We should look at everything from tax incentives onwards to create legislation that is suitable for rural and island communities.

I will give a brief example. When we build community-led housing developments, we are supposed to put in electric vehicle charging points, which requires upgrades to the grid and also does not take into consideration the fact that the rate of electric vehicle ownership in the Highlands is only about 2.5 per cent. We are trying to build affordable housing in a low-wage economy, so it is

a bit futile to stick grid upgrades and EV chargers into houses in the hope that, at some point in the future, the people might be able to afford electric cars. That is an example of the madness that is being imposed on rural areas.

Dr Doble: That is a key question. If the possible rural renewal bill is a blank canvas, it is for all of us to think of the most impactful and important things that could be developed through it in the next few years.

To briefly echo what Ewen McLachlan and Sarah-Jane Laing said, planning reform will undoubtedly be key, and the issues they mentioned are also issues for our members. National planning framework 4 is a really positive policy document but is not flexible enough. That means that requirements that are valid in urban areas are applied as a blunt instrument in rural areas in a way that is just not proportionate. Someone needs to look at that. I agree that we need policy and legislative change to create an enabling environment. Some of that will come from funding—including patient capital funding—and some from tax breaks or whatever else communities might need. I echo what my colleagues have said.

My proposal would be to have more ways of bringing land to market. I am talking not just about big estates but about parcels of land, new entrants and small housing developments. We need mechanisms in the bill to bring land to market and to reduce land prices. We will work on what those might be, and taxation might have a role to play, but we need to see more land coming to market and we need smaller parcels of land for families and small businesses to purchase.

Hamish Trench: All the examples that we have heard are very good, which reinforces the Scottish Land Commission's view that the bill is an opportunity for really specific and targeted regulation, to home in on the practical barriers that communities encounter. We absolutely support that focus, particularly on the simplification of planning and on housing delivery.

I add that all of that needs to happen in conjunction with non-legislative stuff. A huge amount can be delivered through the new housing agency, through planning resourcing and public land ownership and through more active intervention by using public land to deliver those things.

The Convener: Do you have a question, Emma?

Emma Roddick: Not any more.

The Convener: Andrew, do you want to come in briefly?

Andrew Baxter: I welcome everyone's focus on planning changes and the understanding that what suits communities in the central belt might not suit those on the Ardnamurchan peninsula. Quite often, planning change in itself will not solve an issue—for example, where an upgrade to a road junction is required that makes it uneconomically viable for that development to go ahead. Do you all agree that there is a role for the Government to fund such changes through Transport Scotland, to allow rural renewal?

The Convener: Very briefly, please, and you do not all have to answer if you do not want to.

Sarah-Jane Laing: Yes. If you look at the track record on where enabling development has been funded by the Scottish Government and what that then opens up, whether in relation to local house builders or others, you will see that it is required.

Dr Doble: We need to push the Government and all local authorities on what they deem to be “uneconomically viable”. That is an incredibly subjective phrase. According to one person's idea of what is uneconomically viable for the community that will be impacted, they will not be able to survive if that development does not happen, so it represents an existential threat to them.

There needs to be a holistic definition of what “uneconomically viable” is that takes into account rural resilience, community sustainability and all those points and that is not based just on number crunching done by an official in Inverness or at Holyrood.

Hamish Trench: Yes, and it is not just about funding; it is also about the active role that Government can play, particularly in the land context. For example, the Scottish Land Commission has proposed having public land agency functions that would maximise the role that Government can actively play in using land and bringing it forward for use, which would obviously be closely connected with infrastructure delivery.

Ewen McLachlan: When we have senior officials and local authorities worrying about return on investment in remote and rural housing and not realising that the true return on investment is schools staying open, services being active and people not moving away, that is the change that we need to make.

The Convener: Emma, I believe that you have a question.

Emma Roddick: It is on the issue of compulsory purchases, which comes up time and time again with local authorities, but there is obviously a bit of lack of action on that. Will compulsory sales orders tackle that, or does more need to be done to empower authorities to take action?

Hamish Trench: I welcome the conclusions that came out of the Government's review of CPO powers and the commitment to legislate on those, which is hugely important. There is no question that such powers need to be simplified to make them more usable. It is an important backstop.

The commission proposed a model for compulsory sales orders, and we continue to see those as a helpful part of a suite of measures. For example, it is important to be able to prompt that change even when the public body has no interest in taking ownership directly. That is where a CSO could come in.

Dr Doble: I agree with Hamish. The CPO and CSO reform aspect is one of the helpful land reform tools that also brings in urban Scotland. I know that that is not within the committee's remit, but it is important to get on the record that land reform is not just a rural issue. There are increasingly challenging issues in urban areas around vacant and derelict land, absentee landlords, institutional ownership of the high streets and extractive landlordism on rents. CPOs and CSOs would be one way of empowering local authorities to take a much more progressive and interventionist stand.

We want CPO reform to be introduced, like the community right to buy reforms, as soon as possible. Again, it is not necessarily a controversial piece of legislation, and I encourage the committee to ask the Government to introduce that as soon as possible.

There is a vague commitment to exploring CSO reform. The Scottish Land Commission has done good work on the issue already. It seems like a commonsense tool for a local authority to be able to say, “We don't want to own this, but we have deemed that this ownership is not in the public interest and this land is not being used,” particularly on vacant and derelict sites, so that it can open them up to the market and someone else can come forward. That seems like a proportionate and democratic way of changing land ownership of sites where the existing system is not working. I would welcome both of those things being introduced.

Ewen McLachlan: When NPF4 was in its early stages and we were talking about CSOs, I thought, “Great—this would solve so many problems in rural areas, particularly ransom strips.” We have estates of 40,000 acres or more with a 20m ransom strip around them, which negates any form of development if there is only one access road in.

In urban settings, CSOs would be incredibly helpful in restoring common good land. Dr Doble mentioned our high streets, and many of the buildings in those were lost in the 1970s. They were part of the common good, but they were sold

on to developers and they now sit in pension companies' investment portfolios. I was a co-founder of the Stove Network in Dumfries, which Finlay Carson will probably know about. Members might know that many of the shops in Dumfries town centre are owned by overseas investment entities. Discovering their ownership is difficult, which has an impact when a community is interested in taking an asset and doing something with it to regenerate the town centre. Therefore, I agree that CSOs should be brought back in. They were a great idea, but I believe that, sadly, they were too difficult to impose in some urban areas. They get a thumbs up from me.

11:00

Sarah-Jane Laing: We think that there is an opportunity to move CPOs and reframe them so that they are not a source of conflict but a tool that underpins opportunities for sustainable development.

Quite a lot needs to change in the CPO process, and that must include front loading many of the discussions that happen, rather than waiting until a point of conflict is reached. There are already local authorities that are reluctant to use such a power, so, if its use is to be critical, how will that be embedded in the new local authorities that we will have following public service reform? CPOs could be a useful tool in addressing various issues that affect rural Scotland, so we have to ensure that their use is considered.

That is linked to a point that I did not make in response to Andrew Baxter's question, which concerns the rural impact assessment. We would like a requirement for such an assessment to be embedded in statute, possibly through the rural renewal bill. However, that would depend on whether compulsory purchase orders are fit for purpose in rural scenarios and whether the new local authorities are fit for purpose there. If we do not use the rural renewal bill to introduce statutory rural impact assessments, we might fail on all the other measures that we want to introduce.

Andrew Baxter: Mine is a very specific question, and it is for Hamish. There is a statutory requirement for Government ministers to make every reasonable step to ensure that at least one land commissioner is a Gaelic speaker, but, with the departure of Dr Calum MacLeod from the Scottish Land Commission and its indication that it will not fill that vacancy, that might no longer be the case. Is that requirement currently being met? If not, what steps are being taken to address the position?

Hamish Trench: Yes, that is correct. Calum's departure and the decision not to replace that commissioner post mean that currently we do not

have a Gaelic-speaking commissioner on the board. As is the case for all public bodies, it is a highly desirable criterion for commissioner recruitment, as part of the public appointments process, but at present there is a gap.

We are currently consulting on our Gaelic language plan. We are looking at many other aspects of how the commission could more widely engage on, support and promote Gaelic. It is not only the commissioner's role that is important in that, so we will continue to press on with that.

Andrew Baxter: Is the role of the commission diminished as a result of not having a Gaelic-speaking commissioner?

Hamish Trench: We would like to have a Gaelic-speaking commissioner representative on the board, not least because the link between land and language is hugely important in Scotland. It is not just about a tick-box exercise of supporting Gaelic, as it were; it is about the fundamental relationship. The commission recognises that in the way that it supports and engages on Gaelic. I have no doubt that, in future recruitment processes, we would hope to ensure that we have a Gaelic-speaking member on the board.

The Convener: We are going to call it there. I thank everybody for coming to give evidence this morning. We have covered a huge amount of ground. This has been an introductory session on land reform, and I am sure that the committee will return to many of the themes throughout this parliamentary session.

That concludes the committee's meeting in public, and we will now move into private session.

11:04

Meeting continued in private until 11:54.

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