

Rural Affairs Committee
Wednesday 28 October 2026
8th Meeting, 2026 (Session 7)

Land Reform

Introduction

1. In June, the Committee agreed to undertake a series of evidence sessions with stakeholders on topics within its remit, including land reform. The purpose of these sessions is to give Members a broad understanding of the issues and challenges in the remit and to assist with the development of the Committee's work programme.
2. This note draws on the [SPICe briefing Land Reform – Subject Profile](#) (October 2026), which sets out the history, legislation, policy framework, ownership trends and possible future directions for land reform in Scotland.

Background

What is land reform?

3. The [Scottish Land Commission](#) describes land reform as being about “who owns Scotland's land, how it is used, and how the benefits from it are shared”. It is an ongoing programme of change in law, policy and practice, and now spans issues such as housing, derelict land, taxation, the environment and public land.

Key legislation

4. Since 1999, there have been four key pieces of land reform legislation:
 - **Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003** – introduced a public right of responsible access to most land and inland water, and community rights to buy rural and crofting land
 - **Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015** – extended the right to buy to urban communities, introduced a right to buy abandoned, neglected or detrimental land, and allowed community bodies to request the transfer of publicly owned land and buildings
 - **Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016** – introduced the [Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement](#), established the Scottish Land Commission, created a register of persons holding a controlled interest in land, and introduced a right to buy land to further sustainable development
 - **Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2025** – provides for owners of large landholdings (broadly, over 1,000 hectares) to be required to produce, consult on and publish Land Management Plans, and establishes a Land and Communities Commissioner. It also provides for a modified pre-emptive community right to buy and for “lotting” (compulsory fragmentation) when all or part of such a holding is transferred. Much of the Act is yet to be commenced

Who owns Scotland's land?

5. Land ownership in Scotland is highly concentrated. According to [Who Owns Scotland](#), 83% of rural Scotland is privately owned, and 408 landowners own half of all privately owned rural land, compared with 440 in 2012. Over the same period, the public sector estate has fallen by 6.3%.
6. Information on land ownership, management and use is spread across 18 separate sources and there is no single, complete picture. As of June 2026, the Land Register covered 96% of Scotland's land mass. A Register of Persons Holding a Controlled Interest in Land was launched in April 2022. However, recent [analysis by investigative journalists](#) has found that two-thirds of overseas entities were not complying with their legal obligation to record details on the register.

Community ownership

7. As of December 2024, there were [853 assets in community ownership](#), owned by 503 groups and covering 2.7% of Scotland's land area. Most were bought through negotiation with a private owner. There have been only 24 successful purchases under the main community right to buy. Research for the Land Commission found that new large-scale buyouts have slowed due to barriers such as funding, community capacity and complex legislation.
8. The Scottish Land Fund offers grants of up to £1 million to help communities buy land and buildings. In 2021, the SNP made a manifesto commitment to double the Fund to £20 million a year by 2026; the 2026-27 Scottish Budget allocates £7 million. A Scottish Government [review of community rights to buy](#) concluded in March 2026 and recommended a series of changes, which would require legislation to change.

Public attitudes and stakeholder views

9. Public awareness of land reform is low, but there is stronger support when people are asked about specific reforms. For example, 2025 [research commissioned by Revive](#) found that 78% supported requiring large landowners to meet climate and nature targets. In the [Land Commission's 2025 ScotLand Futures engagement](#) exercise, 96% of participants wanted to see change in how land is owned and used. By contrast, research commissioned by Scottish Land and Estates found that only 6% of respondents considered land reform a priority for rural policy, behind healthcare, infrastructure, jobs and housing.

Future direction

10. In February 2026, the [Land Commission published a report - Next Steps for Land Reform](#), setting out three pillars for future reform: opening up land to more people; rebalancing power so that land ownership works for the public good; and putting people at the heart of local land use decisions. It also proposed better use of tax and fiscal powers, stronger local authority powers to tackle derelict land, and a joined-up national land data system.

11. In Session 7, key expected developments include:

- the Parliament is expected to consider the appointment of the Land and Communities Commissioner - a [letter](#) from the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Action and Rural Affairs to the Committee provides a timetable for this, with a new Commissioner expected to be in post by April 2027
- the Parliament is also expected to consider regulations setting out the detail of Land Management Plans
- the Scottish Government has recently published a consultation on community engagement obligations, including what Land Management Plans should contain, along with draft guidance on identifying large landholdings
- the Scottish Government has also begun engagement on a proposed Rural Renewal Bill, which may include new small landholdings, steps to make land ownership transparent and support for community right to buy

Meeting on 28 October

12. On 28 October, the Committee will take evidence from the following stakeholders:

- Hamish Trench, Chief Executive, Scottish Land Commission
- Dr Josh Doble, Director of Policy and Advocacy, Community Land Scotland
- Sarah-Jane Laing, Chief Executive, Scottish Land and Estates
- Ewen McLachlan, Chairperson, Development Trusts Association Scotland

Clerks to the Committee

October 2026