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SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT’S ENVIRONMENT AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE: INQUIRY INTO RURAL DEVELOPMENT

WRITTEN EVIDENCE BY SCOTTISH ESTATES BUSINESS GROUP

1. BACKGROUND

The Scottish Estates Business Group (SEBG) represents a group of progressive land-based estates with significant agricultural and rural business interests. It aims to promote a modern business approach in the management of Scotland's land resource in ways which deliver social, economic and environmental benefits. The Group seeks to secure a sustainable and prosperous future for rural areas.

2. CONTRASTING RURAL AND ACCESSIBLE RURAL COMMUNITIES

Despite in many cases not being separated by great distances, rural and accessible rural communities show very different characteristics and have very differing needs. Rural communities tend to be less well served than “satellite” developments. They may benefit from tourism – “honey pot” locations – but they are distant from their markets and draw little benefit from economically vibrant regional centres. Accessible rural communities, by contrast, are by definition relatively close to their markets and therefore offer much greater prospect of business opportunity and development locally. They tend to be more affluent – commuters use them as dormitories, providing an economic dynamic. The needs of each are different, so require different solutions.

Issues

i Maintaining the local economy

For the rural community, the local garage or village shop will be the centre of social as well as economic activity. As the focal point of the community, the business is more likely to be able to survive. Indeed, they are likely to be a prerequisite for community development.

By contrast, village shops in accessible rural locations are much more challenged, and may be unviable when cheaper produce and commodities are available in nearby towns. Because of the greater affluence of those living in accessible rural areas – a large proportion of the community will be commuters with better-paid jobs in the towns and cities – local jobs are less scarce.

ii Availability of key trades

Jobs in rural areas tend to be scarce and the availability of skilled tradesmen, such as plumbers or electricians, is limited. Young families very often are reluctant to settle in rural communities, so local employers find it difficult to retain key workers. Accessible rural areas tend to be better served, being able to draw on the services and key tradesmen skills available in the nearby town or city, as well as being able to support thriving small businesses through their greater relative affluence.

iii Sustainability of communities

Youngsters are reluctant to remain in their rural communities, being more likely to migrate to towns and cities where not only are job opportunities more varied, but leisure and social facilities are much more plentiful. Where housing is available, accessible rural areas find it much less difficult to retain youngsters, since the availability of public transport means access to nearby centres of population is much easier.

iv Housing

For rural areas, the availability and affordability of local housing tends to be much less of a problem than lack of suitable employment opportunities. Conversely, housing is probably the most difficult issue faced by every accessible rural area. A trend seen across many parts of rural Scotland in recent years has been the inflation of property prices through proximity to centres of population and economic activity. With town and city dwellers increasingly moving to nearby country areas for a better quality of life and commuting to their jobs in the towns and cities, the consequence has been rapidly increasing house prices and shortages of affordable accommodation to let in accessible rural areas. Locals have been finding themselves priced out of the local housing market.

3. COMBINED EFFECTS

The above issues don't act in isolation, but combine to undermine the social fabric of rural communities, both rural and accessible. Those in remote areas feel compelled to move to more urban areas for a more prosperous living, whilst the more economically more active can choose to leave urban areas for more rural locations for a better lifestyle.

As a consequence, rural areas, despite their high level of social cohesion, find it more difficult to develop and grow through lack of business opportunity, whilst accessible rural – or satellite – developments exhibit less of a feeling of community, little social cohesion and decreasing common interests.

Resistance to change is often most evident in accessible rural communities – those who have chosen to move to the nearby countryside do not want to see it change or expand, so further growth or development is resisted or stifled. This resistance to change by incomers can cause friction when it conflicts with the aspirations of those who are pressing for development, and can lead to fragmentation of the local community.

4. DIFFERENT NEEDS

Clearly, the differing needs of rural and accessible rural areas need to be addressed in different ways.

Because of the long term decline of traditional land-based industries, rural areas need new jobs as a way of encouraging families to stay in rural communities. Availability of housing is much less important than how a living might be earned, outwith the tourism “honey pot” areas. Such areas would benefit from closer involvement by economic agencies including Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise in order to nurture business opportunity and development.

For accessible rural areas, the availability of jobs is much less of a problem, as people will always want to live there. The main issue to be tackled is the lack of affordable accommodation for key workers, those not employed in the city, to enable them to stay locally and provide services and key skills. Communities Scotland has much more of a role to play here.

5. ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

With different issues faced by the different types of rural community, differing solutions will be required. For remote and rural areas, support which underpins economic development, opportunity, or improved transport links may be central to practical solutions which bring such communities closer to prospective markets. For accessible areas, economic drivers are far less important, with needs focusing on housing.

All Government policies – whether promoting economic development, social inclusion, improved transport facilities or better health or education – impact on rural areas, but the differing needs of different types of community should be taken into account when such policy is being developed and rolled out. Government thinking needs to be much more strategic or “joined up”, with every policy “rural proofed” – that is, its impact on rural areas assessed as part of the process of policy development. It should not be left to SEERAD alone to tackle rural development.

This applies in particular to planning and development policy. There is pressure on villages to expand, but those that grow into satellite dormitories risk losing their original concept of community. The key issue is how villages can be encouraged to grow in an organic way. The driving force should not be convenience – it might be easier to allow a new development of 200 houses only 15 minutes away from a population centre, when what may be more suitable for the wellbeing of villages are smaller developments that are spread further away, allowing local schools and post offices to stay open and communities to live.

The availability of suitable public transport also plays a key role. As communities expand to occupy outlying areas, additional transport provision linking those areas with the main centres of employment is crucial if their communities are to share in the benefits of economic development.

6. ROLE OF PROGRESSIVE ESTATES

Scotland's Estates and the communities in which they are based are mutually dependent, their future health and prosperity inextricably linked. But the type of support Estates are able to offer their local communities will vary according to location. In rural areas, Estates have traditionally created employment opportunities to support their local communities and to help stimulate the local economy. For accessible rural areas, by contrast, their main contribution has been the provision of affordable accommodation for key workers.

More recently, the progressive Estates have been taking an active role in working with and supporting community involvement and interaction, along with an increasing involvement with agencies at a regional and national level to help in developing a framework for prosperity.

SEBG believes that estates have a vital role to play in the ongoing and future development and prosperity of Scotland. Estates are proven business models that assist the development of smaller rural businesses, and SEBG members work hard across Scotland to stimulate enterprise and economic development. Working with Government and public sector agencies, we aim to bring practical support and help champion pragmatic solutions to address the issues faced by our rural communities, whether remote, rural or accessible rural.

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SEBG
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