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Title: *Can Scotland achieve a more balanced population distribution? Relocation preferences between service accessibility and place attractiveness*

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Abstract: Rural depopulation is a long-term phenomenon that has been attracting increasing attention from researchers and policymakers due to its negative implications for the viability of the rural social fabric, often resulting in discontent and populist reactions. Within this context, achieving a more balanced population distribution across territories can preserve viable rural communities on the one hand and alleviate pressure on urban services and housing markets on the other.

Among European countries, Scotland is noteworthy for its high population concentration, counterbalanced by large sparsely populated rural, remote, and island (RRI) areas. Consequently, the Scottish Government’s 2021 National Population Strategy (NPS) identified the promotion of a more evenly distributed population as a key objective. Achieving this will require the voluntary relocation of people from urban to RRI areas. While often desirable from an environmental point of view, the latter are characterised by lower accessibility to services, forcing individuals to make difficult trade-offs. Understanding individuals’ preferences and willingness to accept different place characteristics thus becomes crucial for designing appropriate incentives.

In this paper, we use discrete choice experiments to investigate Scottish residents’ willingness to move (or not) to places that differ in terms of various attributes. An online survey was disseminated first (2023) to a sample of 250 rural dwellers generally concerned with the issue, and then (2025) to a sample of 1,007 respondents representative of the Scottish population by age and gender, covering the whole urban–rural continuum and a variety of household types. Half of the respondents in the second sample, randomly selected, were shown excerpts from the NPS as an information treatment prior to making their choices.

We found that, *ceteris paribus*, the quality of the natural environment and of digital connectivity had strong positive impacts on preferences. Distances from family, workplaces, schools, hospitals, and grocery shops yielded negative effects, although with different intensities, but were not statistically significant among the rural sample, suggesting habituation to longer distances. Controlling for these characteristics, a place’s population size and remoteness mattered only for the rural sample. While an overwhelming majority of respondents stated that they agreed with the objectives of the NPS, the information treatment had no significant impact on preferences, although we would have expected reduced sensitivity to distance.

While our results suggest that there is scope to achieve a more balanced population distribution, an intention–behaviour gap persists, and substantial improvements in service accessibility are needed to enable its realisation.

Keywords: discrete choice experiment; willingness-to-accept; place preferences; service accessibility; rural Scotland

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