

MIGRATION POLICY SCOTLAND

migrationpolicyscotland.org.uk

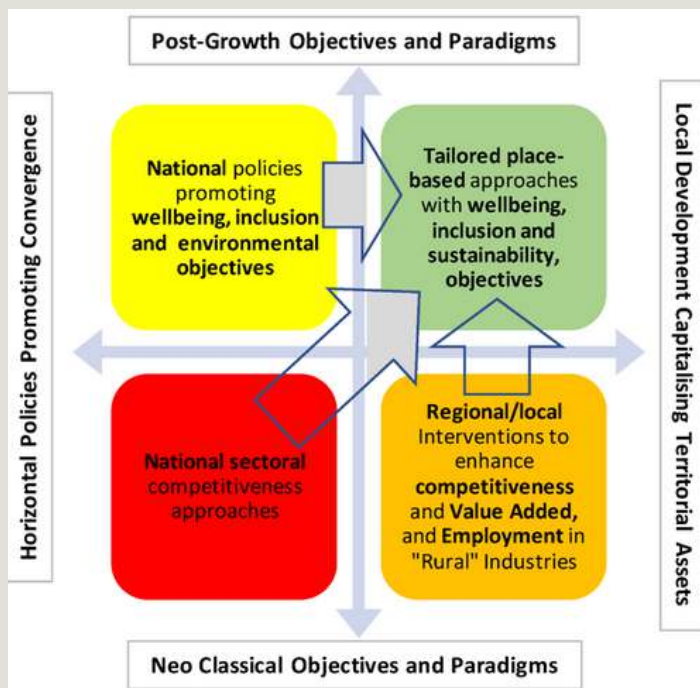
MULTI-LEVEL POLICY RESPONSES TO RURAL DEPOPULATION

September 2023

TACKLING RURAL DEPOPULATION: THE ROLE OF MIGRATION

Rural depopulation is a significant contemporary challenge for countries across Europe and the Global North, and Scotland is no exception. Whilst recently released census data show Scotland's population to be at a record high of 5.4 million,[1] growth since the start of the 21st Century has been exclusively due to migration, both international and from the rest of the UK. Moreover, the census data confirm recent projections showing a continuation and exacerbation of existing issues of population imbalance, in terms of both population-ageing and the geographies of population decline.[2] These issues and related demographic, economic, and social concerns resonate closely with trends in other parts of Europe and the global North: almost two-thirds of rural regions across Europe, containing 40% of Europe's population, are 'shrinking'.[3] Migration has a crucial role to play in understanding historical processes and determinants of contemporary population trends. It is also a crucial aspect of policy responses to rural population concerns. Policy makers, stakeholders and communities working at local, regional, national and transnational levels have been looking for ways to meet this challenge. Efforts to attract and retain newcomers, as well as to support and retain existing populations, are central to a wide range of initiatives.

New Ways of Thinking about Rural Development



(Dax, Copus and Ge, 2023: p. 360)

Whilst much is shared, there is no single picture either internationally or within Scotland. The underlying causes behind population trends are diverse and fragmented.

This diversity is reflected in new ways of think about rural development, including population concerns and related policy responses. The past 10-15 years have seen a shift in emphasis away from national programmes focused on growth, whether economic or demographic, and towards local initiatives with a greater focus on balance and well-being.

This has produced an appetite for local level initiatives and qualitative approaches which is both fed by and feeds into supranational policy frameworks, projects and guidance developed by the EU, Council of Europe and OECD. Such a zeitgeist may beg some questions about the role for national governments, and in our project we were particularly interested in the challenges and prerequisites for effective multi-level policymaking.

[1] [Scotland's Census 2022 - Rounded population estimates](#)

[2] Hopkins, J. and Piras, S. (2020) [Population projections and an introduction to economic-demographic foresight for Scotland's sparsely populated areas \(2018-43\)](#).

[3] ESPON (2020) ESCAPE (European Shrinking Rural Areas: Challenges, Actions and Perspectives for Territorial Governance) Final Report. <https://www.espon.eu/escape>

Attraction and retention. Competing interests or two sides of the same coin?

Discussions of how to tackle population challenges can sometimes become bogged down in an apparent competition between prioritizing initiatives to retain existing residents, especially young people, or seeking to attract newcomers. However, for many local initiatives both attraction and retention are required, and may be better viewed as complementary than competing.

It is important to be realistic about the goals of attraction. Areas with established trends of population ageing and decline are not likely to be able to reverse these through immigration. In line with the focus on balance and well-being rather than 'growth' outlined above, attraction should not be viewed as a means to replenish populations to a predefined 'optimum' number. Instead, newcomers, whether international or from other areas of Scotland or the UK, can play an important role in wider initiatives to make places attractive and liveable for local populations as a whole.[4]

Nonetheless, particularly in areas where depopulation is combined with significant ageing, migration can be the only means to rapidly increase the working age population. Newcomers can fill vacancies in key services and help to retain local businesses and employers which might otherwise close or relocate due to shortages of labour and/or clients. However, this requires thinking about attraction in 'strategic' ways, to bring in newcomers with a good match to local labour market needs, with the capacities to adapt well to local linguistic, social and even natural environments such as climate and landscape. [5]

"Newcomers can be a source of improvement to the quality of life in regions feeling "left behind" as long as the structural problems in the region are addressed properly. Newcomers will make the need for improvements to healthcare and school systems, transportation, digital infrastructure and housing more visible and vital".

(Population Europe Policy Brief No. 40)

Viewed in these ways, attraction and retention are more clearly linked and mutually supporting rather than in competition. Migrants can help to keep places more viable, retaining and creating jobs and services rather than competing for these with local populations. As they boost local populations, whether through mid-length or more permanent stays, newcomers do of course also place demands on local services and infrastructure. However, this increased need could also be harnessed to strengthen arguments for investment from local authorities, national governments or other combinations of public and private funds again improving conditions and enhancing retention of both newcomers and longer-established residents.

So, which policy frameworks, what balance of decision-making, resource and buy-in are needed to make such positive outcomes more likely?

[4] Pinilla, V. and Sáez, L.A. 2021. "What Do Public Policies Teach us About Rural Depopulation: The Case Study of Spain" *European Countryside*, vol. 13, no.2, pp.330-351.

[5] EAG 2021, 'Designing a pilot remote and rural migration scheme: analysis and policy options'



A key challenge posed by a shift in focus towards local initiatives is around how these should best be resourced and coordinated. Involving local communities, employers and other stakeholders directly in diagnosis and analysis of local challenges and in designing and supporting initiatives is crucial to developing solutions that are well-suited to local needs and have the support of local actors to sustain them. At the same time, different levels of government must also work together to understand which policies, frameworks and strategies can help to translate what might otherwise be quite a piecemeal approach into a collective effort, with a clear strategic vision and tangible long-term benefits.[6]

A first step in doing this is to think about whether the drivers and expected outcomes at different levels are well aligned. At a local or community level initiatives are often driven by quite intrinsic concerns and a holistic view of the ways in which population change impacts on the feel of a place and the lives its residents. This focus may match well with an emphasis on well-being and an enthusiasm for locally-tailored responses. However projects designed in these ways can struggle to fit with rigid or siloed policy divisions and structures.

Bringing diverse drivers and needs together can be challenging

Local inputs/drivers

- often holistic, intrinsic,
- can match well to a focus on well-being,
- uneasy fit with rigid policy divisions
- harder to evaluate for 'measurable' economic or demographic outcomes

National (and local) policy

- often siloed
- focused on and measured by harder 'quantitative' outcomes
- requires criteria for selection and evaluation of initiatives or investments

Multi-level Policymaking

Governments at local, regional or national levels are increasingly keen to support the development of place-based initiatives and responses to population challenge. However, they can remain unsure of how to measure success or make decisions about where best to invest resources if criteria for selection and evaluation are not to be based on more easily measurable economic or demographic growth.

Meeting these challenges requires creative thinking and a willingness to move beyond standard practices in policy making and evaluation. Done well, multi-level policy making offers an approach to achieve this, creating a sum that is more than its parts.

Good multi-level policy making needs:

- to start from a shared vision. Indeed coordinating an effective and inclusive process to define this is the first challenge.
- clear mechanisms to understand and work with the actual (not desired) resources and dynamics of different places. Frameworks must be flexible enough to adapt to local needs and capacities.
- clear, equitable and effective mechanisms for spreading resource, sharing learning and building capacity.
- an understanding of resource that includes **both** financial inputs and resource to meet structural needs **and** systems for shared learning and capacity building between places and across policy areas.

The Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot: A top-down model with community participation



The RNIP is a permanent residence pathway designed to bring skilled foreign workers to remote and rural areas. Led and funded by a Federal Government Department - Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, and the Federal Economic Development Agency for Northern Ontario - FedNor. It has a clear focus on a specific group of newcomers and a goal for these newcomers to settle permanently. From a national perspective this is about 'spreading the benefits of economic immigration to smaller communities'.^[9]

'Community' is defined within the programme in administrative terms, based on a town, city or rural municipality and selected on criteria linked to population size and trends, economic profile and geographic location. Within each community a range of delivery partners may be involved: employers and local authorities generally play a key role alongside local development agencies and NGOs.

The prominent role played by employers is a feature of the underlying rationale for the pilot, which is first and foremost an economic development programme, focused on filling labour shortages, with demographic needs also largely understood in these terms. In this sense the programme is more aligned to neo-classical objectives around growth and competition, than to softer goals focused on well-being and balance. And yet the involvement of community partners brings with it a focus on welcome and inclusion as preconditions for successful retention.

Local communities play an important role in determining selection criteria within a points based visa system. Alongside labour-market skills and experience, these often encompass 'human capital' criteria, for example age, family status and language abilities, as well as previous links to the area or experience of living in similar rural contexts. The choice of criteria is often based on characteristics which community partners believe will make newcomers likely to adapt well and establish long-term ties to settle locally.

Delivery partners, including employers, are also responsible for providing 'welcome' through public events, buddy schemes and by facilitating access to services and connections to established community members. In at least one area, visa applicants score higher points if their prospective employer has provided them with an individual settlement plan.

"The program is community-driven, which means participating communities take the lead in attracting new immigrants and matching them with local job vacancies, promoting a welcoming community, and connecting newcomers to established community members and local settlement services."

([RNIP | CanadianVisa.org](https://rnip.canadianvisa.org))

[9] [RNIP | CanadianVisa.org](https://rnip.canadianvisa.org)



Empenta Artieda: A bottom-up, holistic, participatory response

Empenta Artieda is very different from the RNIP in terms of its genesis, focus and approach. This is a very local, bottom-up initiative which has developed over time to make wider connections and draw in resource from external sources, including the regional government and the European Union.

The project was initiated by the town council and mayor's office to counter economic and demographic decline in Artieda, a tiny village at the foot of the Pyrenees, in the north of Zaragoza province. Artieda has a permanent population of just 80 people, increasing to 120 in the summer. Its economy and population have been in decline for over 40 years creating a major threat to the sustainability of the village. At the start of the Empenta Artieda initiative most young people were moving away to Pamplona / Zaragoza, and other bigger cities.

The initiative has involved a phased process which gave considerable time at the start to very open, participatory and consensual planning. Community here is understood as embracing everyone who lives in the village, whether year round or on a more seasonal basis, including both newcomers and longer-term residents. The initiative began from a phase of participative diagnosis based on a survey of inhabitants, a series of mini focus groups and self-diagnostic workshops, through which participants defined their key concerns. These related primarily to housing, employment and social solidarity.

Following on from this an 'Integral Plan of Action' was developed. Anyone living in the village at the time was encouraged to propose ideas, which were then measured against criteria under each priority concern and prioritized through consensus.



The resulting plan of action was taken forward by a revolving core team of young people, employed part-time by the town council, with funding from the EU youth guarantee and the Government of Aragon.

Unlike the RNIP with its clear focus on international skilled migrants, Empenta Artieda is more concerned with retention, and return, of young people with roots in the village, although it is also open to attracting newcomers. The initiative is not about growth or permanence per se but about sustainability, with a holistic and intrinsic approach. This may suggest a model best suited to very small and cohesive communities. A guide produced through the project itself to encourage others to replicate the model, suggests it is suitable for villages of 20-500 residents.[10]

However, a similar ethos and toolkits for participatory design and local-led diagnosis have been used in quite contrasting contexts. The Nordregio REGINA project, for example, which focuses on developing initiatives to attract newcomers to remote rural areas with natural resource in the Nordic Arctic and Scotland. This project mixes a specific focus on attracting skilled workers, with 'softer' notions of welcome/accompaniment and support for various groups of newcomers including international students, lifestyle migrants, young families and refugees.[11]

[10] Unión, Acción, Repoblación. [Guía práctica de desarrollo rural participativo para empentar tu pueblo](#)

[11] www.nordregio.org/research/regina



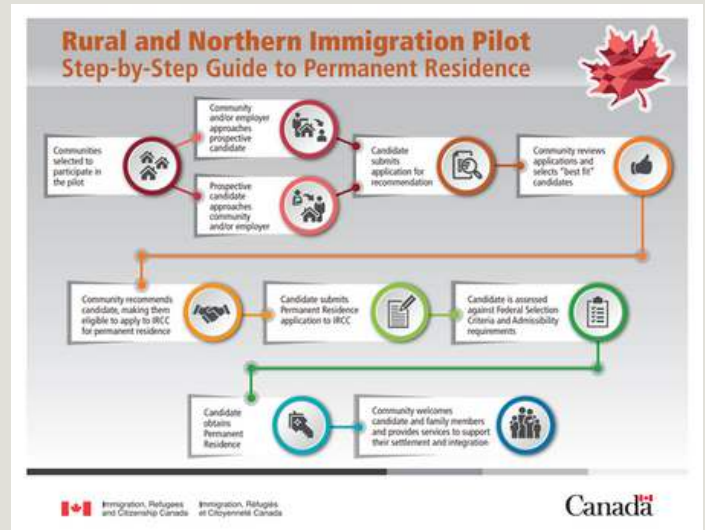
Evaluating Multi-Level Responses

As with any policy response governments, funders and other stakeholders will wish to evaluate the successes and learn from the challenges of multi-level policies and initiatives seeking to meet the challenges of rural depopulation. Our two examples show evaluation can be approached in a variety of ways and aligning these closely with the broader aims and ethos of a response is of crucial importance.

Evaluating the RNIP

The RNIP has been viewed as a success in terms of quantitative evaluations of the numbers of new residents attracted. Whilst there is no data on retention yet, the Atlantic Immigration Pilot Programme (AIP), on which the RNIP was modelled, shows very good and rising retention rates, outperforming other provincial nominee programmes. [12]

Like the RNIP, the AIP differed from other provincial nominee programmes by its focus on collaboration between local governments, employers, communities and settlement agencies and specifically by their responsibility to actively facilitate settlement and retention of immigrants and their families. On this basis one might expect, or at least hope, that RNIP will also produce good retention rates.



Assessments and reports drawing on the perspectives of local communities bring more qualitative insights to evaluating the programme. These are based on interviews with and surveys of key stakeholders including delivery partners, and newcomers, although it is less clear how systematically this is being done across the different communities involved.

Reports highlight that migrants are pleased to be working in jobs for which they are trained and qualified and that local communities are benefiting from the arrival of both skilled workers and their families adding a demographic multiplier effect. [14]

They also note however that the work of providing 'welcome' can be difficult and requires resource both to maintain community 'buy in' and to meet newcomer needs and expectations. Concerns have been raised that skilled workers may be pulled away to more urban areas with larger job markets in the longer term. [15]

Quantitative Evaluations of RNIP are positive

The programme has attracted a growing number of residents each year.

- 2021 - 390
- 2022 - 1360
- 2023 - 6,120 (forecast)

Based on these quantitative assessments the RNIP was extended in 2022. Its conversion to a permanent programme has been proposed in 2023. [13]

[12] Statistics Canada - CIMM - Economic Immigration - November 9, 2022

[13] Immigration Canada - Canada's Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot could be made permanent

[14] Global News - Rural immigration pilot a success in Claresholm, Alta

[15] Aziz, N. and Meades, S. 2020. 'Growth for Sault Ste. Marie's Future: A Review of the Rural and Northern Immigration Pilot'. Nordikinstitute



Evaluating Empenta Artieda

Empenta Artieda is also seen as a success, although perhaps unsurprisingly the approach to evaluation has been much more local and qualitative than for RNIP.

An evaluation process is 'baked in' to the methodology of the initiative and is understood as integral to its development and to sustaining buy-in from the community. This mirrors the participatory diagnostics and design. It involves repeat surveys of local residents, an open process of scoring projects and participatory decision-making about what to continue and where there has been less progress so far.

The evaluations include evidence of modest quantitative outcomes and qualitative assessments of success. Key areas of work are being taken forward through a workers cooperative Ixambre, established in 2020. This has included setting up a consultancy project to share the learning and methodologies developed in Artieda with other villages and rural areas.[16]

A comprehensive guide and toolkit has been produced [17], there are seminars and learning events and Empenta Artieda is part of a wider 'Pueblos vivos' programme funded by the Government of Aragon. This brings together a whole range of diverse local initiatives and municipal programmes seeking to tackle demographic and economic decline in the region. [18]

Where the initiative has been less successful is in tackling structural issues around housing, transport and communications. This has caused a blockage with the village now attracting interest from potential newcomers who they cannot accommodate.



Complex, multi-layered interventions require creative, flexible and multi-faceted approaches to evaluation

Rachel Marangozov, contributed her insights to our project, drawing on her rich expertise in public policy research and over a decade of experience in implementation and evaluation of equality and diversity projects involving policy makers, practitioners and communities.

Evaluation criteria should relate directly to the shared vision and aims of the intervention.

- Avoid narrow criteria that focus only on 'hard', measurable outcomes
- Develop criteria grounded in the realities of place and stakeholders values and aspirations

Begin from formative approaches which integrate evaluation from the start. These help to:

- Develop diagnostic measures of how and why progress is made, with stakeholders and participants central to this process, rather than feeling externally judged by it.
- Create a story of implementation and of how important other factors were and why.
- Test initial assumptions and identify gaps in support, or barriers to implementation.

Establish realistic baselines, metrics and milestones against which progress can be measured. These should include:

- Measures of the performance of the intervention itself, not just its outcomes.
- A record of opportunities for learning created by the intervention, e.g. connections to other policy areas; capacity building to support longer-term planning and sustainable change.
- A combination of quantitative criteria and fine-grain metrics linked directly to realities on the ground. Together these should reflect broader policy goals and the need for the intervention.

[16] <https://www.ixambre.org/>

[17] [Unión, Acción, Repoblación. Guía práctica de desarrollo rural participativo para empentar tu pueblo](#)

[18] <https://pueblosvivosaragon.com/>

Can Multi-Level Initiatives Help to Tackle Rural Depopulation?

Each of our examples has demonstrated that multi-level initiatives can achieve significant successes, but neither is an easy fix, nor is there a single model or approach.

Clarity about the purposes and aims of multi-level interventions is key. It is important that the vision, aims, methods and forms of evaluation within an initiative or programme line up well. This also requires a clear view of what can and cannot be achieved by the different partners and strands of work involved. In an ideal scenario, different levels of government, local stakeholders and private or third sector partners each play to their own strengths, to complement rather than duplicate each others' work.

Both Empenta Artieda and the RNIP in their own ways start from a fairly clear vision. For Empenta Artieda this has been arrived at through an organic process open to all the residents of a small community. It is linked to policies at local, regional and EU levels, but in fluid ways. For RNIP the vision is based on a top-down and structured policy programme, involving consultation between levels of government and formally designated stakeholders. It is clearly delineated within a pre-defined policy framework.

The aims and expected outcomes of each initiative or programme should flow from its shared vision. In broad terms aims and outcomes should:

- provide a framework for co-ordinating and sustaining local inputs;
- create mechanisms which spread resource and build capacity;
- establish a longer-term commitment to refining processes and extending their reach.

In our two examples these aspects are differently balanced and understood.

For RNIP the federal government defines the parameters in consultation with local partners and provides a mechanism to deliver the resource - in this case skilled workers. Local partners are then co-ordinated to select, welcome and retain newcomers. This programme is strong on delivery but has potential weaknesses around 'buy in' of local partners and maintaining this, which may have repercussions around longer-term outcomes.

Artieda is a much more holistic and intrinsic process developed from within the community itself and has more of a 'trial and error' feel to it. Resources have been brought in from local and regional government and EU largely through linking into existing programmes and adjacent policy areas, such as youth employment schemes. The initiative has achieved impressive aspects of delivery through a creative and consensual approach, but its longer-term sustainability seems likely to be weakened if it is not able to secure more lasting 'buy in' from regional and national government and trigger investment in structural improvements.

As different as they are, and successful as they have been in many ways, both the RNIP and Empenta Artieda highlight an ongoing conundrum in rural population work. Namely, that initiatives to attract newcomers and retain residents (new or long established) struggle to work without the infrastructural improvements required to meet needs and ensure that rural contexts are places where people live well. Neither top-down policies, and investments, especially if these are confined to siloed policy areas, nor community-based initiatives and welcome can achieve this alone.