

NorthWest2045 Regional Land Use Partnership LAND+ Handbook

A community-led approach to collaboration,
for the benefit of people and place.

2021-2025



Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba

Written by Rachel Skene (RLUP Manager) and Lizzie Williams (RLUP Coordinator), with input from the NW2045 RLUP Board and team.

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- *The Community of Kinlochbervie*
- *Assynt Development Trust: the Anchor organisation without whom this work would not be possible*
- *The Highland Council*
- [*The wider RLUP Board*](#)
- *Scottish Land Commission*
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- *The NorthWest2045 group*
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1 Concise Executive Summary

This Handbook documents the work of the NorthWest2045 Regional Land Use Partnership (NW2045 RLUP) Pilot from 2021 – 2024, which arose from the community-led NW2045 Vision created in 2020.

There is a strong focus on the micro-pilot project in the Community Council area of Kinlochbervie, and the work to understand the opportunities around Natural Capital markets in the NW2045 area – which included taking a locally-appropriate ‘crofting township’ approach, which included Grazings Clerk, crofters, land owner and community.

The objective of this community-led RLUP has been to create the conditions that catalyse change, rather than implementing a pre-determined programme of delivery.

The work has demonstrated that facilitating conversations and nurturing connections can empower people; engender hope, a sense of possibility and agency, so that people can work together in trusting relationships to create a better future.

A community of place is now more empowered to work together – community, crofters and landowner - exploring and addressing all manner of issues, from childcare to natural capital options to renewable energy to offshore servicing.

Through this experience a set of [Principles](#) has been produced which will inform the next stages of RLUP work. This will be implemented more widely across the NW2045 area, continuing to work with communities of place - including landowners, land managers and tenants - towards the NW2045 Vision.

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**Kinlochbervie
Community**

**Place-based
collaboration**

- Crofters Ghillie/keepers
- Land-owners
- Primary,
- Secondary & FE tutors/ teachers
- Community leads & reps
- Third-sector professionals
- Private sector professionals
- Public sector professionals

2 Full Executive Summary

This Handbook comprises the many strands of work that have taken place since the inception of the NorthWest2045 Regional Land Use Partnership (NW2045 RLUP) pilot in 2021, and represents the invaluable experience gained during this pilot phase.

Throughout the document there are links to additional information on the [Handbook Padlet](#).

2.1 Origin of the NW2045 RLUP

In 2021 the Scottish Government established five pilot RLUPs across Scotland. The aim was to support stakeholders within an area to collaborate to make decisions about land use in a fair and inclusive way. This is particularly necessary because of the urgent and bold changes in land use that are required to meet Net Zero and nature restoration targets.

NW2045 is a cross-sectoral collective of organisations established in 2020 to address the many various socio-economic-environmental issues in the region. Through a community-led process, the NW2045 produced the [NW2045 Community Vision](#) in 2021:

- *Vision 1: A place that is attractive for young people and families to live and work*
- *Vision 2: A model for a new diverse rural economy*
- *Vision 3: A place where communities can determine their own prospects*

Because of this existing cross-sectoral collaborative model, the NW2045 was an appropriate host for one of the five RLUP pilots.

2.2 Four key areas of focus for the RLUPs

The Scottish Government tasked the national programme of RLUPs with focusing on:

1. **Stakeholder collaboration:** implementation and delivery of a stakeholder engagement strategy.
2. **Natural Capital:** identification of regional Natural Capital assets, and exploring what ‘taking a natural capital approach’ means in this area.
3. **Data:** identification of relevant data sets required for development of Regional Land Use Framework (RLUF).
4. **Identification and agreement of regional priorities** / opportunities / challenges to aid in RLUF development.

The four other RLUP pilots were all hosted within large organisations; the NW2045 RLUP is the only community-led initiative. This has been a valuable opportunity to pilot a bespoke methodology, avoiding some of the challenges and constraints of working within a conventional institutional structure.

Throughout the process the team developed a set of Principles (see below) which inform how this RLUP seeks to achieve collaboration across the community of place, and to catalyse positive change.

‘Community of place’ in this context includes all those within a geographic area – crofters, landowners, the wider community – who share a collective responsibility for the needs and future of the land.

It is important to note that the objective of this work is *not* to directly deliver a programme of activity, but to create the conditions that enable change to happen. By facilitating conversations and nurturing connections, the purpose was to empower people; to engender hope, a sense of possibility and agency, so that people can work together in trusting relationships to create a better future.

This positive energy – when generated within the community of place – is itself a powerful catalyst for change, and it is from this foundation that opportunities can be seized and work can flourish which directly serves the needs of people and nature in the region.

Ten Principles guiding the NW2045 RLUP approach: the Land+ project

These Principles, developed by the team throughout the RLUP pilot, acknowledge and respect that communities in this area have experienced multiple short-term, externally-imposed projects which have relied on volunteer input from a small, over-stretched group of people, and have often ended without achieving long-term, transformational change.

In this work we are striving for something radically different, and aspire to support a genuine collaboration and respectful dialogue that empowers the community of place to achieve the change they define as necessary. Therefore:

1. The NW2045 RLUP **respects the knowledge, experience and expertise** of people within the community of place.
2. **People within the community** – those who have a **long-term commitment** to the well-being of the place – are at the heart of the work, and are **supported by a wider team** who are also ‘of’ the area, who understand the full reality of life in the North West.
3. Provision is made within the budget to **pay for the time of these ‘Community Co-Leads’**, rather than relying on voluntary input, in order to:
 - a. Ensure that **different demographics** within the community are represented.
 - b. **Mitigate the problems of volunteer fatigue and elite capture** (ie only those who can afford - in terms of finances or time - to volunteer get involved).
 - c. Underline / emphasise that **people’s time and input is valued**: they are experts of their place.

*This methodology, designed by the NW2045 RLUP, represents a **valuable mutual investment and legacy far beyond the monetary value** of the remuneration for hours worked. (The Team does, of course, recognise that Voluntary work has a very important role within society.)*

4. The **Community Council** is the node of democracy from whom the project seeks the mandate to proceed; who hold us to account, and who are consulted and involved as appropriate.
5. The voices of the **children and young people** must be integral to conversations about long-term changes in land use.
6. The approach also respects the ‘carrying stream’ of knowledge from older generations, and seeks to strengthen **intergenerational and cross-community links**.
7. The team finds ways to **encourage ‘hidden voices’** – those within the community who may not normally express their opinions publicly - to be heard.
8. The approach strives to be **grounded, practical and useful**, and make all **communications accessible and jargon-free**. The project strives to **flex and adapt** to changing circumstances, and work with other initiatives in the area for **maximum efficiency and efficacy**.
9. Whilst being embedded in ‘the place’, the approach **integrates knowledge and expertise** from the wider national, UK and international conversations, to ensure that the community benefits from any appropriate **opportunities**.
10. The approach strives for **reciprocity and exchange**: to optimise and build on the capacity and skills that already exist within the place: the local asset base in the widest, most holistic sense.

2.3 The Land+ Project

The NW2045 RLUP initiated a project referred to as ‘Land+’, focused initially on the Kinlochbervie Community Council area. The Land+ project contracted three ‘Community Co-leads’ to help design and take forward the work. We were fortunate to work with dynamic people representing diverse sectors of the community.

The Land+ work has so far comprised three distinct phases implemented by the Land+ Community Co-Leads and the Core RLUP Team.

Phase 1: Conversations and Connections

- The Land+ Co-Leads spent 100+ hours discussing community issues with members of the community – not in public meetings, but on a 1:1 basis, and deliberately striving to speak with those whose voices may be ‘less heard’.
- The conversations started with loose questions around land use and were free-flowing, not based on a structured interview.

Phase 2: Consolidating the themes

- Assimilating the information from conversations into 12 themes (see [section 7.1.3](#)), which were discussed with the Kinlochbervie Pupil Parliament, as a vital part of working with the Children and Young People.

Phase 3: A focus on Natural Capital

- A Natural Capital Assessment was undertaken: a valuable learning exercise, and a foundation for further Natural Capital-related work.
- Specific funding from the Facility for Investment-Ready Nature in Scotland (FIRNS) allowed the Land+ team to focus on potential opportunities within the emerging Natural Capital markets.
 - o This work was undertaken in partnership with Galbraith (Natural Capital and Carbon Lead, Eleanor Harris) and a leading natural capital academic (Professor Mark Reed, SRUC).
- **The Land+ approach to Natural Capital markets is distinctive in various ways:**
 - o The key driver was to create the conditions for the community of place to proactively engage in natural capital work, to build community wealth - rather than being passive recipients of 'benefits'.
 - o Exploring ways to work outwith the conventional systems of the Woodland Carbon Code or the Peatland Code, the approach focused on developing a holistic product, with impacts on biodiversity, carbon – including in the built environment, and community wealth.
 - o The project worked at the level of Crofting Township (Sheigra Township).
- **The FIRNS project focused on four interlinked areas of work:**
 - o Benefiting Nature: biodiversity credits on Common Grazings land.
 - o Benefitting Households: decarbonising households within the Township.
 - o Collaborative Governance: Exploring governance structures for a community-led natural capital company.
 - o Community Manifesto: Working with children and young people to articulate their aspirations for the future of land-use in their area.

2.4 Learnings from the NW2045 RLUP approach

This unconventional methodology takes time, and is therefore expensive, but when done well it can deliver genuine and lasting results through the new connections and collaborations that are created. Some essential factors for success:

- **Time, patience, persistence and energy** is required to deal with multi-faceted, complex reality.
- It is beneficial to work directly with people who are **of / from community**, who have **energy, enthusiasm, 'bandwidth', tenacity and investment in the future of the place**, and people who are **respected within the community**.
- **Diversity within the team** - intergenerational and cross-sectoral – is important.
- **Remunerating** these people for their time, wherever possible, is important - to avoid volunteer fatigue and elite capture.
- Ensure the **children and young people** are involved: they are the future.
- **Fostering genuine, mutual trust and respect** within and beyond the project team.
- Ensure people know they are **listened to**, have a **voice and agency**, and are **connected**: this engenders a sense of **empowerment**, which can **catalyse change**.
- Being **present in the community** – able to attend meetings of the Community Council and other bodies – fosters connections more organically.

- This ‘soft presence’ helps build **trusting relationships, reaching beyond the ‘usual suspects’ to lesser heard voices, and building a holistic picture** of the community’s views and concerns.
- Personal connections help people to **share knowledge**: often this knowledge is all that is needed to **stimulate and enable change to happen**.
- Technical vocabulary does not enthuse people: it is important to use **accessible language and focus on clear, practical concepts**.
- **External ‘experts’ must communicate clearly** and be careful to involve people **meaningfully and respectfully**.
- These **external advisors / experts must learn** from working within a community.
- **Abstract concepts** - climate and nature crises, and natural capital - **do not resonate** with people, especially when they have more urgent, tangible challenges in their daily life.
- Therefore - encourage people to be involved via **relatable ‘hooks’ that are relevant to their life and immediate concerns**.
- This groundwork **builds resilience and connections** to equip the community of place for future challenges.
- There is no ‘quick win’ when it comes to Natural Capital projects, but **an RLUP can help make concepts more accessible and support communities of place to understand the opportunities, and potential trade-offs**.
- For all partners to have the confidence to commit to a long-term project requires **certainty and stability** in many variables: both external factors (including agricultural subsidies), and all relationships pertaining to the land.
- We continue participate in wider **knowledge sharing initiatives** within Scotland.

This work requires a willingness to embark on a journey without a predetermined destination. We hope that people are galvanised by the vision of inspiring and catalysing regenerative change in their own place.

Going forward, our NW2045 working will be based on these Principles and Learnings. The Principles and Learnings do not stipulate *what* should be done or *what* issues should be focused on; rather they shows *how* people can collaborate on land use issues in this area.

2.5 What’s next? The NW2045 RLUP commitment

Nationally the RLUPs have moved beyond Pilot status to a formal initiative. The NW2045 RLUP is committed to continuing and extending our work across the NW2045 area, and championing the importance of our community-embedded approach at all levels.

Specifically:

1. Working across the communities of place to nurture connections that develop their sense of agency, stimulate collaboration and create the conditions for change.
2. Working with landowners, crofters and other ‘land decision-makers’ to support and encourage meaningful involvement of the wider community of place in discussions and decisions about how land is used.

3. Continuing to explore and support opportunities for communities to be proactively involved in natural capital projects.
4. Working with ScotGov to develop and define the scope of the RLUP, and how it will be delivered both within the NW2045, across the existing network, and elsewhere.
5. Holding to account ScotGov, Highland Council - and others in positions of power – to achieve the transformative change our land and people need to thrive.



Pipers at Coigach Gathering. © Ewen McLachlan

3 Introduction and Overview of Handbook

3.1 What is a Regional Land Use Partnership?

See [Section 5](#) for a fuller explanation and context of the RLUPs. In brief: from 2021 the Scottish Government piloted five RLUP projects as a way to ensure that land use provides public benefits - locally, regionally and nationally. RLUPs are intended increase communication, cooperation and collaboration between landowners, communities and other stakeholders, and create conditions conducive to collaborative action on issues that matter to the people of the place.

Increasing positive interaction between all these groups concerned with land use is particularly pertinent in the context of the Scottish Government's ambitious Net Zero and Biodiversity goals, which will inevitably (indeed, already have) lead to significant changes in the way land is used.

3.2 Who and what is this Handbook for?

This handbook is a compendium of the many strands of work that have taken place since the inception of the NorthWest2045 Regional Land Use Partnership (NW2045 RLUP) pilot in 2021. It represents the invaluable experience gained during this pilot phase, and has various intended uses:

- It contains information and evidence to support decisions about how best to take the RLUP work forward.
- It is a comprehensive record of the work for those who have been involved in, funded, or have a stake in the work: the Scottish Government, Highland Council and NW2045 collaborators, communities and partners - as well as other organisations such as NatureScot and National Heritage Lottery Fund.
- It is a foundational reference and resource for those who wish to learn from, or emulate, aspects of this approach – within or beyond the NW2045 area.

THE HANDBOOK PADLET

Throughout the RLUP project the team have used 'padlets' for communicating. A padlet is a microsite for sharing various types of content in an accessible and dynamic way.

We have created a padlet for additional information relevant to this handbook. It is linked at pertinent points throughout the document, and can be accessed [here](#).

Although the handbook is a long and comprehensive document, it is intended that the sections can be standalone, to allow readers to access section(s) that are particularly pertinent to their own needs and interests.

3.3 What is in this Handbook?

The handbook takes the reader on a journey from *before* the inception of the RLUP work – the creation of the NorthWest2045 Vision - through the development of the NW2045 RLUP methodology and subsequent Land+ project development and delivery: the place-based focus on Kinlochberrie, and the Natural Capital focus of the FIRNS Development grant.

The Handbook provides an overview of how our methodologies and approaches evolved; the lessons we have learned along the way; the impact that has been created directly - and the wider impacts created by the ripple-effect of the work.

4 The background to this work

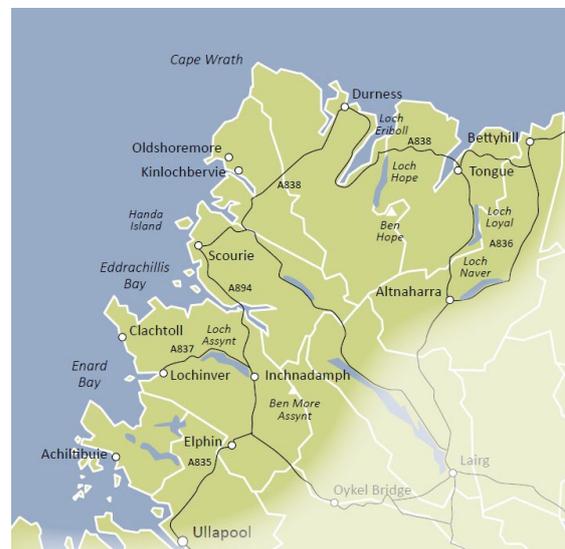
4.1 Development of the NW2045 and the Community vision

The NW2045 RLUP originated primarily from the development of the NW2045 community-led Vision.

NW2045 was established in 2020 by a diverse coalition of organisations operating in the North West Highlands who recognised that the many cross-sectoral, cross-regional challenges facing communities and land in this area are too big to be tackled by any single organisation, or sector, in isolation.

These challenges include lack of affordable housing; falling school roles; an aging population with few young people wanting or able to stay; lack of access to land; degraded biodiversity and an uncertainty about the development of emerging natural capital markets.

NW2045 comprises a non-hierarchical coalition of local development companies/trusts (Assynt Development Trust, Scourie Community Development Company, Up North Development Trust); community groups (eg North West Highlands Geopark); statutory bodies (Scottish Land Commission, Highland Council, Highlands & Islands Enterprise; NatureScot) and community, private and environmental non-governmental landowners (eg Assynt Foundation, Wildland Ltd, John Muir Trust).



Map showing the NorthWest2045 area in Scotland.

The NW2045 partners committed to creating a new way of working, seeking to forge a genuine, transparent, cross-sectoral partnership, to address issues holistically. The initial undertaking was a community consultation to understand what the people of the seven community council areas across the region value about, and hope for, for their area.

The consultation methodology was carefully considered, and was different from the conventional externally-led, top-down, extractive consultation models in various ways:

- It involved in-depth conversations with people throughout the area.
- It deliberately sought out conversations with ‘less heard voices’.

- These conversations were also held by young people across the area (many of whom were at home during the Lockdown), which provided an additional depth of value to the work.
- More conventional online questionnaires and online workshops were also used to complement the in-depth conversations.
- All work was undertaken during Covid Lockdown, so was necessarily carried out online.

This thorough, deliberative process – which reached 10% of the population - produced substantial data, from which a community-led Vision, comprising three bold Vision Statements for the North West Highlands, was extrapolated:

- *Vision 1: A place that is attractive for young people and families to live and work*
- *Vision 2: A model for a new diverse rural economy*
- *Vision 3: A place where communities can determine their own prospects*

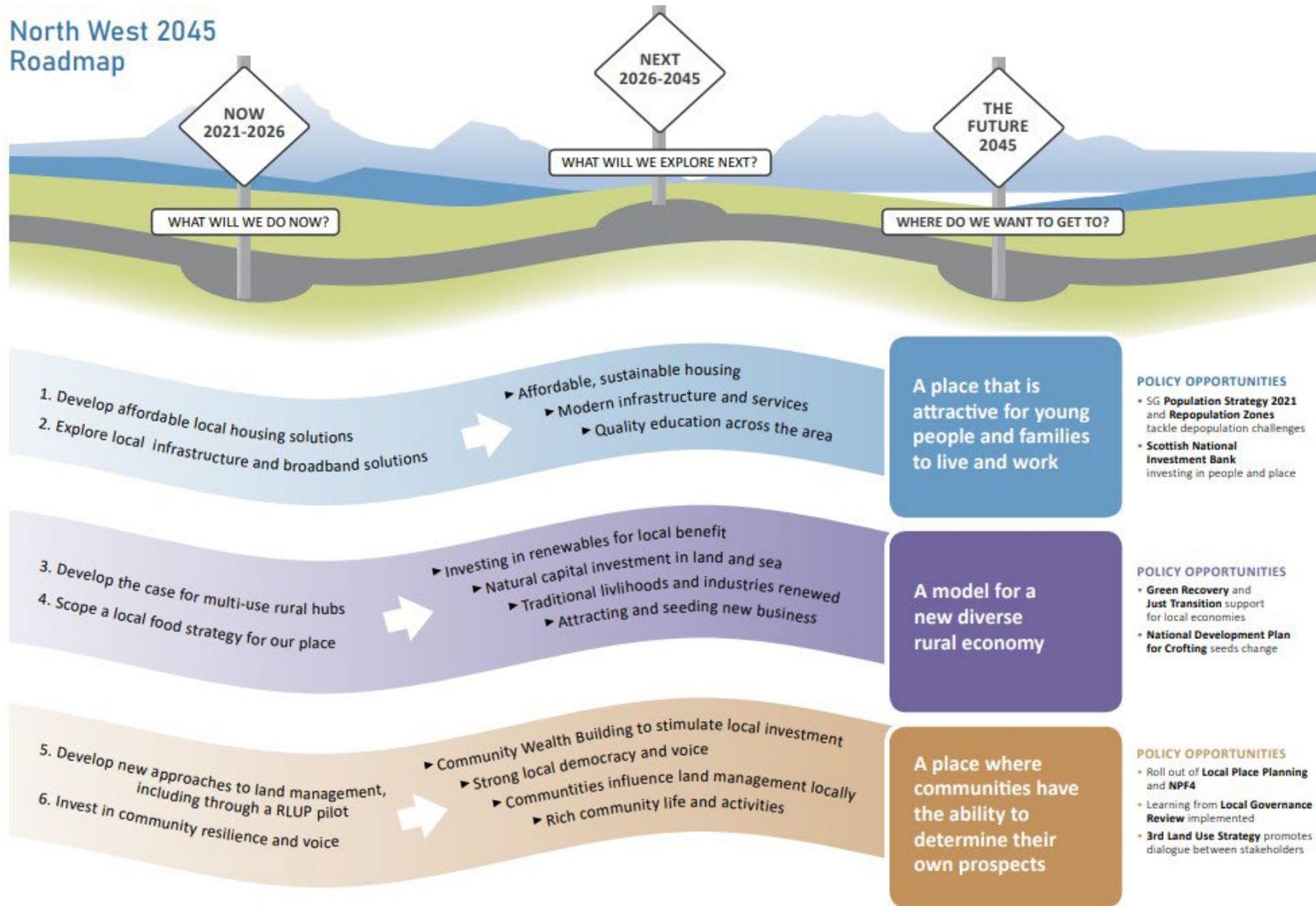
Each of these Vision Statements can be considered a ‘destination’, the route to which has various stages – see below. These statements reflect our urgent need to reverse the current degenerative cycle into a *regenerative* cycle, with communities thriving economically, socially and environmentally.

See over for the ‘roadmap’, which illustrates the route to the Vision. Read the concise NW2045 Community Vision [here](#).



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North West 2045 Roadmap



5 The Regional Land Use Partnership pilots

Scotland has ambitious environmental targets for addressing the climate and biodiversity crises. Scotland's abundant land and other natural resources – our 'natural capital' (see [section 7](#)) - are an important part of our plan to reach [net zero carbon emissions by 2045](#), and [halt biodiversity loss by 2030](#). However, to achieve that, the way land is used in Scotland will need to change in the coming years.

Scotland is also committed to a [just transition to net zero](#), which means reaching a net zero and climate resilient economy in a way that delivers fairness and tackles inequality and injustice, and to building a '[wellbeing economy](#)' that is: *'inclusive and that promotes sustainability, prosperity and resilience, where businesses can thrive and innovate, and that supports all of our communities across Scotland to access opportunities that deliver local growth and wellbeing'*.

The changes to how land is used and managed that are required to address climate and biodiversity crises will have impacts on people living on and around that land, and different groups may have different priorities regarding the use of that land. The changes that are necessary to reach the nation's goals must happen in a way that is fair: reducing rather than exacerbating inequality.

It is therefore important that people from all sectors can be involved in discussions and decisions about how land is used in their local area. Principle 7 of the Scottish Government's [Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement](#) states: *'There should be meaningful collaboration and community engagement in decisions about land'*, and the Scottish Land Commission has developed a Protocol on [Community Engagement in Decisions Relating to Land](#).

It is in this context that, in 2021, the Scottish Government launched five pilot Regional Land Use Partnerships (RLUPs) to explore how to enhance communication and cooperation between landowners, communities and other stakeholders.

As well as this RLUP in the Highland region, the other RLUP pilots were:

- Cairngorms National Park
- [Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park](#)
- North East Region (Aberdeenshire and Aberdeen City Councils)
- [South of Scotland \(Dumfries and Galloway and Scottish Borders Councils\)](#)

5.1 The NW2045 RLUP pilot

The depth of engagement evidenced by the NW2045 vision, as well as our unusual cross-sectoral approach, attracted both attention and opportunity. In 2021, when the Highland Council region was selected for one of the Scottish Government's RLUP pilots, the NW2045 group was clearly a strong contender to host the opportunity with the Highland Council region, and the NW2045 RLUP work started in January 2022.

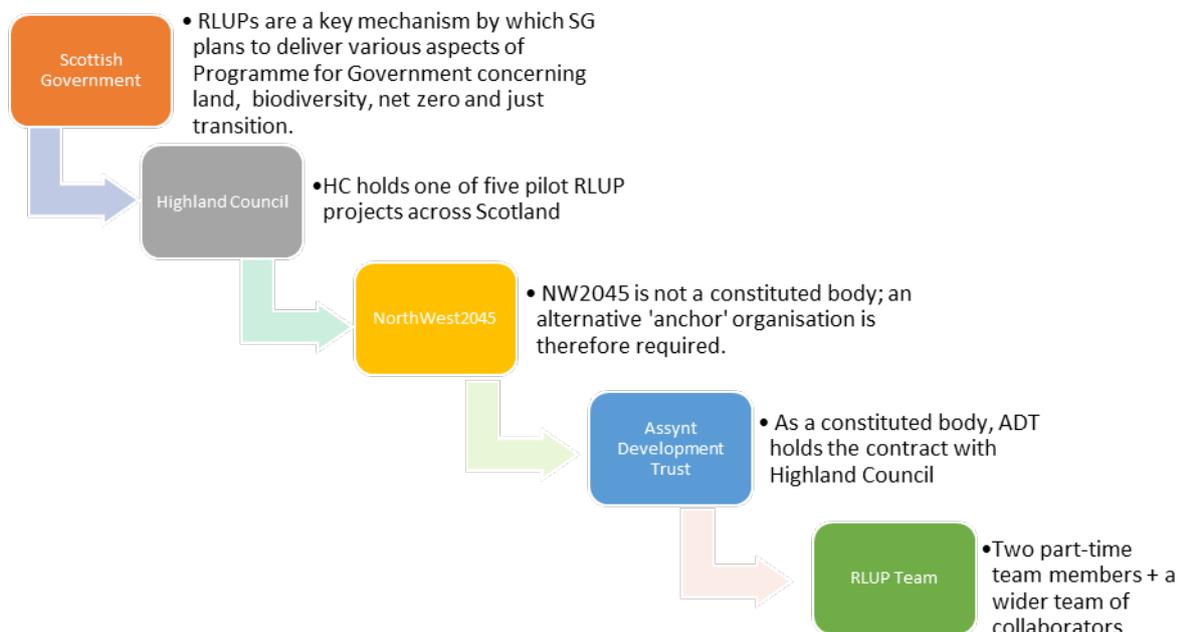
We know that our communities want to be involved in discussions and decisions about land use, and to benefit from them. To elaborate on Vision 3 of the NW2045 Community Vision introduced above, it says that we want the North West Highlands to be:

*“A place where our communities can determine their own prospects...
...a place where our communities have a clear voice in shaping the prospects of our place and in decisions made about land and other natural resources.”*

Our RLUP pilot has been an opportunity to work towards this Vision, so that the land and natural capital of the NW2045 area contribute to our shared wealth and wellbeing, including that of the planet upon which we all depend.

Because NW2045 is not a formally constituted entity, it cannot hold funding itself. After discussion amongst NW2045 partners it was decided that Assynt Development Trust should take the role of Anchor Organisation throughout the Pilot and into the future. This critical function has been, and is, deeply valued by NW2045 and the RLUP team; we acknowledge the time and capacity required from part-time staff and volunteer Board members, namely the ADT Chair, to undertake this role.

5.2 NW2045 RLUP Governance structure



Notably, the NW2045 RLUP was unique amongst the pilots: the only one *not* hosted by an institutional structure (such as a National Park): it is held within, and led by, the community of the NW2045 area.

Whilst presenting some challenges in terms of capacity, this situation has enabled the NW2045 RLUP to forge an alternative path outwith the conventional institutional

constraints. This has been transformative for the outcomes of the NW2045 RLUP pilot; it is best explained by the Guiding Principles, introduced in [section 6 – the Land+ Project](#).

5.2.1 RLUP Board

An initial Board was established, comprising representation from across the NW2045 collective, seeking to draw together a group with different perspectives, experience and connections to steer this new NW2045 project.

- Emma Cooper – Scottish Land Commission Head of Land Rights and Responsibilities. (Emma stood down from the Board in March 2023 due to a change in working pattern.)
- Scott Dalgarno – Highland Council, Development Planning/ Place-planning.
- Karen Grant – Scottish Land Commission, Good Practice Adviser – Land Rights and Responsibilities.
- Frances Gunn – Chair of UpNorth! Development Company; NW2045 and Chair of RLUP Board.
- Lewis Macaskill – Assynt Foundation community land owner, crofter and NW2045 representative.
- Ewen McLachlan – Assynt Development Trust / Community representative NW2045/
- Hugh Morrison – Highland Council Councillor (Independent).
- Fiona Richardson – Highland Council, Community Support & Ward Management
- Adam Rose – NatureScot/ Lead agency representative.
- Phil Tomalin - Highland Council, Policy and Reform / Ward Manager NW2045.
- Nicole Wallace – Highland Council, Planning and Environment / RLUP Contract lead Highland Council.

The respective members of this group have engaged to varying degrees; we are aware of the limitations on voluntary boards and committees, and grateful for all input.

5.2.2 RLUP Core Team

The RLUP pilot has been managed since January 2022 by Rachel Skene as a self-employed contractor recruited by the NW2045 group. Rachel recruited Lizzie in May 2022.

- Rachel Skene – lead contractor and RLUP Manager. Rachel grew up in the North West Highlands and has a powerful vision of community-led change. She has a strong network within Kinlochbervie and the wider area, and has 25 years’ experience of third, private and public sector working and socio-economic development, particularly in the rural context, and has led the NW2045 Regional Land Use Partnership pilot since 2021.
- Lizzie Williams – RLUP Coordinator. Lizzie has lived in Achiltibuie in the North West Highlands since 2009. With a background in biodiversity conservation, community involvement and land management, and as a parent in a remote rural community, she deeply concerned about local and global environmental and community issues.

Lizzie has worked with the NorthWest2045 project since 2020; was Coordinator of the FIRNS project, and remains NW2045 RLUP Natural Capital lead.

Rachel and Lizzie have worked with the Land+ KLB Community Co-Leads since early 2023; see [section 6: the Land+ project](#).

5.3 Development of the NW2045 RLUP

The RLUPs were asked to deliver against four key areas:

5.3.1 Stakeholder collaboration

- Implementation and delivery of a stakeholder engagement strategy

The ask from ScotGov to the RLUP Pilots: *“A representative range of regional stakeholders should be involved in the Regional Land Use Partnership pilot and in the development of the draft Regional Land Use Framework (...) The scale and variety of asks that will be placed on Scotland’s land in order to meet our multiple national priorities is significant. If Scotland’s land is to contribute fully to achieving these it will require buy-in and understanding from local people and communities as well as landowners and managers and other stakeholders.”*

Our approach to ‘stakeholder collaboration’ and our interpretation of a ‘stakeholder engagement strategy’ is explained in detail in [section 9 - the Land+ project](#).

5.3.2 Natural Capital

- Identification and agreement of regional Natural Capital assets, and exploring what ‘taking a natural capital approach’ means in this area.

The ask from ScotGov to the RLUP Pilots: *RLUPs will take a natural capital approach, with natural capital-led consideration of how to maximise the contribution that our land can make to addressing the twin climate and biodiversity crises... (to)... help to optimise land use in a fair and inclusive way – meeting local and national objectives and supporting Scotland’s just transition to net-zero.*

A full explanation of the Natural Capital approach taken by the NW2045 RLUP is found in [section 7: Exploring how Natural Capital markets may help achieve community priorities](#).

5.3.3 Data

- Identification of relevant data sets required for development of RLUP

The ask from ScotGov to the RLUP Pilots: *“Pilots will be expected to identify and utilise existing evidence where appropriate and possible. In addition, the SG and pilot regions will work together to establish if there are wider data or evidence needs and whether the potential exists for additional support to be sourced either for individual pilots or at national level by optimising links with research institutions and academics.”*

Our work on data has been to identify what data (both ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ / qualitative and quantitative sources) is needed to support RLUP working in the NW2045 area. A strong focus of our work has been to ensure that community knowledge - the existing *ken*

(knowledge) and agency within communities - is intrinsic to developing the RLUP way of working, in collaboration with wider partners and bodies.

This knowledge generated within the community can then be aligned with the more conventional, quantitative knowledge and data we have gathered, for instance through the [Natural Capital Assessment](#) (see section 7), and through our work with academics (eg Mark Reed) and other consultants such as Galbraith and Atmos.

This gathering of data and making it available to people in the place is so important to building capacity and being able to make informed decisions about our places: decisions that are made by, and are appropriate to, our places and the people there. The connections and relationships that we create during the process of gathering this information are also essential.

5.3.4 Identification & agreement of regional priorities

- And opportunities / challenges - to aid in regional land use framework development.

The ask from ScotGov to the RLUP Pilots: *“Identify and agree upon current and potential land use priorities / opportunities / challenges across the region in a manner that supports national targets and priorities predominantly in climate change targets and other environmental objectives, including improving biodiversity. Considering the potential for nature-based solutions for climate change within the region such as woodland expansion, peatland restoration, natural flood management and greenspaces to reduce air pollution.”*

The RLUP work emanates from the NW2045 Vision, which is an expression of the priorities and objectives of people of the region. Therefore, the conversations undertaken during the Land+ work further identify the priorities of the people of that place.

5.3.4.1 Having our voice heard: Responding to government consultations

Another element of the RLUP work which contributes to articulating the regional priorities is responding to ScotGov Consultations. The first year of the RLUP Pilot saw two consultations that were of particular relevance to this work: *Land Reform in a Net Zero Nation* and *Proposals for a new Agriculture Bill*. For each of these consultations the RLUP team engaged with the wider NW2045 group to articulate a response on their behalf. We gathered and simplified the most pertinent information into accessible padlets for [Land Reform](#) and [Agriculture](#). For the Land Reform bill we held online events to discuss the issues with the NW2045, with input from Emma Cooper, Head of Land Rights & Responsibilities at the Scottish Land Commission. For the Agriculture bill we strove to engage the crofting communities in the process by distributing information amongst the communities. For both consultations, we simplified the response form and invited NW2045 group to submit their responses to us, which we collated into one unified response.

This work required considerable time from the team, but it was important to achieve. The NW2045 team have not had the capacity to respond to other government consultations in the same intense way since, but it is a question for the NW2045 going forward: should the NW2045 prioritize the capacity to respond to these consultations on behalf of the group, to

represent the voice of the area at the national level? This is part of the discussion ongoing at the time of writing (March 2025).

Another example of influencing upwards: in Sept 2022 we were invited by Ariane Burgess MSP to input into the budget planning process, by identifying what we felt should be included in the budget in order to support the delivery of relevant commitments in the Programme for Government and the Bute House Agreement.

6 The Land+ project

‘Land+’ is the name of the micro-pilot project which became the primary focus of the NW2045 RLUP work from January 2023.

‘Land+’ refers to our focus on the land and its role within a community of place – the people within that geographic area.

The way land is used impacts all those who live on and around it – not only the landowner or land manager, but also the wider community of place.

If more people are involved in conversations about land and how it is used, they may feel more connected to the land, and more people may find opportunities to benefit from it in some way; to feel custodianship and a reciprocal relationship with the land. [As noted above](#), this is integral to the Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement.

To re-emphasise: the focus of this work was *not* delivery of a conventional model of activities-outcomes-impacts. Rather, we have endeavoured to enable more people to have their voices heard, to work together, and to create more opportunities for change - with respect to Land Use, and beyond.

COMMUNITY OF PLACE

Community of Place in this context means: a group of people united by their geography.

Importantly, in this context, the Community of Place includes all people in that Community Council Area: the **crofters, landowners, the wider community**.

These people might share a **collective responsibility** for the needs and future of their local area.

A Community of Place is different to a Community of Interest, which does not share a common geography.

Ten Principles guiding the NW2045 RLUP approach: the Land+ project

As stated in the Executive Summary, a crucial part of our work was the creation of these Ten Principles which were developed by the team throughout the RLUP pilot.

The principles acknowledge and respect that communities in this area have experienced multiple short-term, externally-imposed projects which have relied on volunteer input from a small, over-stretched group of people, and have often ended without achieving long-term, transformational change.

In this work we are striving for something radically different, and aspire to support a genuine collaboration and respectful dialogue that empowers the community to achieve the change they define. Therefore:

1. The NW2045 RLUP **respects the knowledge, experience and expertise** of people within the community.
2. **People within the community** – those who have a **long-term commitment** to the well-being of the place – are at the heart of the work, and are **supported by a wider team** who are also ‘of’ the area, who understand the full reality of life in the North West.
3. Provision is made within the budget to **pay for the time of these ‘Community Co-Leads’**, rather than relying on voluntary input, in order to:
 - a. Ensure that **different demographics** within the community are represented
 - b. **Mitigate the problems of volunteer fatigue and elite capture** (ie only those who can afford - in terms of finances or time - to volunteer get involved).
 - c. Underline / emphasise that **people’s time and input is valued**: they are experts of their place.

*This methodology, designed by the NW2045 RLUP, represents a **valuable mutual investment and legacy far beyond the monetary value** of the remuneration for hours worked. (The Team does, of course, recognise that Voluntary work has a very important role within society.)*

4. The **Community Council** is the node of democracy from whom the project seeks the mandate to proceed; who hold us to account, and who are consulted and involved as appropriate.
5. The voices of the **children and young people** must be integral to conversations about long-term changes in land use.
6. The approach also respects the ‘carrying stream’ of knowledge from older generations, and seeks to strengthen **intergenerational and cross-community links**.
7. The team finds ways to **encourage ‘hidden voices’** – those within the community who may not normally express their opinions publicly - to be heard.
8. The approach strives to be **grounded, practical and useful**, and make all **communications accessible and jargon-free**. The project strives to **flex and**

adapt to changing circumstances, and work with other initiatives in the area for **maximum efficiency and efficacy**.

9. Whilst being embedded in ‘the place’, the approach **integrates knowledge and expertise** from the wider national, UK and international conversations, to ensure that the community benefits from any appropriate **opportunities**.
10. The approach strives for **reciprocity and exchange**: to optimise and build on the capacity and skills that already exist within the place: the local asset base in the widest, most holistic sense.

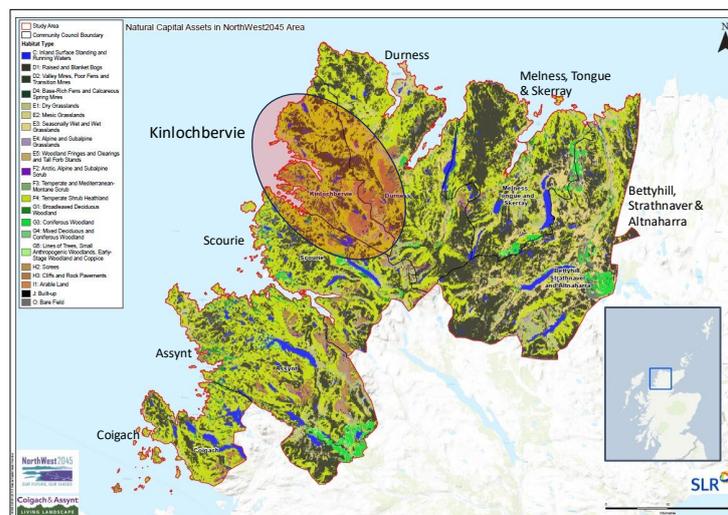
6.1 Land+ Kinlochbervie

The NW2045 area is vast (over 284,000 ha) and comprises seven Community Councils¹: it would not have been possible to work in a meaningful way across such an expanse during our short Pilot phase. Furthermore, as we determined during our Natural Capital Baseline Assessment work (see [section 7](#)), working with a smaller, more specific area – a ‘community of place’ - can be more meaningful when exploring novel concepts and ways of working, and what these mean to people on-the-ground.

We therefore decided to focus our work on a single Community Council area. Kinlochbervie was selected for several reasons: it has been identified by the [Sutherland Community Partnership as one of the five areas in Sutherland deemed ‘most deprived’](#) (largely due to access, housing and work opportunities), based on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation and Socio-Economic Performance Index. As explained in more detail below, there also existed the makings of a strong project team in Kinlochbervie.

We called the project Land+ to reflect the relationship between land and everything else.

Map showing location of NorthWest2045 area, with pilot area Kinlochbervie highlighted



This map – showing distribution of Natural Capital Assets – was produced as part of our Natural Capital Baseline Assessment in 2022.



¹ Community Councils in the NW2045 area: Bettyhill, Strathnaver & Altnaharra; Melness, Tongue & Skerry; Durness; Kinlochbervie; Scourie; Assynt; Coigach.

6.1.1 The Land+ Kinlochbervie Team

The core team - Rachel and Lizzie - attribute much of the impact of the Land+ approach to the composition and talent within with the team of collaborators we drew together, based in Kinlochbervie; our 'Community Co-Leads'. All had strong links within the area, the capacity and curiosity to be involved in the work, and different professional backgrounds:

Sophie Clark grew up in Kinlochbervie. She is a stalker, gamekeeper and ghillie, and was Scotland's first female lecturer in gamekeeping with the University of the Highlands and Islands. Sophie is also a retained firefighter.

Sara Harkins grew up in Kinlochbervie, is an integral part of the Kinlochbervie community, and is owner of Kinlochbervie Estate. Sara has a background in film and television production, and experience on many boards including Children in Need and Early Years Scotland. Sara is a community activist, and passionate about community-led action for Kinlochbervie.

Denise MacDonald grew up in Kinlochbervie and is highly active in all areas of community life, including as Chair of the Parent Council for the North West Sutherland School, member of the Kinlochbervie Community Council, founding member of the [Save our Rural Schools campaign](#), and Crofter. As an advisor with Citizens Advice Bureau, Denise is acutely aware of the challenges facing the communities across the North West.

The team also worked with other community co-leads within the community during specific parts of the work, as explained below.



Some of the Land+ team (L-R): Rachel, Sara, Eleanor, Lizzie, Ian and Sophie.

6.1.2 Land+ KLB Phase 1: Conversations and Connections in Kinlochbervie

Throughout the Spring and early Summer of 2023, the Land+ Community Co-Leads – Sara, Denise and Sophie – set out to gather views from the community of Kinlochbervie about what the land of their area means to people: *What opportunities does the land offer? Do they have connections to the land? Do they feel involved in decisions about how the land is used, and would they like to be involved?*

The team had developed some guiding questions in advance, but in practice they deliberately decided to ‘go with the flow’ which allowed more natural, organic conversations during the (usually) one-to-one meetings. Often, at a meeting with one person the Co-Lead would be asked to meet with someone else who was interested to be involved, and so the process continued. Although some board members encouraged a more formal stakeholder engagement process and policy, this informal approach reaped huge dividends.

The Co-Leads spoke to as many people as they could within the community of Kinlochbervie, including those who could be considered a ‘key source’ such as members of the community council, community development company, the Church Minister. They also made a concerted effort to meet those who might not – during a conventional ‘community consultation’ process – have their voice heard: parents of young children, the elderly and infirm. The links between people were made organically, and the team offered to visit people where they feel most comfortable and at a time convenient to them - often in their own homes - rather than holding an open meeting in a public space.

As part of this process, Sara also began to attend the monthly Kinlochbervie Community Council meetings (also attended by Denise, in her role on the Community Council), to learn about local developments and discussions, and contribute updates from the Land+ work. The Land+ approach recognises community councils as a cornerstone of local democracy and recognises the benefit of working in conjunction with existing structures where possible.

Over the course of these 100+ hours of conversations, the discussions naturally ranged beyond the land, to wider community issues.

This intensive process not only built a holistic understanding of the issues facing the community of Kinlochbervie, but also nurtured trusting relationships between the Co-Leads and the wider community. The conversations and connections are, of course, an ongoing process – of building trust and respect.

6.1.3 Land+ Phase 2: Consolidating the Themes in Kinlochbervie.

During Phase 2 of RLUP Land+ (from Summer - Autumn 2023) the Land+ team gathered the information from these 100+ hours of conversation between Community Co-Leads and their neighbours in Kinlochbervie. 11 main ‘themes’ emerged - challenges to which the community are seeking solutions (see over).

These challenges are not new; they have been repeated by communities in remote rural areas for generations, as we know from decades of initiatives and projects which have

PERSPECTIVE FROM THE TEAM

“The community-up approach of this work was the primary attraction for me to join as local co-lead. After twenty years of community work, I had become disillusioned with the countless and ineffective community consultations and their intentions of bringing meaningful change. The considered approach of this project has succeeded in reaching and inspiring people from across our community to get involved. It is vital this work is continued to steer positive and sustainable land use changes, meeting the needs and goals of our community. We feel empowered; we feel we have control; it is new and exciting.”

**Denise MacDonald NW2045 RLUP Land+ Local Lead
Kinlochbervie NW2045 (and third sector
professional; crofter; Chair of Parent Council)**

sought to create sustainable change. For example, see [Dùthchas Our Place in the Future; Mackay Country; Strathnaver Museum – Back to the Future; Initiative at the Edge.](#)

[See the padlet](#) for a table explaining the main themes; each a specific need or challenge identified by the community, and a summary of action taken so far since the inception of the Land+ work.

Whilst it has been essential to gather and consolidate these themes to gain a holistic understanding of the community’s needs and aspirations, it was not intended that actions to address these themes would be directly undertaken by the RLUP Land+ work. Instead, these conversations were intended to establish the baseline of socio-economic-environmental factors. From this baseline, the RLUP could stimulate action by connecting people and enhancing capacity for collaboration.

This has started to happen: the time and resource invested in people within a community who have passion *and* capacity *and* agency has resulted in manifold returns – see [section 10](#) for more details of how this catalytic, regenerative energy has manifested in Kinlochbervie, and beyond.



Phòlain beach, Kinlochbervie © Lizzie Williams

Themes drawn from Land+ Co-Lead conversations with the community. This poster was shared with the North West Sutherland Schools Pupil Parliament as part of the involvement of children and young people, to inspire discussions.

We asked people here: "What does KLB and the surrounding area need?"

We heard ...

What do you think?

Please let your Pupil Parliament representatives know

Housing
We need sufficient housing that is affordable for people living here, and for more people to join our communities.
Fuel bills are very high, so existing and new housing must be energy efficient to reduce bills and carbon emissions.

Paths & Access
We would like more paths – including ‘all abilities’ paths – so that residents and visitors can access the land and experience the benefits of nature.

Schools & Young People
The voice of Young People must be incorporated into all decisions about the future.
The school must remain viable and thriving, to attract and retain a critical mass of people.
We must try to create jobs for Young People, and opportunities for training in relevant skills.

Pre-School & After-School Childcare
Adequate childcare must be available to support children, and to enable parents to fulfil their potential and for their well-being.

Food
We should produce more food locally – both vegetables and meat – for our health and well-being, and for the planet.
We would like allotments, polycrubs, and closer abattoir and meat processing facilities.

The Harbour(s)
We would like to develop the Harbour(s) so Kinlochbervie can continue to be a thriving harbour.

Governance of Community Wealth
We need to be able to manage our shared resources – including money produced by community projects - fairly.

Care of the Elderly
Elderly people should be able to stay and be cared for in their home community. We need suitable facilities for this

Clean Up Kinlochbervie
We want to feel proud of our beautiful home, and want to tidy the messy areas.
There is potential for innovative recycling and upcycling of waste materials.

Crofting & Deer Management
Crofting needs support: to bring disused crofts into use; to encourage landlords, Grazing Clerks and Townships to work together; to help with grants and succession planning. Deer management also needs to be improved across the area.

Leisure Activities
We need suitable leisure facilities to make this a more attractive place to live.

This work is part of the NorthWest2045 Land+ project. For more info please contact Sara Harkins kinlochbervie.estate@outlook.com



6.2 Conversations with Land Decision Makers across the NW2045

Recognising their inherently pivotal role in the future of land use, the Land+ project sought to make contact with Landowners and Land Managers – whom collectively we can refer to as ‘Land Decision Makers’ - across the NW2045 area.

The team compiled a list of landowners within the NW2045 project area: a surprisingly challenging task, and there remain some gaps in this information. Sara Harkins ([see Land+ team, above](#)) – a landowner herself – made contact with all land decision makers on the list or, where appropriate, their local representatives.

Sara explained the context of the NW2045 RLUP Land+ project and invited a conversation about their perceptions of this work; fears and hopes on the subject of land use and changing land use; and community involvement in land use conversations in the context of Scotland’s moves toward Net Zero by 2045, halting biodiversity loss and land reform. Every conversation was fascinating and flowed in multiple directions.

The team identified 36 Estates, owned by 33 parties (ie some landowners have more than one estate). We were able to confirm contact details for 27 of those 33 parties, and Sara held in-depth conversations with 19 (70%), either online or within their own homes.

Themes emerging from these conversations included:

- All share the common desire to preserve the beauty of the NW2045 landscape and many are actively engaged in the conservation and restoration of the land.
- All were interested in the possibilities that engaging with NW2045/RLUP might bring.
- Some are actively involved in meaningful community engagement but the majority - whilst respecting the community - are more reactive than proactive in their engagement.
- Many were not aware of the level of disadvantage in the area.
- Some (but not all) of those whose land is crofted appear to be more engaged and in tune with the challenges of living and working in the NW2045.
- The majority are against the idea of wind farms, with a few open to the possibility of one community turbine. One has actively explored a bigger scheme which was rejected at planning. One landowner has another type of entrepreneurial venture underway.
- Several have extensive tree planting plans.
- Most of the crofting estates (with the exception of one) have issues around absentee crofters etc.
- Whilst most recognise the economic benefit of tourism, only a few estates are actively involved in tourism; some estates are concerned about the damage to the land that tourism brings.
- All are aware of deer management issues, with differing viewpoints.

- Some have concerns about what being deemed a UNESCO site might bring to the area.
- Some have concerns about the strategies of their neighboring estates, which are in direct contrast to their own.
- Others are interested in collaborating more closely with their neighboring estates.
- Most were interested in carbon credits but many were concerned about it being an emerging market and a lack of knowledge. Only a few estates are actively progressing in this area.
- Some of those with salmon farms in their vicinity were not in favour of salmon farms.
- Most were very interested in a potential NW2045 Apprenticeship model.

As part of this work, the RLUP team are now developing the concept of a ‘Resource Bank’. This evolved from the concept of a ‘funders’ forum’, which brings together those who have financial funding to offer with people seeking funding. The Resource Bank idea could also consider resources and assets in a holistic sense: access to land, infrastructure, knowledge, skills, capacity, and how these can benefit of the wider community. Alongside a Resource Bank we hope to develop a ‘pipeline’ of fundable projects, thereby matching funding, capacity and opportunities.

Of course, input from everyone involved in decisions around land use – particularly those with control - ie the landowners, tenants and land managers, is essential for any future RLUP in the NW2045 area. Further developing this partnership working should be a crucial component of the ongoing work.



Ardvreck Castle, Loch Assynt © Ewen McLachlan

7 NW2045 and Natural Capital

Understanding the natural capital of the area, and exploring how natural capital markets may present opportunities for achieving community priorities.

As explained in [section 5](#), the RLUP Pilots were tasked with ‘taking a Natural Capital Approach’. In 2021 – at the outset of the RLUP Pilot - this was a relatively new concept, and required significant investment of effort to understand its meaning and ramifications.

During the course of the RLUP pilot, this project secured Development Phase grant from the [Facility for Investment-Ready Nature in Scotland](#) (FIRNS), which enabled us to explore natural capital concepts in more detail.

The emerging natural capital markets are controversial and have not always been beneficial to the whole community of place. A fundamental tenet of the NW2045 RLUP approach is that we seek to understand and proactively engage with Natural Capital markets in order to make the most of any opportunity for the communities in the region.

This work has been a large part of our RLUP pilot, and this section is therefore substantial. The section includes:

- [A basic overview of natural capital concepts](#)
- [An explanation of the NW2045 RLUP Land+ Natural Capital Approach](#)
- [A summary of the Land+ FIRNS project, and lessons learned](#)
- [Reflections on the wider natural capital markets pertinent to the Land+ approach](#)
- [Current thoughts on next steps for this work within the Land+ project](#)

7.1 What are natural capital, ecosystem services and natural capital markets?

7.1.1 Natural capital: the basics

For more information on the concepts underlying natural capital, see [this padlet](#) that was developed in 2023 for an introductory session on the topic for the NW2045 network.

‘Natural capital’ refers to the whole of nature – including plants, animals, soil, air, water and rocks. It is a way of talking about nature in a way that helps us understand how important nature is to people, society, and the economy. This natural capital performs ‘ecosystem services’, such as food production, air purification, carbon sequestration (which regulates the climate), recreation, and aesthetic value.

The world’s natural capital has been chronically undervalued and – therefore – critically damaged, leading to the ‘twin crises’: climate change and nature loss, which in turn results in collapse of vital ecosystem services.

Natural capital also has a crucial role in addressing these twin crises, if we change the way the land is used: for instance, we can plant more trees or restore peatland to store more

carbon, or change farming methods to allow nature to recover. Of course, natural capital ‘projects’ such as these cost money.

Meanwhile, companies are under pressure to demonstrate how they are helping to address climate change and nature loss – both within the footprint of their own activities, *and* by supporting other natural capital projects. When a company pays for natural capital projects to happen, they are part of the ‘**natural capital market**’.

There are both ‘voluntary’ and ‘compliance’ elements of the natural capital market. In this context we are dealing primarily with the voluntary market.

The most well-known element of this market is the carbon market. This market currently takes the form of voluntary carbon credits generated through adherence to the Woodland Code and the Peatland Carbon Code as means of trading carbon offsets, whereby a company (or individual) will pay a natural capital project to sequester or store a unit of carbon, ie through planting trees or restoring peatland.

The focus on Carbon has resulted in some unintended consequences. A focus on Biodiversity or Ecosystem Recovery is a more holistic approach. However, defining a unit of biodiversity or ecosystem recovery is more complex than a unit of carbon dioxide. Nonetheless, this has been achieved in England: ‘Biodiversity Net Gain’ is now mandatory for many building developments. In Scotland an ‘Ecosystem Recovery Code’ is being developed by NatureScot; expected early 2026, and the Forth National Planning Framework (NPF4) includes a number of core principles to ensure developments achieve biodiversity enhancement.

There is also a market emerging for projects which seek to address the climate and nature crises outwith the official Codes: ie companies paying for work to be done which improves biodiversity and sequesters carbon, but not necessarily using this to offset their own impact. This could be considered a sophisticated form of philanthropy.

Whichever form the transaction takes, it requires complex schedules for Monitoring, Reporting and Verification to ensure that the work is being carried out and – crucially – is having the intended impact. Complex, long-term legal contracts are also required – often decades-long, which therefore impact multiple generations of land users.

7.1.2 Potential negative impacts of Natural Capital Markets

There has been a lot of discussion and concern around natural capital markets. Of specific concern to the NW2045 RLUP are the potential unintended impacts of natural capital markets on communities of place, which in turn impact on the delivery of the Principles of

SUPPORT FOR OUR APPROACH

“We know that as an area, Northwest Sutherland is rich in natural capital which presents many opportunities for economic growth and sustainable development.

I am certain that through harnessing the [NW2045] collective’s expertise and applying their local knowledge, we can work to bring social and economic benefits to the area that align with Scotland’s net zero ambitions and enhance our natural environment.”

**Maree Todd MSP,
Caithness, Sutherland & Ross, June 2023**

the Scottish Government's [Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement](#) (LRRS). These potential impacts include:

- Communities being excluded from decisions about changes in land use.
 - o This impact contravenes LRRS Principle 7: *There should be meaningful collaboration and community engagement in decisions about land.*
- A rise in land prices – attributed partly to speculation about the value of natural capital.
 - o This could be a barrier to delivering principles 2 and 3 of the LRRS:
 - *Principle 2. There should be a more diverse pattern of landownership and tenure, with more opportunities for citizens to own, lease and have access to land.*
 - *Principle 3. More local communities should have the opportunity to own, lease or use buildings and land which can contribute to their community's wellbeing and future development.)*
 - o However, it is worth noting that, since this [surge in land prices reported in 2022](#), the phenomenon seems to have subsided, with [estate sales described as 'sluggish' in 2023](#).
- Communities being negatively impacted by changes in land use – such as monoculture tree plantations.
 - o This impact contravenes LRRS Principle 5: *Land ownership, management and use should deliver a wide range of social, environmental, economic and cultural benefits.*
- Natural capital projects further enriching those who currently hold the power; not contributing to Community Wealth Building (in the most holistic sense):
 - o LRRS Principle 1 states: *The overall framework of land rights, responsibilities and public policies should (...) support sustainable economic development, protect and enhance the environment, support a just transition to net zero, help achieve social justice and build a fairer society for the common good.*

In March 2022 the Scottish Government published the 'Interim Principles for Responsible Investment in Natural Capital' ('upgraded' in October 2024 to the [Principles for Responsible Investment in Natural Capital](#)) which set out the '*ambitions and expectations for a values-led, high-integrity market for responsible investment in natural capital, that helps deliver policy goals for economic transformation, climate change and biodiversity, and that provides community benefits and supports a Just Transition.*'

Publication of these Principles was followed by the publication of the Scottish Government's [Natural Capital Market Framework](#) in November 2024, which promotes the need for "*responsible, values-led investment in natural capital through the expansion of high-*

integrity voluntary carbon markets, and development of opportunities to invest in biodiversity.”

7.2 The Land+ Approach to Natural Capital

Because of the rapidly-evolving, complex nature of natural capital markets – and the unclear implications for communities of place – the pilot RLUPs were asked to ‘take a natural capital approach’ as [one of the four areas of focus](#).

For the NW2045 RLUP Land+ project, this means striving to understand the opportunities *and risks* around natural capital and natural capital markets in this area – for landowners, land managers, tenants and the wider community of place – and seeking ways to harness the opportunities to generate community wealth in the most holistic sense.

7.2.1 Understanding the Natural Capital of the NW2045: the Natural Capital Baseline Assessment

A first step to ‘taking a natural capital approach’ was to understand what natural capital exists within the NW2045 area – ie to establish a baseline – by undertaking a Natural Capital Assessment. This relatively rapid exercise was conducted by experienced consultancy firm SLR, working with a short-term NW2045 Natural Capital working group, which comprised representatives from Scottish Wildlife Trust; NatureScot; Highlands & Islands Enterprise; Highland Council; local development organisations; University of Highlands & Islands Environmental Research Institute; National Farmers Union Scotland; Wildland Ltd, and others. (See [padlet](#) for more details.)

The assessment was based on various datasets that are publicly available online – such as habitat assessments, deer counts and satellite imagery – and generous contributions of data from the strong network of people and organisations who have been working and studying in this area for many years.

The research created a Natural Asset map, showing the different habitats across the area. It also mapped selected ecosystem services: carbon storage and biodiversity. Due to time constraints, it was necessary to focus on priority ecosystem services.

To make this work tangible and relevant to as many people as possible, the team also wanted to assess the ecosystem services of food production and education, which are important ways that many people interact with the land in this area. However, food production and education are difficult to measure; we therefore focused on one Community Council area – in this case, Melness, Tongue & Skerry – to trial a methodology.

Such a brief study of course has limitations. For instance, the research was mostly desk-based; ground-truthing will be necessary for any more granular work or to develop any

SUPPORT FOR OUR APPROACH

“The innovative approach being taken by the NorthWest2045 pilot will be important in testing new approaches to developing regional priorities in support of a Just Transition.”

**Mairi Gougeon MSP,
Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs,
Land Reform and Islands, June 2023**

projects on the ground. Also, it was not possible to include the coastal and marine habitats, although we know they are so important in many ways. There are of course many ecosystem services that were not assessed in this phase of the work, such as clean water; aquaculture; timber; air pollution mitigation; pest control; flooding control; recreation; and tourism.

The results of this work were shared at a public online event in June 2022. Here the team encountered first-hand the role that RLUP has at the interface between professionals and communities. The concepts of natural capital and ecosystem services are extremely complex and can seem nebulous: to make them interesting and relevant to people is an important skill. Given that the understanding around natural capital was in very early stages of development at that time, this event was challenging - and a learning curve which helped inform our next stages of work.

More detail about this study can be found in the full report and the more accessible ‘StoryMap’, which can be accessed via the [RLUP Handbook padlet](#).



Title page of the Natural Capital Assessment ‘Storymap’ online accessible resource.

7.2.2 Developing the Land+ work with other Natural Capital professionals and projects

Through knowledge exchange sessions held for the RLUP Pilot network, the team were introduced to Mark Reed - Professor of Natural Capital at SRUC. Mark’s academic research is well aligned with the NW2045 approach, with a strong focus on community engagement in natural capital markets. The team were delighted that Mark agreed to be an advisor on the natural capital element of the RLUP and regularly joined online discussions, particularly throughout the development and implementation of the FIRNS project.

In December 2022, Mark introduced the RLUP team to Dr Eleanor Harris, Natural Capital and Carbon Leader at Galbraith, based in Edinburgh. Eleanor’s interest in innovative, community-based and place-based approaches to natural capital markets was also aligned

with those of the Land+ team. Eleanor worked closely with the team during the development and implementation of the FIRNS project (see section 8.3 below).

Professor Reed has since invited the team to be included in various funding proposals as a case study of community involvement in natural capital.

The Land+ project was invited to be part of the initial phase of the Community Benefit Standard project – now [Community Inclusion Standard](#); it has been an interesting and valuable experience to be part of the development of this work.

Through this focus on natural capital, the NW2045 RLUP was invited to work with NatureScot to pilot their [Landscape Scale Natural Capital Tool](#) which will help landowners, managers, tenants and communities to understand their natural capital, identify potential projects and calculate the impact of interventions. Because of our strong links in Kinlochbervie, we were able to directly engage three main landowners in the Kinlochbervie Community Council area. With their direct knowledge of the ground, these landowners provided valuable practical feedback on the application and usefulness of the tool.

This process has been useful for the RLUP team - particularly in the early stages of the project when building our natural capital knowledge. For instance, when the RLUP team held a Natural Capital introductory session for the NW2045 group in March 2023, some materials from NatureScot presentations helped inform our workshop. ([See padlet.](#)) Receiving real-world experience from landowners has also been invaluable for NatureScot in shaping their tool, which is due to be launched in Spring 2025.

7.3 A need and opportunity to explore the potential of natural capital markets

During our Land+ work, we pursued the opportunity to focus specifically on the potential natural capital market opportunities in Kinlochbervie through the [Facility for Investment-Ready Nature in Scotland](#) (FIRNS): a fund launched in 2023 by Scottish Government and NatureScot, working in partnership with the National Lottery Heritage Fund, with support from the Green Finance Institute.

FIRNS was launched in response to both the potential benefits and risks of natural capital markets (as described above), to support projects to “...develop a viable business case and financial model, to attract investment in projects that can restore and improve the natural environment.” (...). FIRNS hopes that these projects to restore our environment and nature will, “...not only help put Scotland on the path to meeting its climate and nature commitments, but also yield rewards in terms of a **just transition and bringing economic benefits to communities.**”

The NW2045 RLUP joined a cohort of pioneering projects seeking to proactively explore and - potentially - enter the nascent market.

Building on the natural capital assessment and other work earlier in the RLUP pilot, the RLUP Land+ team developed a proposal to FIRNS from April until June 2023 in partnership with Galbraith and with advice and support from SRUC, we were awarded the six -month Development Phase grant in September 2023, for a period from October 2023 – March 2024.

7.4 Starting to develop a natural capital project

Our FIRNS-funded work was ambitious and innovative, and aligned with the wider Land+ ‘community of place’ methodology and ethos – as outlined in the [Land+ Principles](#) above.

The Land+ approach to natural capital is unlike many natural capital projects. The aims are:

- To create the conditions that enable the community of place to proactively harness the opportunity presented by emerging natural capital markets, and be at the heart of these projects, so that they contribute to building community wealth, and avoid the potential dangers (outlined in [section 7.1.2 above](#)) or be mere passive recipients of paltry benefits.
- Therefore, to help the community of Kinlochbervie achieve its priorities (see [section 9.2.2](#)) - whilst also benefiting nature and reducing using fossil fuel use.
- To move away from conventional ‘carbon credit’ projects like those based on the Woodland Carbon Code or the Peatland Code, and develop a holistic ‘product’: a project that enhances biodiversity, reduces carbon emissions, whilst building community wealth.
- To identify a buyer who would be interested in developing a long-term relationship with the community and the Land+ project; who would be attracted by the holistic, high-integrity nature of this work, and would see the value of funding this work to benefit biodiversity, reduce carbon emissions and create a positive impacts within the community. In this way the natural capital project could be developed collaboratively with the buyer, ensuring the project meets needs and expectations for all parties.

BUILDING COMMUNITY WEALTH

Building community wealth in this context could comprise:

- *Nurturing and developing **agency and voice** within the community.*
- *Developing opportunities for **local employment**, particularly in delivery of natural capital-linked interventions – such as peatland restoration or ecological surveys.*
- ***Practical interventions**, including footpath creation, community fuel supplies and making land available for affordable housing.*
- *A **share of the profit** generated by natural capital projects.*

7.5 The four strands of the FIRNS work

The FIRNS project explored four distinct but interlinked areas. Strands 1&2 focused on exploring specific interventions to address the climate and nature emergencies at the Township level. Strands 3&4 explored the wider issues of governance, community agency and voice.

1. **Benefiting Nature** - Investigating the potential to enhance biodiversity on Common Grazings land.
2. **Just Transition Decarbonisation** – Investigating potential to decarbonise households and crofts within the Township.
3. **Collaborative Governance** - Exploring the most appropriate governance structure for community-led natural capital.
4. **Community Manifesto** – Enabling Children and Young People to explore and articulate their aspirations for how land is used in their area.

The Land+ team and community co-leads were involved in all stages of the work.

7.5.1 The Township Model

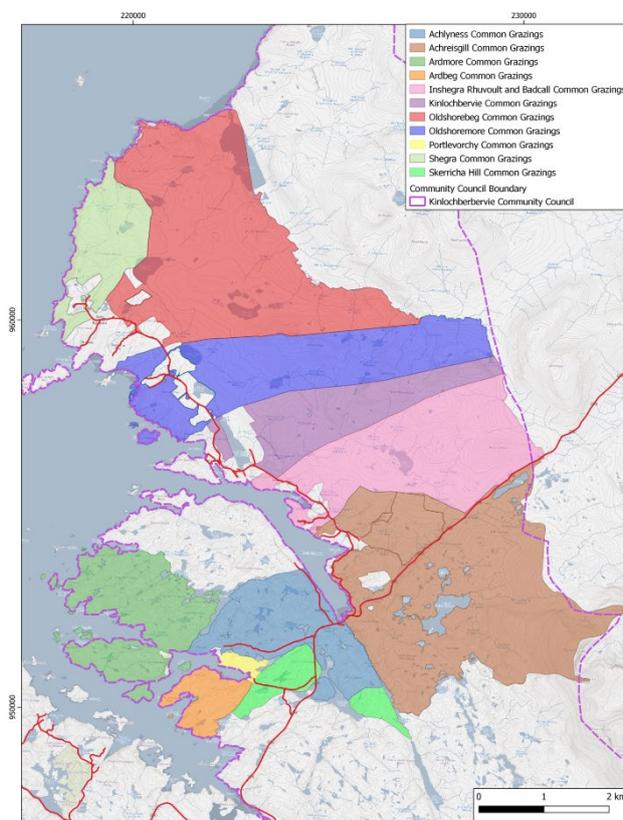
During the early stages of the FIRNS work - and after substantial discussion - the decision was taken to focus on a single crofting township within the Kinlochberrie Community Council area, particularly for strands 1&2. This was deemed to be the appropriate scale for a practical natural capital project – particularly for this short timescale pilot.

A crofting township comprises a few hundred hectares of land, including Common Grazings, crofts (enclosed ‘fields’ - grazing or arable), and a small settlement including people who are actively engaged in land management. ‘Common Grazings’ are areas of land used by a number of crofters and others who share the rights to graze their stock on that land: they are shareholders in the Common Grazings. A Grazings Committee and

Grazings Clerk are appointed by the shareholders to maintain, manage and improve their Common Grazings.

In a crofting community, the crofters have significant legal rights which mean they are the agents of change. Decisions about land use – including natural capital schemes on the land – would be made by the Grazings Committee, whilst of course working constructively with the landowner.

The crofting township provides an opportunity to work with a group of people who have a direct stake in, and influence over, the land – to find opportunities for ecological restoration and community wealth building. Working at this level is also an opportunity to build the agency of the crofting communities.



Various Common Grazings of Kinlochberrie DRAFT
(Size & Location Indicative)
Contains OS data © Crown copyright & database rights 2023

Sheigra Township was agreed as the initial pilot township for various reasons: it is at the start of the road from the north; it has an active Grazings Committee and is on land owned by [John Muir Trust](#) who have a stated aim to be ‘an exemplary crofting landlord’, and have been involved in discussions from the outset.

Sheigra comprises 604 hectares of Common Grazings; crofts; lochs; coast; 12 houses (2 of which are permanently inhabited), and 3 active crofters.

This township focus enabled us to work in an extremely detailed way for the biodiversity and carbon work - to thoroughly understand what is involved in generating an ecological baseline, and the realities of undertaking a carbon audit with residents – within the constrained timeframe. Working closely with Co-Leads Sophie and Denise (see [section 5.1.2](#)) and also - during this phase of the work - Ian MacDonald was critical to the success of this approach.

Ian Macdonald grew up in Kinlochbervie, and is a Crofter and Grazings Clerk of the Sheigra Grazing Committee; is a member of the Kinlochbervie Community Council and runs a construction business. As a parent of a young child, Ian is strongly driven to create positive change within the community.

Involving the Grazings Clerk is a crucial element of this approach, and resonates with the [Scottish Land Commission Good Practice](#). The landowner was involved, and care was taken by the RLUP leads to keep this body up to date throughout. While there has been some variation in achieving this due to capacity shifts and differing levels of input across personnel, the RLUP sought to support dialogue across the community of place to enable collaborative progress: an effort that is ongoing.

7.5.2 Strand 1: Benefitting Nature – enhancing biodiversity

Understanding the baseline of biodiversity in the Sheigra Common Grazings required an Ecological Baseline Survey and a Farm Business Review of the crofting activity in Sheigra Township. Using this baseline, it is possible to identify ways to enhance biodiversity and – using specific Metrics – calculate the number of biodiversity units that would be generated. These biodiversity units can then form part of a natural capital ‘proposition’.

Ecological Baseline Survey

The Ecological Baseline Survey undertaken by Atmos Consulting Ltd comprised:

- a. A [UK Habitats \(UKHab\)](#) survey of the site to understand the habitats’ present and current condition. UKHab survey is a standardised method of recording habitat types and characteristic vegetation, as set out in the UK Habitat Classification Version 2.0.
- b. Condition assessment of all habitats within the Site, which is required for calculation of Biodiversity units. (Whilst the NatureScot Ecosystem Recovery Code is being developed, an adapted version of the Defra (English) Metric 3.0 is commonly used in Scotland.)

- c. A survey for protected species to gain an understanding of the use of the site and any constraints that their presence may pose.

These baseline surveys suggest that there is considerable opportunity for Biodiversity uplift in the form of biodiversity units - measured using the Defra Metric - to form a core part of a proposition for a natural capital project.

However, the timing of the biodiversity survey field work - in February (due to the timing of the FIRNS grant) - was not optimal, due to a number of plant species being dormant; this was unavoidable due to the FIRNS funding period. The data obtained is therefore not 'decision grade', and further field work will be required during summer months for accurate baselining.

A Township Review

A conventional Farm Business Review methodology was adapted to undertake a 'Township Review' of the whole of Sheigra Crofting Township, to establish a baseline of the economic and environmental health of the rural businesses (ie crofting) in Sheigra. (We believe this may be the first Township review of this nature that has been undertaken in the Crofting Counties – and, therefore, anywhere.)

This study was undertaken by Galbraith's agricultural consultant (alongside a Farm Carbon Audit – reported below), through in-person interviews with the crofters in Sheigra – Ian MacDonald and Cathel Macleod - and analysis of three years of farm subsidy applications, maps, and field monitor spreadsheets.

The Review identified strengths and weaknesses of the beef and sheep enterprises. Strengths included the strong performance per head of the enterprise, the open-mindedness of crofters to change and develop their practices, and the varied opportunities to develop the large area of hill for biodiversity. Weaknesses included workforce constraints; the challenging nature of the landscape including soil depth and fertility, and harsh weather conditions – which result in reliance on bought-in feed, and calves and lambs being sold before the onset of winter; and the exposure of the business to labour shortages and rising input costs.

This work produced several key initial recommendations, including the integration of livestock enterprises with nature restoration, which could produce a biodiversity uplift. Suggestions can be seen on the annotated map below.

This was a useful exercise and demonstrates how the Land+ Project can provide clear, useful suggestions to the crofters, landowner and community of Sheigra, and to equip the community with knowledge both to enhance the sustainability of existing crofting

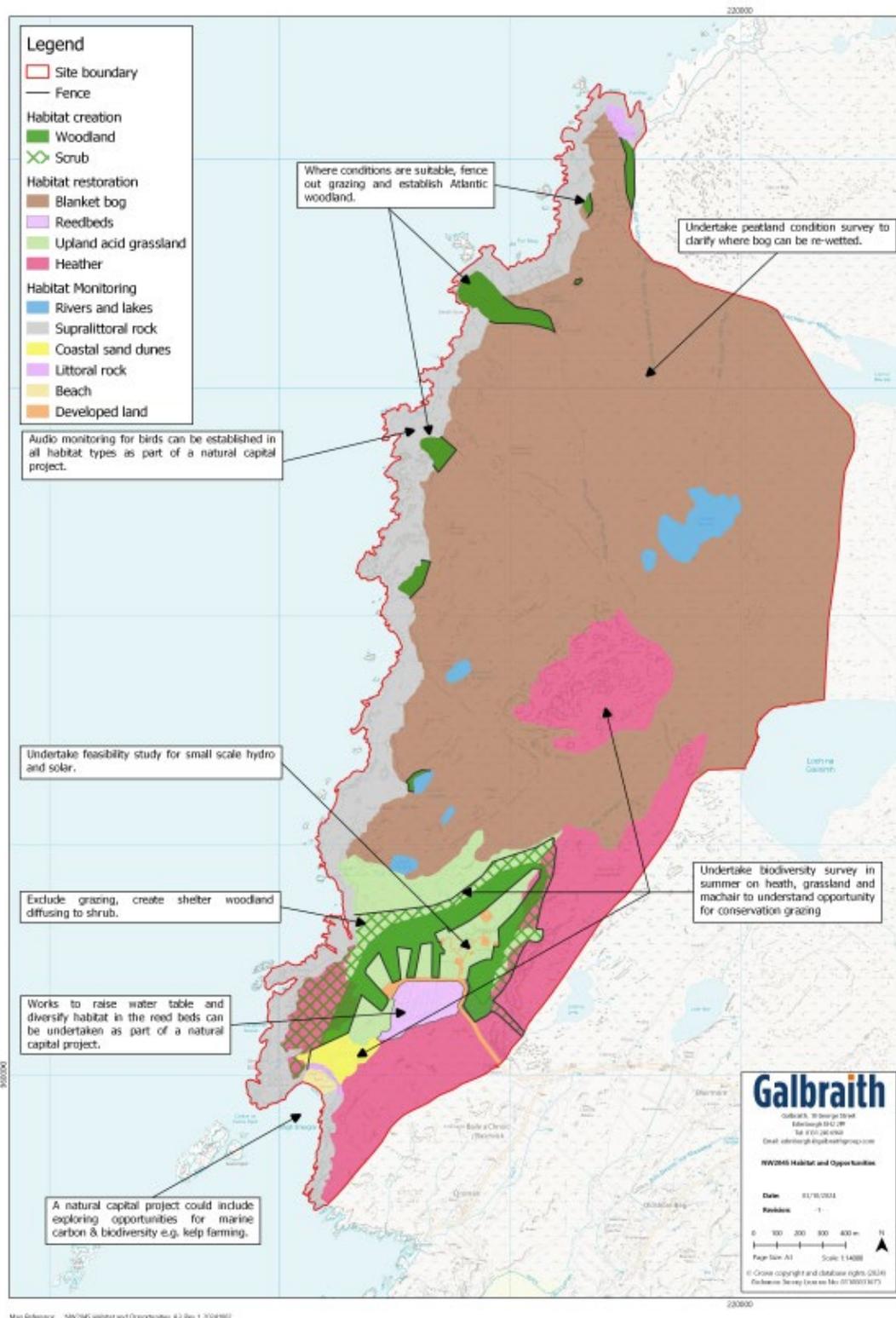
PERSPECTIVE FROM THE TEAM

"I see natural capital as a brilliant way to both restore natural hill ground to its full potential and also generate much needed funding for our area which desperately needs it".

***Ian MacDonald, Sheigra Grazings Clerk,
Crofter, Builder, member of Kinlochbervie
Community Council***

practices, and to ensure that any new enterprises are founded on strong principles of sustainability.

These recommendations are also potentially useful for the wider Kinlochbervie Community Council area which (encompasses seven townships), and the wider



Annotated map of natural capital options extrapolated from baseline research.

NW2045 area, when seeking to develop a natural capital project that involves enhancing biodiversity.

Galbraith produced a summary of recommended next steps to take the land-based interventions further – see below - which included consideration of how private natural capital finance could be blended with existing Agri-Environment grants.

Activity	Recommended	Purpose	Estimated cost
Develop farm accounts and forward budget	Agricultural Consultant, Galbraith	Identify potential efficiency savings and understand financial position of farming operation for example for succession planning	£1,500 + VAT
Undertake AECS feasibility study	Agricultural Consultant, Galbraith	AECS schemes can provide valuable income for conservation management, but are highly competitive, so scoping potential before embarking on an application is essential. If potential is high, Calum can also assist in drafting the application.	£1,000 + VAT
Undertake peatland restoration feasibility study	Specialist peatland restoration provider	Identify potential for and costs of restoration, and number of potential carbon units.	£7,000-£8,750
Undertake woodland grant scheme feasibility study	Forester, Galbraith	Once desirable woodland creation area is confirmed, Galbraith can undertake a feasibility study and indicative budget for the project.	£750 + VAT
Undertake Biodiversity Metric baseline in summer	Atmos or another ecologist	Clarify potential for biodiversity units.	Around £10,000

Table of potential next steps for land-based interventions at Sheigra

For further discussion about the implications of crofting law and distribution of income generated – [see Collaborative Governance section 7.5.4 below](#).

7.5.3 Strand 2: Just Transition Decarbonisation – households and crofting

This component of the FIRNS-funded work was particularly innovative and ambitious. We are not aware of any similar work in existence. As such, it was a challenging component of the work.

The purpose was to explore how a natural capital project could support decarbonisation of the Township: ie making houses more energy efficient, and less dependent on fossil fuels (which would bring benefits to both the residents - through warmer houses and lower bills - and to society by mitigating climate change).

As the price of fossil fuels inevitably increases, living in buildings which are energy inefficient and reliant on fossil fuel will become increasingly unaffordable and unsustainable. In the short term, this impacts the choices - and therefore the quality of living - for the residents, and in the long term may contribute to depopulation. Decarbonisation and energy efficiency are therefore crucial issues for just transition and rural de/regeneration.

By quantifying the decarbonisation and energy efficiency interventions, it would be possible to demonstrate their carbon benefit. They can then be incorporated into the natural capital proposition for the Township. A natural capital buyer could then fund these interventions alongside the biodiversity enhancement interventions.

The first step was to understand the current carbon footprint of Sheigra Township, through a carbon audit process. By understanding Sheigra's carbon footprint, interventions to reduce it can be identified and implemented and, by repeating the audit over time, improvement can be measured.

Advised by the community co-leads, the Land+ team decided that a full conventional carbon audit – incorporating all lifestyle factors - was not appropriate at this stage: it could be construed as intrusive and judgmental by a community who are not yet 'ready' for such a process.

Instead, a subset of the carbon footprint of Sheigra was explored, focusing on these specific elements:

1. Household carbon, measured through:
 - Household energy use and car travel to and from Sheigra – via a householder questionnaire.
 - Building surveys – via a specialist process undertaken by a qualified surveyor, with energy efficiency calculations and detailed reports by specialist firm [Lùths](#), resulting in revised Energy Performance Certificates (EPCs) of all houses.
2. Carbon from crofting, measured through:
 - Farm carbon audit of the Sheigra crofting enterprises – alongside the Township Review (see above).

Household carbon

Information on quantity of fuel used in heating and lighting, and the journeys travelled to and from the house in the past year, was calculated using the [Carbon Footprint Ltd](#) calculator.

Analysis showed that the average home energy consumption was slightly above the average carbon emissions of a Scottish home. Transport was difficult to compare to the national average due to insufficient data.

From the specialist building surveys, detailed options appraisals and updated EPCs were produced for each house.

The recommendations cover a range of heating options including new electric heaters, Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG), and ground and air source heat pumps (ASPH), as well as cover other measures such as new triple glazing, insulated doors, additional loft insulation, internal wall and floor insulation. The carbon and financial savings compared with the existing system are then calculated.

The model suggested that for many households, ASHP would be the best option for achieving net zero under assumed use scenarios and could be cost-effective over 20 years. However, there is a cost – especially for retrofitting – estimated at a total of £78,661 for supporting houses across the township to transition away from fossil fuel use. This cost could be part of a ‘Just Carbon Transition’ natural capital project proposition.

It is important to note that the lived experience of Community Co-Leads – one of whom is a building contractor; another is a Citizens Advice Bureau advisor, who often assists people experiencing fuel poverty – tells us that ASHPs are not the panacea in this area. They perform sub-optimally in retrofit situations, and the lack of availability of trained experienced heating engineers leaves residents vulnerable when breakdowns occur. Electric heating – in particular High Heat Retention Radiators – are suggested as a more viable, low-maintenance solution. This sort of local, practical knowledge is essential for ensuing proposed interventions will have a positive outcome for those directly involved.

Other options to reduce the local cost of – and decarbonise - electricity, such as small-scale local generation of electricity (eg solar panels mentioned in the Farm Business Review), have also been discussed.

The Options Appraisals and EPCs were provided to householders to support decisions about any changes.

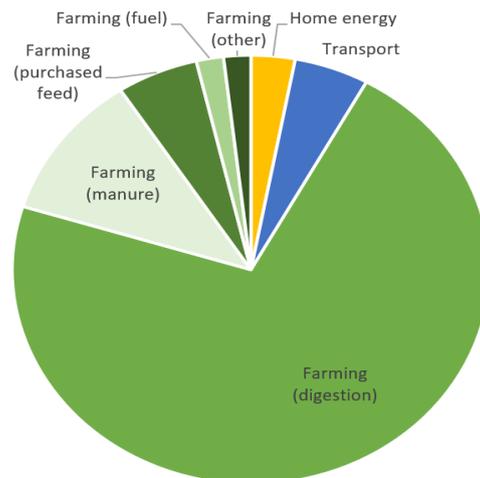
It is also important to note that, of the nine houses in Sheigra, only two are permanently inhabited: the rest are second homes or holiday lets owned by local residents or those from further afield. It is of course important to include owners of these properties in the discussion about the future of the township: they have a credible stake in the future.

However, the small number and low percentage of permanently inhabited houses does present a difficulty in terms of the ‘fundability’ of this work, and – if we were to attract a buyer for this product – the potential prioritisation of second home owners over local residents.

Crofting carbon

For farm carbon emissions, information was provided by Sheigra crofters and analysed using the SAC Consulting's [Agricultural Resource Efficiency Calculator](#) (Agrecalc) - the calculator endorsed by Scottish Government.

Carbon emissions associated with crofting were 563 tCO₂e. The biggest source of this is methane from ruminant digestion and manure, with feed and fuel responsible for most of the remainder.



Carbon emissions by activity in Sheigra

Methane emissions from digestion and manure of ruminants (cows and sheep) are difficult to reduce. Reducing livestock numbers in Sheigra would reduce the footprint of the farm 'on paper', but unless fewer people are eating meat globally, this meat will simply be produced elsewhere, resulting in no net climate impact.

The other farming emissions are all possible to reduce, through measures such as enhanced pasture management to reduce the need for bought-in feed, and increased herd efficiency (both of which are noted in the nature section above). These options will be explored with the Sheigra crofters as part of the next steps.

Next steps for Just Transition Decarbonisation

The baseline shows that there is potential for a natural capital buyer to deliver a project to upgrade housing. This work would have a strong 'Just Transition story', and would require high-integrity measurement of the carbon savings.

The complex nature of the 'carbon offset' discussion makes this a challenging path to navigate. However, it remains an important part of the project: a 'just carbon transition' is essential to the sustainable future of communities in the north west; and reporting carbon benefit remains essential for corporate buyers - so there is clear mutual interest in developing a proposal that works for all.

The Scottish Government [Natural Capital Market Framework](#) – and the [Science Based Targets Initiative](#) '[Beyond Value Chain Mitigation](#)' framework – provide a strong basis for buyers to report the carbon impact in delivering Just Transition, and build a strong narrative with clear, transparent reporting - despite the complexities. Therefore this approach might well be of interest to potential buyers.

However, interventions that involve people's homes and lifestyles can be fraught with difficulty, and the question of which households benefit – including, importantly, whether second homes and holiday lets should be eligible for support – is a thorny one which requires consideration against short-mid- long timeframes and returns.

7.5.4 Strand 3: Collaborative Governance

It is essential to explore the optimal governance structure to enable natural capital projects to generate meaningful change within the community of place.

An important step *may* be to establish a community structure which will undertake the role of project developer (ie broker and vehicle) for natural capital projects, to ensure as much wealth as possible is retained locally.

During the FIRNS project, research was undertaken into existing and potential governance structures, through discussions with representatives of existing community bodies within and beyond Kinlochbervie, including:

- the Kinlochbervie Community Company
- the Kinlochbervie Community Council
- the North West Sutherland Community Alliance
- private landowners (including one who has their own charitable trust)
- an environmental NGO landowner
- community governance specialists at Development Trusts Association Scotland.

Based on these discussions, a Community Benefit Society (CBS) seems to be most appropriate, for various reasons:

- A CBS has a two-tier structure:
 - o a small, nimble Board
 - o a Membership made up of people within the community.
- A CBS can have charitable status.
- Community Shares can be offered to raise capital and ensure the business meets the community's needs: 1 shareholder: 1 vote.
- A CBS can have sub-committees with a separate membership, eg each community throughout the NW2045 could have a sub-committee.
- A CBS is simple and inexpensive to establish, and the legal structure can evolve to meet future needs.

A summary of pros and cons of potential governance structures:

Structure	Pros	Cons
Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO)	Charitable objectives clear. Can access grants, funding schemes etc.	Inflexible the SCIO structure cannot evolve to meet future needs or demands.
Company Limited by Guarantee – includes Community Interest Company (CIC)	CIC has clear commitment to community goals. Can be profit making.	The community is not clearly represented. Control is in hands of a few company directors. Less access to grants and funding schemes
Community Benefit Society (CBS) with Charitable Status	The CBS is flexible, easy to establish and has clear community benefit and charitable aims at its centre. Community shares / bonds possible. Set up cost via DTAS and CO-OP is circa £200	Must adhere to conduct business in accordance with the community benefit and Charitable aims.

Amongst the Land+ team there was general support for the concept of a CBS based on natural capital, which would sit between the natural capital buyer and the community to manage the community-generated natural capital projects.

The group agreed that Community *Wealth* Society would be a more appropriate name, to avoid ‘Benefits’ - which has patriarchal connotations.

It was agreed that further discussion and development is required to determine where such an entity would best fit within the wider NW2045 structure; in relation to existing and emerging entities in the area, and the future of the RLUP work.

Inherent in discussions about a Community Wealth Society is the issue of distribution of income generated by natural capital projects. These are challenging conversations, but crucial to achieving the Land+ aspiration of natural capital projects being able to support community wealth building.

Crofting legislation is notoriously complex, and at the time of writing there are few other examples of natural capital projects on common grazings land – although the [Flow Country Partnership](#) is undertaking pioneering work in Sutherland, and [Forest Carbon](#) have worked with crofting and common grazings land in the Hebrides.

The Land+ team was able to engage Eilidh Ross of Camus Consulting – Crofting Law Specialist - to start to explore the legal implications of undertaking this work on common grazings land.

An excerpt from the advice from Camus Consulting:

Crofting law does not at present have any provision relating to carbon, peat, natural capital or nature restoration. Nor has there been any case law handed down from the Scottish Land Court to provide for how these [natural capital] schemes ought to proceed, who should benefit, and to what extent.

Under current law, although “nature restoration” does not appear in the act, there is nothing preventing a tenant crofter from working their croft in a way which restores nature. This would likely fall under the umbrella of “another purposeful use”, which is the alternative to “cultivation” (s. 5C (8) Crofters (Scotland) Act 1993).

...the question of who has the rights to the carbon relating to a certain area of land is less clear.

... due to two existing processes [the right of crofters to share the market value of the land resumed equally with the landlord (1976), and the scheme for development (2007)] it has become fairly common practice for parties to split the proceeds of any project equally; or certainly to have discussions on that basis.

Read the full reflection [on the Handbook padlet](#).

Although generating income from a natural capital project is a long way down the line, it was important to embark on conversations about potential revenue sharing at an early stage of the process. At the time of the discussions, the Sheigra crofting community were generously willing to share any proceeds with the wider community (as well as – as suggested above – the landowner), to support the community to work towards their objectives.

The situation with the landowner is less clear, partly due to recent staff changes. This highlights how circumstances can be complicated by complex tenure arrangements. However, the landowner has a stated aim to support stronger links between the rural economy and wild places, and to be an exemplary crofting landlord, so we are confident that progress will be made.

7.5.5 Strand 4: Creating a Kinlochbervie Community Manifesto for engagement in natural capital markets

The NW2045 Vision highlights the critical need for the next for the younger generations to be involved in actively shaping a sustainable future. Therefore, ensuring that the voices of children and young people are heard - particularly on issues of present and future potential of the land, and everything connected to the land, in their community – is a fundamental Land+ Principle.

The concepts of natural capital *per se* are therefore not at the core of this component of the work: rather, we are striving to understand *how* we can legitimately support the development of voice and agency within the community, especially the younger generation.

Being involved in initiatives such as the RLUP builds confidence, knowledge, experience, resilience, capacity and trusting relationships locally. These have, historically, been lacking.

The Land+ Community Manifesto method was developed to enable the younger generation to be involved in the RLUP, and to explore and articulate their aspirations for how land in their home area is used.

This method involved working directly with pupils at the North West Sutherland Schools (primary and high school level) and working virtually with the 18-30s age range, including those who have moved away from the area.

Having established the groundwork through the early conversations throughout the community and with the Pupil Parliament (see section 6.1.3 above), the Land+ team again attended the Pupil Parliament and distributed 'Manifesto booklets' for the pupils to distribute, take home, discuss with their families and fill in. These A3 booklets comprised a basic explanation, some questions, and space for answering the questions.

A fortnight later, the Team visited the school again and worked with small groups throughout the day. The children had been asked to bring in a small pot of soil from their home, which was then mixed with water from the Loch beside the school. This was used as paint with which to draw responses to the questions about their relationship to the land.

Making the 1st Land+ Manifesto*
 DEFINITION: *MANIFESTO* means to make known or to show something; a written statement of the beliefs or aims (Cambridge Dictionary)

WHAT? Land+ is a pilot project focused on discussing, learning about and finding actions for the way land and sea is used in the future and how this can support community wealth building and nature positive change. A MANIFESTO created by the community can help represent the voice and views of the community about this.

WHY? The community Land+ MANIFESTO will be a set of guiding words which reflect the views, the needs & the principles of the people who live in the area. The next stage of the Land+ project will include seeking funding; this community document will be central to such propositions- helping ensure the community voice is heard in decisions about change and how land and sea can do more, for everyone.

HOW? So far the Land+ team has gathered views from people in the community on what needs to change (see back page). To generate the **MANIFESTO**, we think this is best created through **intergenerational** input. The young people of KLB are going to lead on this, as the **GATHERERS** of the community words to form this document & via *this* document, everyone can contribute and help achieve this.

THEN In KLB High School, from the individual documents created, we will create a **Mass(ive) Manifesto**. The Land+ Manifesto will then be included in project information making the case for funding to take forward actions that support land+ change and community wealth building. We will come back to the school; to the KLB Community Council and to KLB Community Development Company to share a final draft for comment and community approval, before it goes out to potential funders.

Extracts from the 'Manifesto booklets' that helped children and their families consider their relationship to the land.

Please share your thoughts here: you can do this in words, by drawing, by mapping = to create your Land+ manifesto....

Questions to inspire your conversations and thinking

What does the land around **you**, mean to you?

What do you and your family **do for/on the land**?

How can community have **more of a say** in land use decisions?

Worries about future land use?

What does the land **do for you and your family**?

Do you have any feelings about the way **land is used**?

Do you have ideas about how the land **could** be used?

Hopes for the future of land use?



This process resulted in wonderful images and profound statements about the relationship of the young people to the land. It has initiated a strand of work we see as integral, and our community collaboration - including with young people - continues to ensure knowledge is gathered and shared, and dialogue develops around land use.



Working with children throughout the North West Sutherland schools, exploring what land means to them.

Meanwhile, to understand the perspectives of the 18-30s age-group – many of whom have moved away from the area – we set up an online questionnaire which was circulated by community co-lead Sophie Clark - herself a young person with good contacts in that age-range, so this process provided further strong feedback.

As an additional strand to this work, Sophie produced a rich 'Portrait of Sheigra' by interviewing, and gathering photographs and stories from people who have lived and worked in Sheigra.

Through this work we have represented the voices of the community from pre-school to 86 years old - voices which demonstrate a community with agency and a determination to create positive change.

Further information about the experience of the Manifesto work – including a personal reflection from Sara Harkins - is [on the Handbook padlet](#).

Sheigra, The Past, Present and Future

SHEIGRA

THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

researched and written by Sophie Clark

INTRODUCTION

Sheigra is all small crofting township made up of around 12 houses, approximately 4 miles north of Kinlochbervie. It is known for its beautiful scenery, a campsite that is situated near the beach, its sea cliffs that are popular with rock climbers and of course the coastal walking route to Sandwood Bay and surrounding coastlines. The 9-mile stretch of coast between Sheigra and Oldshoremore is a Site of Special

Scientific Interest. Covering an area of 620 acres, it is one of the best examples in Britain of a dune and machair habitat. Machair is the coastal grassland (characterised by shifting sand dunes with marram grass). The machair has over 220 species of flowering plants.



FIGURE 1 THE TOWNSHIP OF SHEIGRA (LATE 60'S/EARLY'S)



FIGURE 2 SHEIGRA 'HONOURS' CAMPSITE 2024

THE PRESENT

Sheigra itself falls under the Sandwood Estate which has been owned by the John Muir Trust (JMT) a Scottish conservation Charity since 1993. A lot of the ground towards the beach and the machair at Sheigra lies within Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Special Sights of Scientific Interest (SSSI), this gives it the highest level of protection under European law. The land may be owned by JMT but the majority of it is under crofting tenure, and it's the crofters that manage the land.

At the moment there is a 'Honours' campsite on the machair at Sheigra, which has no facilities but great views. It's always been a popular place for campers for many years. Just now its tent only, as in the recent years gone past has seen a lot more tourism to the area which attracted more vehicles using the campsite and damaging the habitat. Visitors can park at the cemetery. It works on an honesty box system, where people pop in their money/ donation, and the funds raised throughout the year will be used to maintain the campsite.

7.5.6 Reflections on the wider natural capital market context and implications for this work

The field of natural capital markets has been evolving rapidly. When this work began – in 2021 – the term ‘wild west’ was commonly used in relation to the natural capital market in Scotland, and particularly ‘community benefits’. It seems that expression is used less now - there is more guidance and oversight – but there remains significant uncertainty.

By this point, in 2025, we have expanded our knowledge and participation in Scotland-wide forums, which supports our collaboration and capacity with regards to natural capital. This is reliant on having a member of the team focused and resourced to remain involved in this ever-shifting field, who endeavours to share this knowledge across NW2045. We hope this will – in time – help communities of place to navigate these markets.

Recent global and national developments in natural capital markets – and their potential impacts on the Land+ approach to developing a natural capital project – were summarised usefully by Galbraith in Oct 2024:

1. *Increase in global concerns about carbon offset credibility, in particular ‘avoidance’ offsets such as renewable energy or Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation.*
 - **Market reaction 1:** more demand for UK based woodland carbon offsets.
 - o **Low relevance** for the NW2045 area, because slow-growing trees, small woodland size, and highly organic soil mean opportunity for woodland carbon units will be very small.
 - **Market reaction 2:** less demand for peatland carbon offsets, which are ‘avoidance’ offsets.
 - o **Constraint** for the NW2045 area, because peatland carbon could be a significant opportunity.
 - **Market reaction 3:** companies interested in alternative routes to tell environmental story.
 - o **Opportunity** for NW2045, because chance to pitch an alternative option, as described above.
2. *[Montreal-Kunming Global Biodiversity Agreement](#) provides international commitment to transition to regenerative land use and conservation of natural habitats.*
 - **Market reaction 1:** Pioneering companies start to adopt [Taskforce on Nature-based Financial Disclosures](#)
 - o **Opportunity:** align crofting activities at Sheigra with nature- friendly supply chain thinking.
 - **Market reaction 2:** Growing knowledge and capacity amongst businesses about biodiversity-related issues.
 - o **Opportunity:** growing likelihood of interest in a more sophisticated biodiversity based project.

3. *Widespread economic downturn and political backlash against policy mechanisms to enforce nature markets. High-profile examples of natural capital projects failing.*
 - **Market reaction 1:** Natural capital markets more challenging as governments roll back on commitments to meet net zero and tackle biodiversity decline.
 - o **Constraint:** Increased caution in natural capital markets as companies have less cash and less incentive to spend money on nature restoration.
 - **Market reaction 2:** Knowledge and interest in environmental crisis and in natural capital market theory has been built in the corporate world, resulting in businesses eager to explore solutions, analysing and causes of problems and exploring solutions.
 - o **Opportunity:** A high-integrity, high-impact project with a strong story and opportunity for research and development could meet an emerging demand.
4. *Growing concern about social impacts of natural capital projects, and policy focus on ensuring social benefit.*
 - **Market reaction 1:** Companies considering funding natural capital projects are more cautious in assessing the risk of projects, resulting in negative social impacts.
 - o **Opportunity:** A community-led project with strong governance could have increased appeal.

Some pertinent developments in Scotland:

- There is strong focus on social impacts in the [Principles for Responsible Investment in Natural Capital](#) and [Natural Capital Market Framework](#) published by Scottish Government in 2024.
- Projects such as [Community Inclusion Standard](#) (also funded by FIRNS) are developing various best-practice tools to support projects.
- The high-profile project led by [Community Land Scotland](#) in partnership with [Scottish Land Commission](#) (and others) ‘to ensure more people can benefit from the investments being made in natural capital across Scotland’.
- The British Standards Institute is in the process of developing a suite of standards to guide natural capital markets. The [Overarching Principles and Standards](#) were launched in March 2025; the Community Engagement and Benefits standard is in development and will be published later in 2025.

Observations and anecdotal evidence from other natural capital work in development in Scotland:

- Companies interested in funding biodiversity-based natural capital projects are generally seeking to support work that is in close proximity to their own operation; for example [Dreel Burn in Fife](#).

- Anecdotally, we hear that companies are interested in supporting projects operating outwith the code system. However, we have yet to witness this directly.
- Scale is important to many buyers / funders: although some investment in large-scale projects is now happening, we are not yet aware of smaller-scale projects attracting funding.
- Many funders of such large-scale operations do consider ‘community benefit’ to be important. However, there is risk that this is rarely more than a ‘tick-box exercise’: the crucial detail and nuance required for meaningful involvement of people - in the way described here - is unlikely to be possible when operating at such scale, from a distance. If projects are locally-driven, the community of place can genuinely influence outcomes to ensure these projects are fundamentally beneficial to the place.

7.5.7 Next steps with Land+ natural capital work

All four strands of this work produced valuable outcomes which continue to inform our work going forward, and all those involved were enthusiastic about exploring the potential for a natural capital project in Sheigra.

However, this nascent market is complex and novel, and there are multiple uncertainties.

For the crofters to have the confidence to embark on such an uncharted journey – especially one which will require a commitment of several decades, and across generations - they need confidence in external variables, such as the future form and roll-out of agricultural subsidies, and the relationship with the landowner.

For the Land+ team, there is still much to learn from other projects, and hesitancy to be overly encouraging to the land decision-makers when there is so much uncertainty.

The next steps will require further investment in data gathering; this is expensive, and difficult to justify until there is more certainty. This indicates the need for data sharing and integrated systems which have coherence at place-based level.

For a project that involve biodiversity uplift, decision-grade data will be needed to augment the surveys conducted in 2024. It might be sensible to wait until the Ecosystem Recovery Tool is launched, or at least more details are available, to be confident that baseline work is aligned with future requirements.

It is possible that the appropriate conditions may develop over the coming months, and all involved remain open to learning and developing plans in the future.

The Land+ team continue to gather information about the emerging natural capital markets and strive to find opportunities to support development of viable natural capital products that would be of benefit to the crofters, the landowner, the community of place and the land itself. This work is ongoing within the Kinlochbervie area, and we will keep aware of opportunities throughout the wider NW2045 area.

Importantly, the team also continue to build and nurture the relationships of trust that are foundational to all of this work.

The RLUP has an important role in translating and making accessible the complex concepts and language around natural capital, to support communities of place to overcome these barriers and make the most of potential opportunities.

Meanwhile, we remain positive about the potential, and are bolstered by these reflections on the Land+ approach to natural capital by Professor Mark Reed of SRUC:

Excerpt from reflection by Prof Mark Reed

*This FIRNS project represents a significant step towards reimagining how natural capital markets can operate to benefit communities directly and profoundly. By **centring community wealth and empowering local voices to not only participate but lead in the development and management of natural capital projects**, this initiative challenges the traditional paradigms of environmental and social investment. It proposes a model where communities are **not mere beneficiaries but are active architects of their sustainable future, leveraging their local knowledge, values, and aspirations** to design and implement projects that **serve their needs and the planet's**.*

*As ecosystem markets evolve and expand, the lessons and frameworks developed through this project offer valuable insights and a replicable model for **integrating environmental restoration with genuine community wealth building**. This approach not only aims to restore nature and tackle the climate emergency but also to **ensure that the benefits of such endeavours foster community resilience, equity, and long-term sustainability**. As such, the project is a **beacon of hope** and a potential blueprint for creating a more **inclusive, equitable, and sustainable future for natural capital markets**, setting a new standard for how we value and invest in our natural world and in each other.*

Read Prof Reed's full response to the Land+ approach to natural capital on [the Handbook Padlet](#).

8 Connection to other NW2045 work

8.1 The Repopulation pilot project

As well as the opportunity to pilot the RLUP, the Repopulation pilot project – funded by Highlands & Island Enterprise and Highland Council and managed by Michell Hardie – has been focused on the NW2045 area. The Repopulation Coordinator, Boyd Alexander, has worked with communities and landowners to identify suitable areas for construction of affordable housing, and has supported community housing projects.

Through the Repopulation project, Boyd has also supported communities to create [Local Place Plans](#) as a way to think about how to make their place better, to agree priorities, and to take action to make change happen.

In Kinlochbervie the RLUP team were keen to see an integrated approach and to test how the RLUP could best add value to a place-planning process, and also how the RLUP could benefit from that process.

The RLUP Land+ project had already established the lines of communication to Community Council and other decision-makers, and the RLUP Land+ community leads brought their expertise and connections to Boyd to help ensure synergy and collaboration, particularly through the school Pupil Parliament – which involves representatives from every age of Primary and Secondary school. Boyd’s process was able to build directly onto the work of the Land+ team in Kinlochbervie ([see Section 9.2.3](#)).

As a result of this work in Kinlochbervie, Boyd and the Land+ team were invited to share their experiences with other communities within the NW2045 area, including Durness and Scourie.

Furthering this approach, we also plan to ensure connection and consideration of how Land Management Plans – if implemented through the Land Reform Bill - can support this way of working, at the community council and regional level.

8.2 Amplifying the NW2045 Voice and Vision

Members of the RLUP team are involved in the local, regional and national discourse in various ways. For instance, amongst other roles...

- Denise leads the [Save our Rural Schools campaign](#)
- Ewen is a Trustee of [Development Trust Associations Scotland](#)
- Frances is Chair of many local bodies, including the [Flow Country World Heritage Project](#), and is involved in many more.

PERSPECTIVE FROM OUR COLLABORATOR

“Working with the NW2045 has ensured a supportive collaboration that has seen communities identify and mandate new opportunities to strengthen the sustainability of the settlements of the North West Highlands.”

**Boyd Alexander,
Repopulation Coordinator**

- Lizzie coordinates the [Coigach & Assynt Living Landscapes](#) group
- Rachel is a Director of [Community Land Scotland](#)
- Sara is a Trustee of the [West Sutherland Fisheries Trust](#)
- Sophie is a joint vice-chair of the North West Sutherland Deer Management Group

In addition to these responsibilities, the team have been involved in many events – giving presentations and speaking on panels, such as the [Scottish Ecological Design Association webinars](#) and Scottish Nature Finance Pioneers roundtable on place-based approaches to natural capital.

The team also participate in many knowledge sharing fora and networks, such as the FIRNS Community of Practice; the NatureScot pilots; the ongoing James Hutton Institute Research; proposals for further research with SRUC (Prof Mark Reed) and ETHZurich (Prof Jaboury Ghazoul) – see below.

The team takes every opportunity to amplify the vision and the voice of the NW2045 communities.

9 Learning from others – a carrying stream

9.1 Learning from previous projects

Throughout this work we have recognised the importance of the history of community-based working in this area, and have respected the integrity of the community's involvement in past initiatives and the common knowledge banks that have already been tapped.

We are very aware that we are drawing from and continuing this work, rather than beginning afresh. The methodologies described below are inspired and informed by decades of projects, including: [Dùthchas Our Place in the Future](#); [Mackay Country](#); [Strathnaver Museum – Back to the Future](#); [Initiative at the Edge](#). We are learning from and building on these initiatives.

The team are also acutely aware – from our own lived experience – of the numerous community studies, projects and initiatives that take place in this area, and the consultation fatigue that results. This provides additional impetus to be aware of, respect, and build on work that has gone before – to avoid duplication, and work as efficiently as possible.

9.2 Learning from current work

As well as learning from previous projects, we are keeping in touch with and supporting the work of various academic institutions. These include a [longitudinal study on Rural Futures](#) by a team at the James Hutton Institute, and studies on [Land Reform Futures](#) and [Reimagined Policy Futures: Shaping Sustainable, Inclusive and Just Rural and Island Communities in Scotland](#) by SRUC.

We collaborate with the other RLUP Pilots through the RLUP Network and learn from the differences between our community-led project and their institutional structure. This network is led by Scottish Government via regular online meetings where updates are given and insights gleaned into the experiences and positions of the various pilot RLUPs.

There are various analogous projects in the region - including the [Flow Country Partnership](#) who are working on many similar themes, and with whom we keep in touch to share experiences.

In addition, since the inception of the FIRNS project we have been part of the FIRNS Community of Practice: a pro-active effort to share knowledge and experience about natural capital and the emerging markets for nature-based solutions. Through this we continue to meet, learn from and mutually support many projects experiencing similar challenges in the world of natural capital. Specific natural capital projects are mentioned throughout [section 7](#).

9.3 Direct involvement in other pilots

9.3.1 Community Engagement in Landscape Change.

In April 2022 the RLUP was invited to be involved in a NatureScot pilot project: Community Engagement in Landscape Change (CELC). The project aims to deliver a number of actions in a joint NatureScot and Historic Environment Scotland Landscape Position Statement and Action Plan: People, Place and Landscape which is guided by the [European Landscape Convention](#).

The additional CELC resources contributed to Sophie Clark's work on the [Community Manifesto](#) – producing the 'Portrait of Sheigra' and gathering views from her peers in the 18-30s age group. Sophie is now undertaking interviews with, and gathering visual resources, from people connected to the land - within Kinlochbervie and elsewhere in the NW2045 area - to create a network of knowledge related to the land and land use change.

Ethnologist [Mairi McFadyen](#) is working with Sophie, sharing her expertise in ethnology and research practice, including the ethics of research.

The CELC pilot projects are discussing a Fixed Point Photography project as a simple standardised way to document land use change over time.

The other projects in the CELC pilot range from a project engaging a small rural Island community in the landscape through art activities, to a landscape-scale programme in the central belt. The regular sharing and learning workshops have been nourishing and inspiring. Through this network we have created many valuable links – both with the other project leads and beyond, which has led to proposals for further work.

For instance, academic and NatureScot Board member Jaboury Ghazoul invited our RLUP to be a case study on a funding bid to develop a package of tools for negotiating,

quantifying and visualising environmental management options at landscape scales. We have joined other CELC Pilot projects – including [Bioregioning Tayside](#) – in funding bids to further explore concepts such as a Landscape Observatory and Adaptive Governance.

9.3.2 The Social Enterprise Academy work – Dare to Dream and the Dreaming Bog

The RLUP network provided an opportunity to work with the [Social Enterprise Academy](#). We adapted the generic programme to be consistent with the Land+ Principles and community-led approach. Two further Community Co-Leads – Nadine Malcolm and Konstantina Pateraki from Skerray – held a series of online workshops entitled ‘Dare to Dream’, which encouraged participants to consider the future of their place without the conventional constraints.



Word cloud generated by participants' responses during a 'Dare to Dream' workshop

The ‘Dare to Dream’ events were followed by a screening of the eco-poetic film ‘[Dreaming Bog](#)’, and a smart-phone film-making workshop with the community delivered by the Film Maker.

9.3.3 NatureScot The NatureScot Landscape Scale Natural Capital Tool

As explained in [section 7.1.1.2](#), the NW2045 RLUP has also been involved in the development of the NatureScot [Landscape Scale Natural Capital Tool](#) – due for launch in Spring 2025.

10 Outcomes & Impacts of the NW2045 RLUP pilot

10.1 What outcomes have resulted from the RLUP work?

As has been stated throughout this document, the purpose of the RLUP Pilot work was *not* to deliver a conventional programme of activity / outcomes / impacts within communities, but rather to find ways to increase communication and collaboration. The expectation was that this enhanced communication and collaboration would support communities – working with partners where necessary - to take action and create positive outcomes, for people and for the land. This is what we have seen happen in Kinlochbervie.

10.1.1 Direct outcomes of the RLUP work

These outcomes relate directly to the activity of the RLUP:

- The NW2045 RLUP has piloted a **new cross-community, intergenerational place-based collaborative process**: a process of empowering people to do (and expect) more - sometimes reaching beyond their comfort zones - and in doing so build trusting relationships and overcome barriers. The cumulative effect of this is the mobilisation of people, becoming motivated and emboldened to take action for positive change, together.
- The process of **commissioning the Natural Capital Assessment** increased the RLUP team’s knowledge about natural capital data, the constraints of working with external consultants within a short time frame and limited data, and the difficulties of communicating about natural capital to a public audience.
- From their experience of the FIRNS work, the Land+ team are **more knowledgeable about natural capital** opportunities; potential governance structures, and crofting law with respect to natural capital projects.
- As a result of the FIRNS work, the **township of Sheigra have additional knowledge and data about their place**. This includes the detailed information and advice in the Building Surveys and Energy Performance Certificates, and the ecological survey, farm carbon audit and crofting review. This knowledge could help the people of Sheigra access opportunities to make changes to their household energy consumption and crofting practices independently if they wish. Meanwhile, the RLUP continues to seek opportunities for natural capital projects, including continuing dialogue with Sheigra township.
- The natural capital work has helped people within the community **value and respect the land**. More people now see that it could potentially contribute to building community wealth, in a holistic sense.

- Since January 2025, a **new role has been developed within the NW2045 RLUP: a ‘Natural Capital Lead’** contract, to keep abreast of developments in the field of natural capital markets.
- As part of this work, the team are now developing the concept of a **‘Resource Bank’**. This evolved from the concept of a ‘funders’ forum’, which brings together those who have financial funding to offer with people seeking funding. The Resource Bank idea could also consider resources and assets in a holistic sense: **access to land, infrastructure, knowledge, skills, capacity**, and how these can benefit the wider community. Alongside the Resource Bank we hope to develop a **‘pipeline’ of fundable projects**, thereby matching funding, capacity and opportunities.

10.1.2 Unanticipated outcomes of the work

By empowering people to work together and overcome barriers, the Land+ project has catalysed action on issues beyond Land Use. Below are some examples of the organic, mycelial way that solutions and projects can emerge:

10.1.2.1 Supporting childcare facilities to remain open

Through the Land+ conversations the team were aware that the Kinlochbervie Nursery was at the heart of the community. News that it had been mothballed was a huge blow, and finding a way to reopen it was imperative. A NW2045 Childcare Working Group was formed comprising six core members, including two members of the Kinlochbervie Land+ Team. The group pursued multiple possible solutions, and lobbied hard. The group also connected with other communities in the area – Achiltibuie and Melvich - who were facing similar issues. All three nurseries have reopened. The NW2045 Childcare Working Group have subsequently [written up a Toolkit](#) and [produced a padlet](#), and have supported other communities – including one outwith the NW2045 area - facing similar issues, with positive results so far.

PERSPECTIVE FROM THE TEAM

“The NW2045/RLUP Land+ work is extraordinary and it is a privilege to be part of it. This is an innovative collaboration between landowners, crofters and community with equality and respect at the heart of the work. We all have a common purpose to do the best we can to nurture our natural capital and support our communities to flourish. We’re actively listening to each other, learning from each other and trusting each other to find exciting solutions to a myriad of challenges. Change is already happening.”

**Sara Harkins NW2045 RLUP Land+ Local Lead
Kinlochbervie and
Owner of Kinlochbervie Estate**

10.1.2.2 Emerging technologies project delivery with KLB High School

A Land+ team member attended a Rural Studies careers fair in Ullapool and witnessed the pupils’ excitement about a Virtual Reality (VR) headset featuring footage of a combine harvester in Australia. A proposal was subsequently developed by Land+ in collaboration with a VR Educator in Dublin, with support from the school. The VR Educator will initiate the

project in person in Kinlochbervie, with his time and travel supported by funding from Leeds University. Glasgow University are lending the VR headsets; Abertay University, Youthlink Scotland, Scottish AI and the Mhor Collective are also involved. Land Use and the local environment - including the harbour and cultural identity of the students and their place - are at the heart of the project. This is a participatory project with the students designing and guiding how they wish the project develop.

10.1.2.3 Seaweed project

Assynt Development Trust, Scourie Development Trust and a member of the Land+ Team have been developing the possibility of a seaweed enterprise in the NW2045 area. The group successfully applied to the Highland Council Community Regeneration Fund (via the Kinlochbervie Community Company) for support for the development a business plan, which concluded that there is potential for a viable business.

Taking the next step to practical development of the enterprise will require a strong relationship between the third sector community development organisations and an entrepreneurial entity. This in itself requires patience, understanding of different approaches and respectful collaboration – whilst not missing valuable opportunities to make progress.

10.1.2.4 Experiences with renewables

Over the years the Kinlochbervie Estate has been approached by multiple renewable energy firms seeking to develop wind turbines on the land, and the Estate has decided to pursue one avenue. Partly inspired by the experience of working with the RLUP, the owner – Sara Harkins – insisted on transparency from an early stage, to maximise opportunities for community and crofters to input into decisions, and also to ensure meaningful benefits are created for the community.

An interesting model to learn from is the Bettyhill Wind Farm, where a meaningful package of benefits – including a Local Electricity Discount Scheme for residents – has been negotiated in partnership with the Farr North Community Development Trust.

The process in Kinlochbervie is certainly challenging, as is any impactful project requiring substantial trade-offs. The process will continue to be approached with the RLUP ethos of transparency, close collaboration between all stakeholders, and seeking meaningful benefits for the community of place.

PERSPECTIVE FROM THE TEAM

“Different generations and people that wouldn’t normally come together are connecting and having conversations that may not usually happen. It’s great to see a spark, enthusiasm, and excitement throughout the community. This project has already been super beneficial as it is letting everyone involved (live, work, landowners, business, schools etc) in the area have a voice, and the confidence to use it.”

Sophie Clark, NW2045 Land+ Community Co-Lead Kinlochbervie and Ghillie/ Stalker, Land Professional, Further Education Rural Resources Educator/trainer

10.1.2.5 Woodland creation with the school and community

Connections made through the RLUP work have led to a tree planting project in collaboration with [Woodland Trust](#) and [North West Highlands Geopark](#), involving Kinlochbervie school and the community.

10.1.2.6 And others...

There are many other potential projects emerging in the Kinlochbervie area, at different scales and with direct/indirect links to the Land+ work – from exploring Kinlochbervie as a port for servicing for off-shore windfarms, to riparian woodland restoration and creation of wildflower meadows. Time will tell which of these have longevity, but the catalytic energy of the Land+ work has certainly created energy, ambition and action.

10.2 Wider impacts of the RLUP Land+ work in Kinlochbervie.

The headline impact from the RLUP Land+ work in Kinlochbervie is that **a community of place is now more empowered to work together – community, crofters and landowner** - exploring and addressing all manner of issues, from childcare to natural capital options to renewable energy to offshore servicing.

The people of this community – including people who may not have previously felt empowered or confident to be involved in such discussions - have a **voice and agency**.

The **children and young people are heard** via the Pupil Parliament, the Manifesto methodology and many other interactions with the Land+ project that have emerged from these processes. The open and proactive attitude of the Head Teacher - and other staff - of the North West Sutherland Schools has been crucial to this involvement of Children and Young People.

Because of the Land+ opportunity, an **intergenerational team of talented and passionate individuals** from within the community knows they bring expertise and value to this place-based work. And, whilst they certainly learn from external 'experts', they know that they too **are experts with valuable knowledge and experience**.

Emboldened by the support of the RLUP team, a landowner - who was previously uncomfortable about her status and wary of involving herself in community matters - has **committed deeply**, with remarkable and diverse results.

This **positive energy** this work has brought to Kinlochbervie has **generated hope for the future**.

10.3 What have we learned from this work?

When we analyse the profound impacts generated by the work, we find at the source the **fundamental quality of human connections** that have been nurtured by this work. Of course, *many* connections and relationships already existed within Kinlochbervie before the Land+ work started, but anecdotal evidence tells us that this work has created significant change.

Critical factors for success:

Creating and nurturing connections is not trivial; there are several factors that have been critical in this Land+ work:

Time – and therefore funding to pay for that time – is essential. That is why the approach of contracting Community Co-Leads is so important: Co-Leads are paid for their time, so this work need not rely on voluntary work, squeezed in around the edges of an already full life. Paying for the work also confers value on it, so the Co-Leads can be confident that their **contributions are respected.**

Mutual trust and respect are essential amongst the team – and between the team and the wider community. This takes **time** to build: people must know they are **listened to, have a voice and agency, and are connected.**

The Land+ project has been extremely fortunate to work with people who have such **energy, enthusiasm, ‘bandwidth’, tenacity and investment in the future of the place** (...and many other qualities besides...).

Community Co-Leads are **from / of the community**; it is essential that the community see people from within their own community **committed to** and guiding the work with **passion and integrity**. Meanwhile, we have of course been mindful of – and taken steps to mitigate – conflict of interest.

Diversity within the team has been valuable: the team is **intergenerational and cross-sectoral** (comprising a landowner, a third-sector worker and a stalker); all members of the team are respected within the community, which adds gravitas to the project. We have consciously worked to **avoid a hierarchy** within the team and, with our diverse experience and working styles, the team has learned to work well together.

The commitment of the **landowner** (as well as the other community Co-Leads) to be **present in the community** for significant periods of time – and to attend meetings of the Community Council and other bodies, but also to chat to neighbours, to be familiar and involved in the daily life of the place – has a profound effect.

Being **present in the community** and having **confidence in the process** has also facilitated **informal, organic conversations**, which contribute to trusting relationships. Rather than following a formal stakeholder engagement process, the team deliberately decided to ‘go with the flow’. This **informal approach has reaped huge dividends** in terms of **trusting**

relationships, reaching beyond the ‘usual suspects’ to **lesser heard voices**, and building a **holistic picture** of the community’s views and concerns.

Connections help to **share knowledge**: often this knowledge is all that is needed to **catylyse change**.

It is important to use **accessible language**, and avoid jargon and technical vocabulary wherever possible.

Clear communication is particularly important for **external ‘experts’**; it is also important for these external experts to understand how to achieve **meaningful, respectful engagement**; the appropriate pace to work at, and the need to consistently seek approvals and ensure people locally are still engaged in the work. Through our encounters with many professionals we feel we have learned how to engage effectively to mitigate against tensions and issues, and we hope that those **external advisors / experts** who have worked with the project **have also evolved their understanding** of appropriate ways to work within a community.

Abstract concepts do not resonate with people, especially when they have many significant and more tangible challenges in their daily life. We have found this to be the case with natural capital concepts, and the climate and biodiversity crises. Climate change is not felt as an emergency (yet) in the North West Highlands. It is important to find ways to **encourage people to be involved via ‘hooks’ that are relevant to their life and immediate concerns**.

There is **no ‘quick win’ when it comes to natural capital projects**. This whole sector is evolving rapidly, but few people have yet achieved a ‘result’ – particularly not with an innovative approach such as the one we are pursuing. It would be understandable if we became despondent, but **it is important to remain engaged with the national conversation, continuing to develop our potential natural capital projects, and being ready for any opportunities** that do arise. Remaining engaged in this conversation also reassures the team that the challenges we experience are felt across the country. This is important work on behalf of our communities.

The RLUP has an important role in translating and making accessible the complex concepts and language around natural capital, to support communities of place to overcome these barriers and make the most of any potential opportunities.

10.3.1 Pros and Cons of this approach

Much of the power of this way of working is in the very *human-ness* of it. But - of course – working with humans is not without its challenges.

This way of working

- Work of this nature takes a *lot* of **time and personal energy**:

- Fathoming every step of an **innovative, mould-breaking project** requires a large amount of in-depth discussion, which in-turn requires **patience and forbearance**.
- Dealing with **complex, multi-faceted reality** and working in partnership across sectors with different perspectives, approaches, vocabularies is not as simple as staying comfortably in an isolated silo and following conventional methodologies.
- It is essential that we can **communicate why working in this way** (time consuming as it is) **is so important, and demonstrate the benefits**. We hope that the details above - of both direct and indirect outcomes – achieve that.

The subject matter

- The **RLUP is a difficult concept to communicate** to people who are not directly connected to land use policy, especially when the intended outcome of the work is not clearly defined. **Talking with people about land, land use change, nature, natural capital and climate change can be difficult.**

Many people are not immediately deeply interested in issues around land use, climate change, natural capital on the face of it. This is understandable: these issues do not seem to touch their everyday lives, the concepts may be incomprehensible and require a new vocabulary, and people do not feel they have agency to make a meaningful contribution or a change that will of direct benefit to themselves or their family.

In the North West Highlands, we are relatively fortunate that climate change is not (yet) having significant tangible impacts, either directly - we are not experiencing the extreme weather events such as catastrophic flooding - nor directly through mitigation efforts such as renewables infrastructure.

Both these situations are - of course - changing rapidly, and the hope is that **this work will establish the connections and the groundwork**, so people are **equipped and resilient** to better deal with challenges as they arise. For instance, by working together, communities can lobby for fair and proportionate benefits from renewables infrastructure, and establish the collaborative governance structures required to manage these benefits equitably.

Apparent inertia

- Not everyone within the community shares the enthusiasm or has the same capacity for this work, and it can be dispiriting, for example, to receive no responses to a suggestion offer. It is important to recognise and respect that **time and energy are precious resources for everyone**, and not everyone has the same priorities.

- Meanwhile, however, it is important to identify which projects will have most **positive impact**, and find ways to work through obstacles or inertia, with **respect and patience**.
- Operating within the machinery of **Scottish Government is sometimes logistically and strategically problematic**. For example, if it was possible to have confidence in multi-year funding, we wouldn't face the annual 'limbo' periods when work must pause for the next grant contract. These hiatuses are not only **detrimental to the lives of individuals** working within the RLUP - and their commitment to the work - but also **the credibility of the approach** that the team is working hard to develop. We are aware that our forward momentum is contingent on the Scottish Government's strategic vision and delivery of the RLUP initiative beyond 2025. This external factor has a significant bearing on how the NW2045 RLUP develops and then operates.

Personal pressure

- Being so deeply integrated in the community brings a **heightened personal responsibility and pressure** to make this work a success.

This is particularly the case when – as is the case in many communities - there are **challenging individuals**, and difficulties associated with carefully managing the local politics around such individuals. This can be time consuming, dispiriting and detrimental in many ways. This issue is not to be taken lightly, and the RLUP has a **duty of care to its team**.

We have, however, witnessed that, as the wider community becomes **stronger and more united**, the **power of such individuals to disrupt and derail diminishes**.

Politics and power

- The Land+ team have encountered many differing views, lived experiences, aspirations for the area – particularly regarding Deer Management, which is a significant point of tension across the area. Through **patience and respectful persuasion**, the team were able to **engage with even those who were reluctant**.
- Initially it might have been assumed that the Landowners hold all the power in the area, and that tensions would be between landowner and community. Whilst this is true in some cases, it has been interesting and important to understand that there are **other powerful players in the area**. These might include crofters, a local family, a local employer or member of the community. There can be tensions, for instance, between those who croft and those who do not; those who croft in a more traditional way versus modern crofting ways; those who have moved to the area recently and those who have lived in the area for generations.

- The team consistently strive to **navigate this challenging terrain in a respectful way by listening deeply**, and have endeavoured to be **fair and transparent**. The team have also deliberately engaged with those who consider themselves to have no 'right' to a voice or opinion on these matters.

This work requires a willingness to embark on a journey without a predetermined destination. As we plan our next steps, learning from our experience so far, we hope to find more collaborators and accomplices who will accept – and perhaps even relish – these challenges.

The hope of creating and catalysing regenerative change in our own communities is a galvanising force.



The power of the Highlands. © Anne McGee

11 The NW2045 RLUP commitment

In March 2024 the Scottish Government announced that the RLUPs would move from Pilot phase to a formal initiative. Since then, the ScotGov team has been working to define the nature of the next phase of these RLUPs, with involvement from the regional RLUP network.

The Land+ work in Kinlochbervie established a mandate from the community for this way of working. The NW2045 RLUP team is therefore committed to continuing and extending our work across the NW2045 area, and championing the importance of this approach at all levels, as resources allow.

We will continue to develop delivery in line with Scotland’s ambition to create an “*inclusive, sustainable, and empowered local economy, where land is used and managed productively and in the public interest*” ([Scottish Land Commission’s Community Wealth Building guide](#)).

Specifically:

1. **Collaboration and Partnership working:**

- Working across the communities of place to nurture connections that develop their sense of agency, stimulate collaboration and create the conditions for change.
- Working with landowners, crofters and other ‘land decision-makers’ to support and encourage meaningful involvement of the wider community of place in discussions and decisions about how land is used.

2. **Natural Capital:**

- Continuing to explore and support opportunities for communities of place to be proactively involved in natural capital projects, consistent with ScotGov’s objective to achieve ‘responsible private investment in natural capital’.

3. **Resource Bank:**

- Identifying resources and assets in the most holistic sense (access to land, infrastructure, knowledge, skills, capacity) and bringing them together with developing projects in need of resources, to enable progress.

4. **Knowledge gathering and sharing:**

- Continuing to gather and share knowledge from those connected to the land across the NW2045.

5. **Influencing:**

- Working with ScotGov to develop and define the scope of the RLUP; how it will be delivered within the NW2045, across the existing network, and elsewhere, and how it will achieve integration with the policy and funding landscape.
- Acting on NW2045 mandate to influence ScotGov, Highland Council - and others in positions of power – to achieve the transformative change our land and people need to thrive.

This work will be synergistic with the ongoing evolution of the NW2045 network, and in sync with Scottish Government RLUP development.

Our NW2045 working will be based on these community-generated Principles and Learnings. It does not seek to stipulate *what* should be done or *what* issues should be focused on; rather it shows *how* people can collaborate on issues of Land Use in this area.

All our work will be informed by the [NW2045 RLUP Land+ Principles](#), the lessons we have learned, and will be striving towards making the NW2045 Vision a reality:

- *A place that is attractive for young people and families to live and work*
- *A model for a new diverse rural economy*
- *A place where communities can determine their own prospects*

A FINAL WORD

“To my knowledge, after many years of community development, this is the first time the folk on the ground have seen such an active and empathetic interest taken in them and their communities. The involvement of young local people with an enduring connection to the land and culture is refreshing and a hugely hopeful sign.

What must not happen is that all this wonderful work is parked and forgotten, it is vital that Government do not leave progress becalmed due to lack of funding when this could be transformative to this area and other rural parts of the country.”

Frances Gunn,
Chair of Up North Development Trust, Chair of Flow Country World Heritage Project,
Chair of NW2045 and NW2045 RLUP and 5th generation crofter.



© Rachel Skene

