

Rural Parliaments in Europe: A report for the Scottish Government

**Mike Woolvin, Jane Atterton and Sarah Skerratt
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Rural Policy Centre Research Report

Mike Woolvin¹, Jane Atterton² and Sarah Skerratt³

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¹ Researcher, Rural Society Research, SAC. E: mike.woolvin@sac.ac.uk

² Researcher, Rural Policy Centre, SAC. E: jane.atterton@sac.ac.uk

³ Senior Researcher and Team Leader, Rural Society Research, SAC. E: sarah.skerratt@sac.ac.uk

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Executive Summary

Context

- In its 2011 election manifesto the Scottish National Party (SNP) made a commitment to take forward proposals for a Rural Parliament. This commitment was reaffirmed in the SNP's 2011-12 Programme for Government.
- In October 2011, researchers at SAC were asked by the Scottish Government to carry out a study of existing Rural Parliaments in Europe. The aim of the study was to 'enhance understanding of how and why Rural Parliaments operate, and the outcomes they generate, through examining international examples'.
- Rural Parliaments in six countries were identified for analysis in discussion with the Scottish Government: Sweden, the Netherlands, Estonia, (Swedish-speaking) Finland, Hungary and Slovakia.
- The study has been undertaken in four phases: i) scoping of the number and location of existing Rural Parliaments; ii) desk-based analysis of the information available about selected existing Parliaments; iii) interviews with representatives of the Parliaments and with individuals centrally involved in rural movements in Europe to discuss in more detail the ways in which they operate; and iv) summarising the implications of phases (i) – (iii) for the establishment of a Rural Parliament in Scotland.

Key characteristics

- Analysing the key characteristics of the Rural Parliaments revealed similarities and differences.
- They generally form part of a wider rural movement, often focused on a number of key issues, which was usually established to 'give a voice' to rural people and issues and to act as a forum through which to engage with policy-makers and politicians.
- Although engagement from local and national government is important in sustaining Rural Parliaments, several of them have been initiated and are organised from the 'bottom-up' while others have stronger NGO involvement.
- Participants include individuals from local rural communities, representatives of NGOs and other organisations with an interest in rural areas and issues, local and national government representatives and politicians.
- The role of national and local layers of governance varies between Rural Parliaments. In some instances (such as Sweden and Estonia) central government was closely involved in setting up (although not necessarily instigating) the Rural Parliament; in others (such as Finland) this was not the case.
- Rural Parliaments usually meet every two years and each meeting tends to last two days (although this ranges from one to three days) and involves a mix of workshops, plenary sessions, exhibitions, visits and time for networking and socialising.
- Finance is drawn from multiple sources including the public, private and third sectors.
- The Parliaments studied report a range of outputs and outcomes. Outputs included a report or statement of key themes and agreed actions. Outcomes included sharing good practice, increasing a sense of empowerment amongst rural inhabitants, and the opportunity to meet, establish relationships with, and increase the rural awareness of, local and national politicians and policy-makers.

Thematic analysis of key informant interviews

- In discussion with representatives of the six Parliaments and of the wider European rural movement, questions and subsequent analysis were grouped around five key themes:
- *Why was a Rural Parliament felt to be the most appropriate model of governance?* Due to Rural Parliaments usually being part of wider movements they served to bring together members of the wider movement to discuss the way forward for the movement as well as to debate, share and network regarding rural issues more generally. They are particularly helpful in engaging rural stakeholders with decision-makers at national and local governance levels. It was highlighted that a Rural Parliament can allow stakeholders to be of equal status. In the absence of a Rural Parliament it was suggested that there would be limited direct links between individuals/organisations and decision-makers, as well as no forum for networking.
- *How can everyone be represented in a Rural Parliament?* It was accepted that Rural Parliaments are not fully 'representative', and that those involved may also be most likely to be engaged in other forms of social action. Most are open to all; however some have sought to target representatives from specific locations/organisations/tiers of governance. Although interviewees commented on the difficulties of establishing 'one rural voice', single documents are often produced as outputs from Rural Parliament meetings, as statements of what has been discussed and key priorities, to articulate to decision-makers. These documents are often voted upon by participants at the Rural Parliament. Involving politicians and decision-makers at Rural Parliament events can help to establish good working relationships with grassroots participants and to ensure that messages are translated quickly into actions.
- *What worked well in organising the Rural Parliaments?* A diversity of participants and topics was felt to be important, along with a mix of activities during the meeting, including seminars, workshops, field visits, cultural activities and informal networking. Value was placed upon direct engagement of and with decision-makers at all levels and the political legitimacy and influence this offered. The organisation of the Rural Parliaments by a number of stakeholders (rather than a single organisation) was also felt to be important.
- *How have conflicts and tensions been addressed?* Articulating 'one rural voice' through output documents was not always easy given the diversity of participants present at Rural Parliaments, and it was suggested that remaining clear about the purposes of the Rural Parliament was important. Negotiating and maintaining funding was reported as challenging, with additional tensions around maintaining neutrality whilst accepting funding from organisations which may have particular objectives. Finally, maintaining a high profile once the Rural Parliament had been established for a number of years was an important challenge.
- *What are the key lessons learnt?* Interviewees wished to convey a number of messages. It is important to take into account the national and regional history and culture of participation as well as institutional and governance landscape of a country in establishing a Rural Parliament; one size does not fit all. Governmental involvement and commitment is important, but it must be done in partnership with others and it is important to be clear about the aims and objectives of the Rural Parliament. It would not appear advisable for the Government to lead a Rural Parliament. All stakeholders at all levels must be involved in the development of the Rural Parliament from the earliest opportunity. There is great willingness from others involved in Rural Parliaments in Europe to share expertise.

Implications for establishing a Rural Parliament in Scotland

- The final section of the report builds on the preceding analysis, and the knowledge of the report authors about the institutional infrastructure in rural Scotland, to draw out the implications for establishing a Rural Parliament in Scotland.
- *Building on existing knowledge and experience:* There is much existing information, knowledge and expertise within Scotland to inform current discussions about establishing a Rural Parliament. Engaging those individuals involved in earlier discussions in future discussions will help to ensure that lessons are learned about the successes and challenges experienced in previous initiatives.
- *The commitment of the Scottish Government:* This is important for success but not sufficient. It is particularly vital for ensuring that the Parliament is well resourced, and that recommendations are quickly translated into actions by policy-makers and politicians. However equally, if not more important, is enthusiasm, engagement and drive from the grassroots as a Rural Parliament cannot be imposed from the top-down. Financial resources are clearly also vital, and these can come from the national and local levels, and from the public and private sectors.
- *A Rural Parliament embedded within an existing rural movement:* Generally, an existing rural movement provides an important backdrop to the Rural Parliament, not least in terms of keeping momentum between Rural Parliament events. In Scotland no such rural movement exists, and local level governance is relatively weak and patchy. A decision will therefore be required about how such a movement can be formed, or at the very least, how the grassroots level can be engaged in discussions before, during and after a Rural Parliament event.
- *Maintaining dialogue towards and between Rural Parliament events:* It is important that all stakeholders are engaged in a thorough discussion of the key issues prior to the Rural Parliament event and that frequent contact is maintained with policy-makers and politicians following the event to ensure that recommendations are translated into actions. Despite not having a rural movement, there are existing mechanisms in Scotland through which this dialogue could be facilitated.
- *Format of the Rural Parliament events:* Around 300 participants seems to be an ideal number, and an event held over 2 days will enable plenty of networking opportunities. The event should be a dynamic celebration of the culture, food, music etc. of the local area in which it is held, particularly through exhibitions and field visits. An alternative, which brings both benefits and challenges, is to host the Rural Parliament within a high-profile national venue, such as the Scottish Parliament.
- *Focussing on success stories:* It is important that the Rural Parliament event highlights best practice case studies to emphasise that rural areas are positive, 'can-do' places.
- *Learning from other countries:* The existing Rural Parliaments have all shared information amongst themselves, and interviewees all expressed a willingness to assist Scotland further (including through personal visits) with taking forward the proposal for a Rural Parliament. At the same time, all Rural Parliaments are different and have characteristics and 'atmospheres' that fit their national contexts.
- *Engaging key individuals as ambassadors for the Rural Parliament:* It can be useful to engage well-known and well-respected individuals (such as former politicians or sports personalities) in driving the process forward and in raising the profile of the event itself.
- *Taking time but having the confidence to proceed:* Setting up a Rural Parliament will take time. All interviewees in this project expressed their willingness to assist Scotland. Despite the differences between Scotland and the countries studied, interviewees unanimously concluded that setting up a Rural Parliament in Scotland would be possible.

1. Introduction

1.1 Study aim and objectives

In its 2011 election manifesto, the Scottish National Party (SNP) made a commitment to ensure the voice of rural Scotland is heard by taking forward "...proposals for a Rural Parliament, to enable rural communities to engage more effectively with government"⁴. Following on from this, in its 2011-12 Programme for Government published in September 2011, the SNP (now with a majority) reaffirmed their commitment to take forward proposals for a Rural Parliament in the next Parliamentary session⁵.

In October 2011, researchers at SAC were asked by the Scottish Government to carry out a study of existing Rural Parliaments in Europe. The aim and objectives of the study are set out in Figure 1 below.

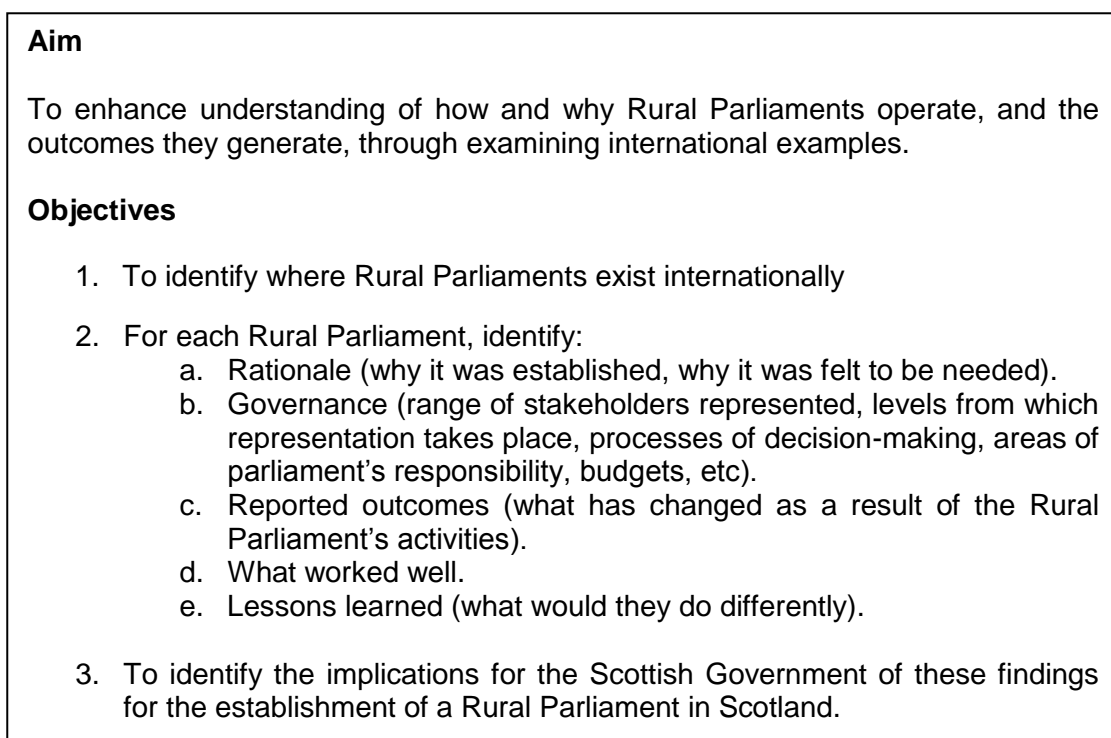


Figure 1: Study aim and objectives

1.2 Study Methods

The study has been undertaken in four phases:

- Phase 1: Desk study to identify specific bodies that have been set up as 'Rural Parliaments'.
- Phase 2: Desk study to gather as much information as possible from websites, where English translated text allows.

⁴ For more information, see: http://votesnp.com/campaigns/SNP_Manifesto_2011_lowRes.pdf (p. 38).

⁵ For more information, see: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/357504/0120772.pdf> (p. 48).

- Phase 3: Interviews (undertaken by telephone, Skype or by email) with representatives of the Rural Parliaments and the wider European rural movement to address the study's objectives identified above.
- Phase 4: Write a brief report outlining the main findings and implications for establishing a Rural Parliament in Scotland.

1.3 Structure of the report

This report represents the final report of the study (Phase 4). It is divided into a number of sections:

- Section 2 contains descriptive 'key fact' information on six Rural Parliaments. These Parliaments were identified in Phase 1 of the research and, in discussion with the Scottish Government team, were selected for further in-depth analysis.
- Section 3 contains a thematic analysis of the findings from the interviews carried out with key informants involved in the Rural Parliaments in the six countries and in the wider European rural movement (supplemented with information gathered from other sources). The analysis is organised around five key themes focussing on what has worked well, and the lessons learned, in other countries. This section, therefore, focuses on the processes and experiences of others in developing and sustaining a Rural Parliament, in order to draw out the key lessons learnt.
- Section 4 draws together the key messages emerging from the thematic analysis presented in section three to identify the key policy and practice implications for establishing a Rural Parliament in Scotland.

2. The key characteristics of Rural Parliaments in Sweden, the Netherlands, Hungary, Estonia, Finland and Slovakia

2.1 Introduction

This section of the report contains descriptive ‘key fact’ information on Rural Parliaments in six countries:

- Sweden
- The Netherlands
- Estonia
- Finland
- Hungary
- Slovakia

The information contained in this descriptive section has been taken from a number of sources, including the ‘Rural Parliaments: emerging participative democracy’ book, published in 2011 by the PREPARE network⁶, interviews with individuals with experience of contributing to the coordination of the Rural Parliaments and the broader European rural movement, and online resources. These have been identified in a footnote following each of the summaries, and references can be found in Section 5.

The information about each Rural Parliament is summarised in a table containing a number of common questions for ease of cross-referencing between the Parliaments. These questions are summarised in Figure 2 below.

1. Population of country
2. Rural population of country
3. When was the Rural Parliament established?
4. Why was the Rural Parliament established?
5. What are the aims and objectives of the Rural Parliament?
6. How is the Rural Parliament, and wider rural movement structured?
7. How was the Rural Parliament initiated?
8. Who organises the Rural Parliament and how do they do it?
9. Who are the participants?
10. How often does the Rural Parliament meet?
11. How is the Rural Parliament financed?
12. What is the format of the Rural Parliament meeting?
13. What is reported to have changed as a result of the Rural Parliament?

Figure 2: Summary points for Rural Parliaments studied

⁶ Šoster, G. and Halhead, V. (2011) (eds).

2.2 The Rural Parliament in Sweden

**All Sweden Shall Live
(Hela Sverige ska leva,
HSSL)**



<http://www.helasverige.se/kansli/in-english>

<i>Population</i>	9,379,116 (2010)
<i>Rural population</i>	1,435,004 / 15% (2010)
<i>When was HSSL established?</i>	1989
<i>Why was HSSL established?</i>	HSSL resulted from a campaign (with the same slogan), focussing on a range of issues, including depopulation, limited employment opportunities, lack of service provision and youth out-migration. 'The aim of the campaign was to mobilise the people in the rural districts and to change the attitudes of the general public and the decision-makers... and to improve national rural policies'.
<i>Aim/objectives of HSSL</i>	The mission of HSSL is to coordinate and unite the voice of rural areas in order to be able to influence politics. The RP is a manifestation of the HSSL movement, providing a place to catch-up on the latest regarding what is going on, a place to expose current issues to the authorities, the Government and the National Parliament. It is also a forum for exchanging experiences and a source for inspiration.
<i>How is HSSL structured?</i>	Run by a board of 14, elected from the membership. National head office in Stockholm with a staff of 5-7 people, plus project managers. Also has 24 county networks and 100 municipal networks, some with their own staff.
<i>How was the RP initiated?</i>	The National Civic Movements Committee initiated a major project in 1988 to collect the views of rural people. The scrolls containing the views were presented to the political parties and the Minister of Industrial Affairs promised that the Government would try the ideas listed in the scrolls. The first RP saw 650 delegates get together to discuss the content of the scrolls and a decision was taken that HSSL should continue.
<i>Who organises the Rural Parliament (RP) (Landsbygdsriksdagen) and how do they do it?</i>	Co-organisers are the selected HSSL county network, the municipality selected for the meeting and the Swedish Rural Network. Partners are national and regional agencies and other parties that are actively involved in running the Parliament and that support the event financially. In organising an RP, an Executive Committee (10 people), project group (10 people) and 8-10 working groups (of 8-10 people) are formed.

<i>Who are the participants?</i>	4,700 village action groups and 40 rural NGO organisations are members of HSSL. Invitations to the RP are sent to all local development groups, NGOs, the Government, the Parliament, county administrative boards and municipalities. The number of participants in the RP varies but is usually 1,000, of which 70-100 are international.
<i>How often does the RP meet?</i>	Every 2 years, for 3-4 days (11 RPs since 1989)
<i>How is the RP financed?</i>	The average cost of an RP is EURO 700,000. Funding comes from All Sweden Shall Live, different regional bodies, the Swedish Board of Agriculture, the Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth and participant fees. Banks, businesses and NGOs contribute as well. EU programmes (including LEADER) are also possibilities for help with financing.
<i>Format of the RP meeting?</i>	Focused on a particular theme (e.g. cooperation across generations, youth, rural services, energy etc) which is decided by the Executive Committee. The event includes political speeches, an introductory speaker, exhibitions, a speaker's corner, plenary sessions, workshops and field visits. A booklet style report is produced following the RP and the event is evaluated by delegates (with questionnaires for national and international delegates) and by the Executive Committee.
<i>What is reported to have changed as a result of the RP?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increase in the number of local development groups from 1,000-4,700, many of which are inter-political and work across interest borders. - The identify of the village movement has been strengthened and creates an 'us' that is working towards a common goal - Stimulated the development of All Sweden Shall Live county boards - Worked with NGOs to coordinate a common stance in various important political questions - RP helps lift the spirit of people in rural communities; they are better informed and are given a chance to display their work and inspire themselves/others - Local influence on politics has increased and politicians pay more attention to local development groups - Status of rural issues has increased e.g. a national Rural Programme was accepted by the national Parliament in the mid-2000s and the Delegation for Sparsely Populated Rural Areas was incorporated into the regular national administration by becoming a National Agency/board. - The Swedish Ministry of Agriculture changed its name to the Ministry of Rural Issues in October 2010. - The number of Ministers and MPs attending the RP has increased - Holding RPs makes All Sweden Shall Live known to the public in a way that could not have been done in any other way. - The Swedish RP has inspired other countries to hold similar events⁷.

⁷ EU (nd f); Halhead (2005); Bond, S., Strömberg, U., Jillsmo, L., Wenström, K. and Folkesson, B. (2011); World Bank (nd a; nd b; nd c).

2.3 The Rural Parliament in The Netherlands

PlattelandsParlement (PP)



<i>Population</i>	16,612,213 (2010)
<i>Rural population</i>	2,840,688 / 17% (2010)
<i>When was the PlattelandsParlement (PP) established?</i>	2005
<i>Why was PP established?</i>	The PP was established to raise the voice of the inhabitants of rural areas, at a time of concern that interest and money was focused on the cities and politicians were not well-informed about the problems and possibilities in rural areas.
<i>Aim/objectives of the PP</i>	The PP creates an opportunity for all rural inhabitants to make direct contact with politicians and policymakers. The agenda is made by the rural inhabitants not the politicians. The objectives for all PP's held to date are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To give an opportunity for rural people to raise issues through direct contact with policymakers and politicians - To give an opportunity to influence national policy - To exchange information between active people in rural areas and to inspire each other with good results - To give an opportunity to meet each other and to network.
<i>How is LVKK structured?</i>	The National Organisation for Small Villages (Landelijke Vereniging voor Kleine Kernen, LVKK) is the main organiser of the PP. The LVKK exists to give information on the trends in rural areas to the national level, to influence the policy of the national government, to exchange knowledge and good experience, and to find solutions for problems.
<i>How was the PP initiated?</i>	The idea for the PP was directly imported from Sweden. LVKK representatives visited the Swedish Rural Parliament and subsequently decided to organise such an event in the Netherlands. The LVKK is well connected with both NGOs in small villages in the Netherlands and with the national government. They wanted to let the voice of rural people be heard and show the politicians that rural people have great possibilities to solve challenges on their own, facilitated by Government. The national Department of Agriculture also stated in a report that contact between citizens and the Government needed to be improved and that the distance between citizens and the Government was too wide with new

	efforts needed to make a new contract between citizens and the Government.
<i>Who organises the PP and how do they do it?</i>	The LVKK is the main organiser of the PP, in collaboration with other organisations, including KNHM (part of a company which historically cultivated large areas of the Netherlands) and 'Netwerk Platteland', a network of all organisations involved in rural development. An Advisory Committee and a Working Group (WG) each of three persons (with one individual representing each co-organiser) are formed. The WG manages the event and decides on the themes. Maintaining the same way of organising the event each time has helped as the individuals involved have come to know one another well.
<i>Who are the participants?</i>	All 1500 village NGOs are invited as are politicians and some policymakers. In the run-up to the event, the organisers issue a newsletter which summarises the results of the last PP and what has been achieved since and introduces the theme for the next PP. A meeting is also held with the Committee of Agriculture of the national Parliament to talk about the results of the previous PP and the themes of the next event. A newsletter is also issued after the event which includes reports from all of the groups, the recommendations from the event and the statements made by politicians. Everyone is allowed to participate in the PP and participants are there as a person living in a rural area, not as a delegate from a village or organisation. Approx. 300 participants have attended the PPs held to date. More professionals and less village representatives are now attending the PP. The organisers are concerned that this may result in the voice of rural inhabitants being taken over by these participants.
<i>How often does the PP meet?</i>	Every 2 years (2005, 2007 and 2009 – the most recent PP was scheduled for October 2011). The event is one day (10am – 4pm), followed by regular, ongoing contact with politicians and policy-makers.
<i>How is the RP financed?</i>	The PP event has become cheaper each time it is held: EURO 340,000 in 2005, EURO 170,000 in 2009 and a planned budget of EURO 160,000 in 2011. Half of the funding comes from the Ministry of Agriculture and the other half comes from RABO-Bank (historically the cooperative bank of the farmers which is still strong in rural areas) and KNHM. Participants do not pay to attend the PP, they just cover their own travel costs. The event is always in the centre of the Netherlands (with the exception of the October 2011 event which was held in The Hague) at the same location so that it is easy for all people to attend (invitations from southern municipalities to host have been turned down as this would increase the travel time and cost for people living in the north).
<i>Format of the RP meeting?</i>	The PP starts with a plenary session discussing the results of the previous PP. Discussion is then focused around key themes (e.g. population change, village-level renewable energy developments) which are discussed by groups of people, led by 'experts' (the WG discusses the format of these discussion sessions in advance and decides on the experts to invite). The groups produce statements and recommendations to the politicians (including the Chair of the national Parliament and the Minister for Agriculture). The day ends with a plenary session with politicians. During lunchtime, participants can talk directly with a politician for 5-7 minutes to raise issues relevant to their region. In 2009, good practice case studies formed the basis for discussion. Using good practice examples gives much better energy, refers to possibilities and shows the expertise of people in the villages.

	<p>For all 3 previous events, the host has been a well-known Dutch TV presenter.</p> <p>For the 2011 event, the organisers planned more pre-event work, whereby experts study four designated themes in advance of the day and identify improvements and solutions in relation to that theme. At the event, the experts will present proposals for each theme which are then discussed with recommendations offered to the chair of the national Parliament.</p>
<p><i>What is reported to have changed as a result of the RP?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Since 2008, many of the organisations for small villages in the Province have organised a 'Province Plattelands Parlement' in the years between the PP, focussing on similar themes. - A key recommendation from the 2005 PP was a test for all new policy on the special effect for rural areas. - The organisers feel that politicians realise the effects of their measures on rural areas and sometimes make special rules for rural areas. In some cases politicians ask LVKK for advice when they work on new laws. - The media has picked up on some of the themes of the PP in stories, and also more often ask for the LVKK's vision. - Discussion at the first PP was shaped by the frustrations of rural people about the policies and attitudes of politicians. This led to quite negatively phrased recommendations. At the second PP meeting, more emphasis was placed on dialogue and more time was given to talking about good practice and the conditions required for good experiences. The organisers felt that there was much better energy when people showed the politicians good results and what can be achieved with some facilitation from government. The organisers believe that people feel strengthened by seeing and drawing upon what others have achieved. - Evaluation work from the event has confirmed that participants are generally satisfied with the content of the event, but would like to see more concrete output to policy-makers and politicians, continuing and ongoing dialogue after the event (which the organisers have taken on board by organising meetings with the Committee of Agriculture of the Dutch Parliament and with individual MPs) and better monitoring after the event⁸.

⁸ Data contained in this 'key facts' summary is drawn from: EU (nd d); Halhead (2005); Mirck (2011); World Bank (nd a; nd b; nd c).

2.4 The Rural Parliament in Estonia

Kodukant and MAAPÄEV



http://www.kodukant.ee/index.php?id=&news_id=103103 (in English)

<http://www.kodukant.ee/> (in Estonian)

<i>Population</i>	1,339,646
<i>Rural population</i>	408,592 / 31%
<i>When was Kodukant established?</i>	First Rural Parliament of Estonian Villages (MAAPÄEV) took place in 1996, Kodukant was established in: 1997
<i>Why was Kodukant established?</i>	Kodukant is an association of NGOs (approximately 5000 people) and aims to support rural communities and their local initiatives to create, support, and maintain networks on different levels (from local to international) and to influence rural policies, opening up the view of and needs of small rural communities to policy-makers.
<i>Aims/objectives of Kodukant and MAAPÄEV</i>	The Rural Parliament plays a role in setting the overall strategic direction for village movement organisations and making links with the membership and Government. The long term aim of the Rural Parliament is to evaluate the achievements of rural people and Kodukant, to discuss the development needs for the next period, to make suggestions to the Estonian Parliament, ministers and local governments about rural development. It aims to facilitate a common discussion of rural development issues and to raise awareness of, and seek solutions to, issues facing rural development. This is distinguished from shorter term 'objectives', the topics of which vary dependent upon Kodukant strategy.
<i>How is Kodukant structured?</i>	<i>Kodukant</i> is structured at 3 levels: 1 National Association made up of the County Associations. 15 independent County Associations (one in each Estonian county) and 5 other NGOs.
<i>How was the RP initiated?</i>	Post-independence, partnership and learning from Sweden informed gatherings at county level. Grassroots organising led to the election of a Council (with a representative of each county) which formed and registered Kodukant.
<i>Who organises the RP and how do they do it?</i>	Organisation of the MAPPÄEV is mainly the responsibility of the County Association of the county in which the event takes place which applies to and is supported by Kodukant and the Board of Kodukant to do so. Representatives of County Government help with opening and receptions, representatives of Local Authorities assist with receptions in the villages and municipalities.
<i>Who are the participants in the RP and the wider</i>	Kodukant is composed of 15 County Associations, and 5 additional NGOs. MAAPÄEV capacity is generally 400 – 450. This might typically include: 20 representatives from membership organisations;

<i>rural movement</i>	approximately 60 guests from Estonia including members of Parliament, Ministers and officers from different ministries, LA and county government representatives, partners, funders, and other NGO leaders; 40 – 60 foreign guests (international partners, rural organisations outwith Estonia and experts in the field of rural development); around 300 from the counties and 30 – 70 volunteers. The Parliament plays an important role in setting overall strategic direction and making links with the membership and Government. Equal representation from all counties.
<i>How often does the RP meet?</i>	Every two years nationally, over three days.
<i>How is the RP financed?</i>	Recently, the average cost has been approximately EURO 60,000 – EURO 65,000. Sources of funding include The European Commission, European Parliament, (DG AGRI and DG INFO), Estonian Ministry of Agriculture, Estonian Rural Economy Research Centre, Estonian Civil Society Foundation, Open Estonia Foundation, county governments, associations of local governments, and sponsors/local entrepreneurs. Meetings of the Rural Parliament of Estonian Villages are sponsored by the Estonian Village Movement Kodukant and must also be financially supported by the County Association concerned.
<i>What is the format of the RP?</i>	The meeting runs over three days, with shorter first and last days. The meetings are organised around themes, which are proposed by the board on the basis of discussion with members, These ideas are then discussed with members and finalised. The Parliament event includes themed workshops, each of which have a key speaker and moderator, who summarise the discussion and prepare input for the declaration. Emphasis is on responses at three levels: what can we (as local villagers) do? What can be done in cooperation with the local authorities, and what do we need to ask for from Government and Parliament? It is important to identify challenges and experiences, but also potential steps to solve problem. This results in a declaration being distilled by the moderator and a lead member of the Kodukant from the workshop feedback, presented back to the Rural Parliament, and passed to the Board and subsequently decision-makers.
<i>What is reported to have changed as a result of the Rural Parliament</i>	<i>For rural communities:</i> the opportunity to exchange experience and best practice (as well as ideas that didn't work), stimulating ideas, training, and social capital. <i>For rural policy influences:</i> After event, all ministers, MPs etc are given booklets with the decisions of the Rural Parliament, with subsequent meetings to introduce them and outline potential means to address. Fund for rural communities lobbied for and successfully won. Strengthened relationship with and influence on policy and practice at all geographical levels including opportunity to inform SAPPARD and monitor Ministry of Agriculture legislating. International networking and profile-raising. Role in supporting the development of the Estonian third sector. <i>Social change:</i> awareness raising, political engagement between policymakers and citizens, particular emphasis on engaging young people ⁹ .

⁹ Data contained in this 'key facts' summary is drawn from: EU (nd a); Halhead, V. (2005); Kodukant (2009); Kodukant (2011); Vinni, S. (2011); World Bank (nd a; nd b; nd c).

2.5 The Rural Parliament in Slovakia

VIPA (Vldiecky PARlament)



<http://www.vipa.sk/> (in Slovakian)

<i>Population</i>	5,433,456
<i>Rural population</i>	2,347,253 / 43%
<i>When was VIPA established?</i>	2000 (informal platform) 2001 (VIPA NGO established).
<i>Why was VIPA established?</i>	To improve the quality of life of people living in the rural areas of Slovakia, in a sustainable way. It also aims to strengthen civil society at local level. To this end, it has created a network across Slovakia and disseminates information about and for rural areas; promotes exchange of knowledge and experience; formulates common interests and lobbies for these; and co-ordinates approaches to rural development.
<i>Aims/objectives of VIPA</i>	The vision of VIPA is that 'by 2015 the Slovak countryside should be an area with a clean and healthy environment, with a technical and social infrastructure, which provides enough employment opportunities and favourable conditions for small and medium businesses, based on the sustainable use of natural resources, such as farming and forestry, agro- and eco-tourism, crafts and using modern technology to create the highest added value. Development of the Slovak countryside will be built on good cooperation among different sectors and the educated and active inhabitants, who have an interest in public affairs and respect for their ancestors and traditions'. VIPA's mission is 'to promote quality of life in rural areas and to support rural initiatives in the management of rural development'. It's 'priorities' are 'advocacy, education, promotion of public relations, international cooperation, environmental protection, regional development support, equality of opportunities and network cooperation'.
<i>How is VIPA structured?</i>	VIPA was established as a result of seeking to develop a recognised NGO entity which would be able to act as a formal structure to lead the organisation of a Rural Parliament Forum. The highest authority of VIPA is the general assembly which meets every year, who are individuals, municipalities, micro-regions and organisations at all levels. Every three years the president and presidency are elected. The presidency is composed of 14 members and manages the activities of VIPA. There are also seven regional Rural Parliaments post 2002. About 89 individual, municipality, micro-region and organisational members at all scales. VIPA is a network of many independent associations at local, regional and national levels who work in a co-ordinated way. The Rural Parliament Forum operates as a partnership, with member organisations hosting it and providing an administrative function. VIPA has a regional structure to help coordinate activities from central to regional level, and to work with regional government. VIPA also operates 30 Communication centres and information points at regional and local level each with a trained

	facilitator (funded by the EU's Special Preparatory Programme).
<i>How was the RP initiated?</i>	The Rural Parliament was developed in collaboration between individuals and communities following interaction with Sweden.
<i>Who organises the RP and how do they do it?</i>	Every two years, the event takes place in a different Slovakian region, selected and organised by the VIPA presidency in conjunction with LAGs, alongside working groups of VIPA members and partners (including organisational, PR, communications, etc). The theme and subthemes are also proposed by the Presidency of VIPA on the basis of member, partner organisation and societal needs. Partners include the Slovakian Environmental Agency, The Association of Village Renewal, Cultural and Tourism offices of the Slovakian government, and various NGOs.
<i>Who are the participants in the Rural Parliament?</i>	All organisations that work for rural areas – public, private and civil, including organisations at the national and regional level, including government agencies and NGOs.
<i>How often does the RP meet?</i>	Every two years, with approximately 100 participants.
<i>How is the RP financed?</i>	Multi sourced, drawing on grants, subsidies, project funding, own resources (VIPA), sponsorship (from local partners where the Rural Parliament Forum will take place), financial donations by local partners and participant fees. The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development of the Slovak Republic also partly contributes to the event. It is difficult to estimate the cost as much of the work is done on a voluntary basis. During its first 3 years, EURO 50,000-75,000 were spent. At present the Parliament has a low funding level comprising EURO 17,000 for the core costs of the central secretariat, low membership fees and project funds for specific projects. The cost of the event is approximately EURO 20,000 but the costs paid by VIPA are approximately EURO 6,000 to EURO 8,000 due to donations, sponsors and voluntary activities.
<i>What is the format of the RP meeting?</i>	The event lasts for 2 days, opening with a plenary session providing a summary of previous forum and the status of passed resolutions. Workshops/working groups are then formed, which visit positive examples of a particular aspect of rural development, receive introduction to the topic by 'lecturers', and then undertake an interactive lecture/discussion which conclude, the following day, with proposal of resolutions to the Rural Parliament Forum. In addition, in the evening of day one there is a cultural programme and informal socialising, and throughout the two days there are accompanying cultural and historical exhibitions regarding the local region.
<i>What is reported to have changed as a result of the RP?</i>	Through VIPA, the Rural Parliament Forum has the capacity to feed in to policy and programming formulation and implementation at the national level (Committees of the Government; National Council of the Slovak Republic), and EU level. Also feeds in to European Rural Network. VIPA also facilitates the Day of The Countryside at the National Council of the Slovak Republic in cooperation with the Slovak Environment Agency and the National Council of the Slovak Republic, the Women Leader Awards (with the Rural Organisation for Community Activities), public awareness and education including seminars and publications ¹⁰ .

¹⁰ Data contained in this 'key facts' summary is drawn from: Behanovska, M. (2011); EU (nd e); Halhead, V. (2005); World Bank (nd a); World Bank (nd b); World Bank (nd c).

	Finnish populations in rural areas) coordinate the event itself.
<i>How was the RP initiated?</i>	The first 'Rural Parliament' regarding the Swedish speaking Finnish population took place in 1990, developed by researchers, and involving 120 participants representing study circles and NGOs, co-organised by a union of municipalities with Swedish speaking populations. A key decision by this parliament was to establish village action groups, and to establish a rural parliament on the basis of these. A partnership between the Swedish Study Centre and the municipalities took place in 1994, named the Swedish Village Service,
<i>Who organises the RP and how do they do it?</i>	In collaboration between the Swedish Village Service (addressing programme planning) and the regional office of the host region (of which there are five, generally addressing the more practical components of arranging). Working groups and the division of labour tend to be quite informal.
<i>Who are the participants in the wider movement and the RP?</i>	Participants from village councils and associations, wider NGOs, project workers, representatives of the municipalities. It is noted that an ongoing trend is the increasing participation of project workers rather than unpaid/volunteers. The aim is over 100 participants, generally reached, but has been as low as 50.
<i>How often does the RP meet?</i>	Once every two years, a two day event.
<i>How is the RP financed?</i>	'Partly ad hoc and partly a fixed model'. The Swedish Village Services (supported by the 'Swedish Study Centre') contributes EURO 3000, but there is still a shortfall. The local organisers make up this shortfall as far as possible, through applying to foundations; using project money; tourism initiatives may contribute, along with the municipality and private sector. The newsletter is financed through advertising.
<i>What is the format of the RP meeting?</i>	Run over two days. It is opened with a formal ceremony, and contributions from the municipality and guests. Keynote speakers contribute on both days. The Rural Parliament is divided into working groups, with different themes which match to the keynote speakers. Other participatory methods are also used, including 'bee hive'; 'open space' and interactive panels. Time for networking is an important part of the event, which is facilitated by a cultural evening on day one. Excursions to successful projects were part of the programme but have been removed due to low levels of participation. An output is a joint statement from all participants to highlight the message from the Rural Parliament.
<i>What is reported to have changed as a result of the RP?</i>	A key aim is to influence decision-makers and to set the agenda, but this is difficult to evaluate. <i>Decision-makers</i> do get a better understanding of rural questions. In terms of the <i>participants</i> themselves, they become enthusiastic and learn new ways to work. Networking is facilitated. The <i>organising groups</i> benefit more than the Swedish Village Service, in that they gain significant publicity and credit on the basis of the event. ¹¹

¹¹ Data contained in this 'key facts' summary is drawn from: Backa, P. (2011); EU (nd b); Halhead, V. (2005); World Bank (nd a; nd b; nd c).

2.7 The Rural Parliament in Hungary (HRP)



<http://www.ruralnet.hu/> (in Hungarian)

<i>Population</i>	10,008,703
<i>Rural population</i>	3,172,759 / 32%
<i>When was the Hungarian Rural Parliament Association established?</i>	1998
<i>Why was the Association established?</i>	Established in Hungary (7 years before the country joined the EU) to give a voice to rural society. It also aimed to build up rural policy in Hungary (including introducing the LEADER approach during the pre-accession period), to serve as a communication and information channel for rural actors, and to advocate for rural sustainability.
<i>What are the aims and objectives of the Association?</i>	The aim is to ensure that rural civil society has a voice. The objectives are: capacity development; info-networking; policy discussion; and international networking.
<i>How is the Hungarian Rural Parliament (HRP) and wider rural movement structured?</i>	The Association is made up of rural civil society organisations. Organising the Parliament is one of the activities of the Association. The Association has a President and board members.
<i>How was the HRP initiated?</i>	The RP was initiated by 12 national civil society organisations.
<i>Who organises the HRP and how do they do it?</i>	The events are organised by the RP Association. There are no permanent staff. The member associations work together on given projects (500 membership organisation and local action groups).
<i>Who are the participants?</i>	The stakeholders of the RP Association are civil organisations. There is a network of 500 sustainable rural initiatives (NGOs), working across international, national, regional and local levels, with connections with 1500 villages and small towns (50% of the municipalities). Between 70 and 400 people attend each RP meeting, depending on the interests of rural people. Both NGOs and civil/local organisations attend the RP. Politicians attend and make presentations at the RP event.
<i>How often does the HRP meet?</i>	National event twice a year; regional events once every 2 years
<i>How is the HRP</i>	The RP Association has no financial subsidy. Six to seven years

<i>financed?</i>	ago support was received from abroad, but this did not continue.
<i>What is the format of the HRP meeting?</i>	The RP takes the form of a 'big conference' with plenary sessions and thematic working groups. There are also exhibitions, films and site visits.
<i>What is reported to have changed as a result of the HRP?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hungary introduced a national Leader programme before the EU Leader programme was introduced. • The RP Association has participated in the preparation of numerous political decisions concerning agriculture and rural development, and took part in the initial working phases of the national development plans and programs. • The RP Association is a member of the Hungarian National Rural Network (HNRN) and of the monitoring committee, etc. • Hungary is one of the founders of the Partnership for Rural Europe Network (PREPARE)¹².

¹² Data contained in this 'key facts' summary is drawn from: EU (nd c); World Bank (nd); World Bank (nd); World Bank (nd).

2.8 Conclusions: key characteristics of Rural Parliaments

The final part of this section briefly summarises the key characteristics of the Rural Parliaments described, drawing out their key similarities and differences.

- *Rural population of the country*

The percentage of the population of each country which can be categorised as 'rural', according to World Bank figures, ranges from 15% to 43%. Scotland sits towards the lower end of this range (18%¹³).

- *When was the Rural Parliament established?*

It is important to note that the Rural Parliaments studied are all part of wider rural movements to some degree, although the characteristics of those rural movements do vary between countries¹⁴. While the rural movements tend to have been established from the 1980s onwards, the Rural Parliaments tend to have been established from the 1990s onwards.

- *Why was the Rural Parliament established?*

Wider rural movements tend to have been established to 'give voice' to rural populations of the country, to influence policy and practice and to develop networks between those in rural areas (individuals and groups). Particular drivers for the movement to be established at that point include the joining of the EU, economic depression, challenging demographic structures, or a shift in political regime. The Rural Parliament is often positioned as providing a particular focal point for engagement with policy-makers, and for developing the strategic direction of the wider rural movement.

- *What were the aims and objectives of the rural movement?*

Stated aims and objectives of the rural movements of which the Rural Parliament is part, tend to focus on a number of key themes. In addition to the motivations for the establishment of the rural movement identified above (for example engaging with policy-makers to influence local, regional and national policy, and networking), these include: to increase rural quality of life; to promote sustainable rural development; and to share best practice experiences of overcoming shared challenges.

- *How is the Rural Parliament and wider rural movement structured?*

It appears that the Rural Parliament is generally open to all interested parties. Some Rural Parliament meetings are more characterised by NGO representatives while others have a stronger representation of grassroots participants. The national rural movements of which the Rural Parliament tends to be part often operate as coordinators of regional and local movements, composed of varying mixtures of individuals and NGOs.

- *How was the Rural Parliament initiated?*

The rural movements themselves appear often to have been developed in a 'grassroots' rather than 'top down' manner, with key actors being individuals, alongside both smaller and larger NGOs. Whilst support and engagement from national and local government appears important in sustaining Rural Parliaments and ensuring messages are articulated in a

¹³ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/359320/0121431.pdf>.

¹⁴ Some 'rural movements' appear more characterised by ongoing action and representation, whilst others appear to perform a more administrative function in-between Rural Parliaments.

meaningful way, it appears that government has rarely played a part in initiating the rural movement, and Rural Parliament, at first.

- *What is the role of national and local government in the Rural Parliaments?*

There is some variation between the Rural Parliaments in terms of the role played by national and local governments. In some instances, the national government was centrally involved in setting up the Rural Parliament (such as Sweden and Estonia). Interestingly, one interviewee commented that, in his opinion, these were also the most successful and bottom-up Rural Parliaments. In other cases, the national government was not involved from the outset, and the Parliament emerged solely from a grassroots movement (such as Finland).

It is usually the case that representatives of local government in the host region are involved in the planning and organisation of the Rural Parliament event. In addition, some interviewees noted the increasing significance of the regional layer of governance (such as in Finland) and the importance of engaging that layer of governance in the Rural Parliament event and subsequent activities.

- *Who organises the Rural Parliament and how do they do it?*

It appears to generally be the case that the wider (usually national level) rural movement organisations support local member organisations to run the Rural Parliament, with the host organisation and locality changing each year the Rural Parliament takes place (the recent Rural Parliament in the Netherlands - held in The Hague - is an exception to this).

- *Who are the participants?*

Participants in the Rural Parliaments include individuals living in rural areas, smaller and larger NGOs, members of the wider rural movement organisation, representatives of local authorities, guest speakers (academic, international, or professional in background), policy-makers and politicians. The balance of representation across these different groups varies between the Rural Parliaments, with some placing greater emphasis on NGO and organisational representation, while others place focus on maximising the number of individual, 'grass-roots' participants. The size of Rural Parliament meetings varies from 100 to 1000 delegates, with the majority falling between 100 and 450.

- *How often does the Rural Parliament meet?*

Once established, it appears to be universally the case that Rural Parliaments meet on a biennial basis. This appears to ensure that organisational tasks remain manageable, that sufficient time elapses to make progress on aims and objectives, and that meetings are sufficiently frequent to ensure that momentum is maintained.

- *How is the Rural Parliament financed?*

Finance for the Rural Parliaments is drawn from multiple sources across the public, private and third sectors. These include the wider rural movement of which the Rural Parliament is part, the national government, the local/municipal government, local/national businesses, grants, donations, membership fees, delegate fees and as part of wider programmes of work by the local level organising body. Through the association of the Rural Parliament with raising the profile of the host region, additional funds can be leveraged through culture and tourism resources from the public sector, for example.

- *What is the format of the Rural Parliament meeting?*

Rural Parliaments generally last for two to three days (the Netherlands is an exception with the meeting only lasting one day), containing a mix of workshops (organised thematically), presentations/addresses, seminars, exhibitions, showcasing of best practice projects from local communities across the country, local cultural activities (generally paired with networking and including local food, music, dancing etc), and field visits to local case-study projects.

- *What is reported to have changed as a result of the Rural Parliament?*

The information presented in this chapter highlights the range of outputs and outcomes that are reported to have emerged from the Rural Parliaments.

In terms of outputs, many of the Rural Parliaments present a statement or report following the event to influence policy and practice. Often these statements are directly aimed at politicians and/or policy-makers, to encourage them to take rural issues into account in the formation of a new policy, for example. These statements often represent the distillation of the key themes emerging from discussions at the Parliament meeting.

Outcomes from the Rural Parliaments are more challenging to robustly measure and describe on the basis of the available evidence, however outcomes appear diverse. In terms of participants it is asserted that good practice is shared, inspiration gained, networks developed and sense of empowerment increased (through contact with decision-makers, and the articulation of outputs from the Parliaments in documents passed to decision-makers). It is also reported that the capacity of representatives of the wider rural movements to routinely inform policy through consultation is increased, and opportunities to meet with and present to decision-makers are more frequent. In addition, it is suggested that politicians themselves benefit from direct contact with their electorate, whilst the Rural Parliament itself can also act as an opportunity to assess progress and develop future strategic direction. The subsequent development of further civil society organisations is reported, with all of these outcomes in addition to those highlighted above, including the social, economic and cultural benefits to the region hosting the Rural Parliament.

3. Thematic analysis: what has worked well and what lessons can be learnt from the existing Rural Parliaments?

3.1 Introduction

This section of the report presents the findings from the interviews carried out with key informants from the six Rural Parliaments and the wider European rural movement. This section therefore reports the views of these stakeholders, rather than an evaluation of these statements. The findings are presented thematically, tackling five key questions, which aim to establish what has worked well in the Rural Parliaments and what have been the key lessons learned.

3.2 Why a Rural Parliament?

Here, discussion with interviewees focussed on why a Rural Parliament was felt to be a particularly appropriate model of governance, relative to other less formal community organising. A number of key themes emerged on this point:

- *Rural Parliaments as part of wider movements*

As highlighted in the preceding 'key facts' section, Rural Parliaments generally appear to sit within a broader 'rural movement'. Often the Rural Parliament provided an opportunity for all stakeholders in the rural movement to group together and discuss the direction, goals and priorities of the rural movement, and to engage with policy-makers to discuss concerns and priorities. In the case of the Swedish-speaking Rural Parliament in Finland, this emerged from the identification of the need for such an event through study groups. The Rural Parliament is therefore an important event in each country, but it sits firmly within the broader context of rural development activities.

- *Rural Parliaments as politically high profile*

A number of interviewees emphasised the strong relationships that the rural movement had developed with decision-makers at the national level. Whilst interviewees highlighted the importance of sustained engagement with these individuals in-between the Parliaments, the Parliaments provided a particularly powerful focal point for residents of rural areas and their representative bodies to directly engage with decision-makers, and for politicians themselves to gain a 'first hand' experience of the current challenges and opportunities in rural areas. The very name 'parliament' is seen to emphasise the relevance of the event to policy- and decision-makers and for some was employed to encourage participants to see the event as distinct from seminars/conferences. Equally, however, there was also some resistance to the term 'Parliament' given its particularly formal connotations. Some preferred to link the word to the French 'parlez', and emphasised the importance of conversation, linking and networking, rather than purely decision making.

- *Rural Parliaments positioned as an 'equal' forum, identifying actions for all*

Rural Parliaments were seen as being particularly effective at providing a platform which gives equal voice to all participants, often allowing a single summary document to be collaboratively produced, identifying key themes, issues, and actions emerging. Whilst Rural Parliaments have the capacity to identify key actions for policy-makers to take in order to address challenges faced by those in rural areas, they can also allow for all participants to identify actions required at all levels. For example, not only what is required of policy-makers, but also what can be done by participants themselves, and what might be required by those at Local Authority level, as well as national level. In addition, Rural Parliaments

function at the national level. This therefore allows a particularly diverse range of experiences to be shared and networks to be developed.

- *What would rural representation look like without a Rural Parliament?*

The key difference identified here was the lack of a direct link between individuals/organisations and decision-makers. The opportunity to draw on direct experience from the perspective of those involved was emphasised. In addition, it may be challenging for individuals across the country to network and learn from each other at a single event in the absence of a Rural Parliament. Finally, it was also suggested that debates and policy initiatives may remain too 'general' were it not for Rural Parliaments, which can provide a focus to illustrate the particular challenges and opportunities faced in rural areas.

3.3 How can everyone be represented in a Rural Parliament?

This section briefly explores the responses received when discussing the question of representation in the Rural Parliaments.

- *Balancing diversity with articulating 'one rural voice'*

How best to ensure that Rural Parliaments are representative of rural areas was discussed within the interviews. It was generally accepted by interviewees that it was not possible to claim that the Rural Parliaments could be truly representative of a single 'rural', with the diversity of the challenges and opportunities experienced in rural areas within each nation recognised, and valued. To the extent that articulating 'one rural voice' was seen as possible, this was achieved through the synthesis of the key discussion points which emerged through the course of a Rural Parliament into a single summary document for articulation to policy/decision-maker audiences. This was reported as sometimes being challenging, in terms of achieving a balance between producing a document to which all could agree yet maintaining a strong message.

Approaches to ensuring balanced representation vary. For some Rural Parliaments, it appears that all are free to attend with no restrictions (such as the Netherlands). For others, however, there are more structured attempts to ensure the representativeness of participants, which is linked to the organisational structure of the wider rural movement within which the Rural Parliament sits (see following point) or to the nature of governance more generally in the country (for example including representatives from village, municipality, and national levels). By way of illustration, the Rural Parliament in Swedish-speaking Finland has recently introduced moves to invite specific individuals and groups to aid representation from the village, municipality and regional levels. In Estonia, a more strategic approach is taken to ensuring representation at the Rural Parliament. Membership of (the national level rural movement) Kodukant is composed, in part, of 15 local county level organisations, which represent rural areas and organisations at the more local level. Each of these is allocated 20 places in the Rural Parliament, with each county organisation selecting its own delegates. The delegation is expected to include representatives from: the Local Action Group; young people; the Local Authority; entrepreneurs and NGOs. Attendance is voluntary. Other individuals and groups are invited to the Rural Parliament, such as membership organisations, members of Parliament and Ministers to ensure all groups are well represented. This Rural Parliament also seeks equal representation from all counties.

- *Do Rural Parliaments involve those who wouldn't otherwise participate?*

It was suggested that Rural Parliaments may provide the opportunity for individuals without sufficient time or resources to contribute regularly to addressing rural development issues (for example, through action groups which may require larger amounts of voluntary commitment) to engage in a less resource intensive but still meaningful way. Respondents generally recognised that those who became involved with Rural Parliaments were those who were likely to be also involved with other forms of social/political participation. This is as distinct from engaging those who wouldn't necessarily be politically engaged in other ways. Nevertheless, the role of these individuals acting as catalysts - or 'sparks' - for action in their local community was emphasised, and the value of the Rural Parliament for generating and sustaining new ideas and enthusiasm highlighted.

Attempts were made to engage those who would not normally get involved, however. For example, some Rural Parliaments have had specific sections organised for younger people. Others have organised seminars which run at the same time and location as the Rural Parliament to encourage those who might not be attracted to the Rural Parliament specifically to attend the venue and perhaps be engaged with the Rural Parliament whilst there.

- *How are participants in the Rural Parliament continuously involved between meetings?*

Given that Rural Parliaments are often a component of a wider rural movement, the general activities of these movements are generally reported to sustain involvement between Parliaments. These include ongoing support, training, conferences and workshops. The activities of the wider rural movement such as development projects and networking also play a role. Printed/electronic newsletters and general communications are important here. In terms of continuing to influence politicians/decision-makers, several interviewees reflected on the ongoing role of the rural movement in informing rural policy and providing consultation responses. For example, VIPA of Slovakia also organise two 'Rural Days' per year which take place at the National Council of Slovakia to specifically engage policymakers in the needs of rural areas.

- *Involving politicians and decision-makers*

The capacity of politicians/decision-makers to travel to more rural areas is sometimes limited, and therefore one Rural Parliament (the Netherlands) was held in the national Parliament for the first time this year in order to encourage the participation of this segment; in short, the Rural Parliament was brought to the politicians/policy-makers. In addition, it was also emphasised by some that the Local Authority level of governance is fundamentally important in terms of representation. Those who had failed to engage with this level from the outset highlighted this as something that they would consider doing differently if they were able.

The outputs from Rural Parliaments, such as reports and statements, are usually directed at politicians and decision-makers to inform the direction of a particular decision or a new policy statement, for example. Involving these key individuals in the Rural Parliament event itself, and the build-up to and follow-up from the event, can assist in developing closer relationships to enable this influencing to happen in a positive manner. It can also help to ensure that the messages from the Rural Parliament are quickly translated into actions. Some also produce newsletters as a means to maintaining contact with stakeholders.

More broadly, a key outcome from Rural Parliaments discussed by many interviewees is the increased capacity, confidence and empowerment of representatives of the rural movement

in carrying out such influencing and in developing strong, long-term networks and working relationships with politicians and decision-makers.

3.4 What has worked well?

This section outlines those areas reported by interviewees to be key successes in the development of Rural Parliaments.

- *Diversity of participants and themes*

The bringing together of individuals from diverse backgrounds (including practitioners, NGOs, representatives of the private sector, local and national decision-makers, academics and specialists from outwith the country) was seen as a key ingredient to vibrant and constructive discussion. This is in addition to the diverse activities and themes discussed at the Rural Parliaments. The significance of the less formal components of the event was highlighted including the cultural events and networking these facilitated. Some interviewees specifically commented that the cultural events create an important and positive sense of 'celebration' at the Rural Parliament events.

- *Direct debates and discussion*

The capacity to engage with and/or convey findings to decision-makers is particularly significant. This is with respect to both the value of such events for decision-makers, and also for instilling a sense of empowerment amongst participants. Generally it has been reported that there has been an increasing amount of interest from decision-makers and politicians in engaging with the Rural Parliaments. It has also been suggested that there has been an increase in paid workers rather than volunteers attending the meetings (which brings both challenges and benefits). Finally, some also highlighted the value of direct debates and discussion between community members, to allow for the addressing of challenges and sharing of good practice.

- *Collaborative organisation*

The value of the organisation of the Rural Parliament by bodies other than the national government appears significant. This allows the Parliament to be seen as unbiased, independent and for the use of and benefit of those in rural areas. Maintaining consistency in terms of the organisers helps to ensure that good working relationships develop between the partners (although the flexibility to involve new partners as new issues arise should not be lost).

Such multi-scalar collaboration across national and local bodies also allows for the articulation of messages from a particularly broad range of stakeholders, and for the shaping of the format and themes of the Rural Parliaments in a collaborative way amongst stakeholders. Equally, the inclusion of high profile 'ambassadors' (such as popular musical, cultural or sports personalities) may play a role in gaining publicity, raising the profile of the event and linking the Rural Parliament with the media. There are also inherent challenges in working collaboratively, however, outlined in section 3.5.

- *Benefits to host region*

In addition to the perceived benefits of the Rural Parliament itself outlined above, respondents also emphasised the significance of the hosting of the Rural Parliament to the local area. All Rural Parliaments reviewed rotate the hosting of the event to a different location every two years (with the exception of the Netherlands), as identified in Section 2. A

strong component of the Rural Parliament is the cultural activities, which allow the host region to raise its profile nationally, and share local produce, culture and tradition. Excursions to demonstrations of successful initiatives of relevance to the topics of the Rural Parliament also allow for the 'showcasing' of local best practice examples.

- *Wider political influence*

Whilst the aims and objectives cited in Section 2 were generally reported to have been met to varying degrees, a particularly key outcome which has followed on from the Rural Parliaments for some has been the reported increase in attention paid to rural issues amongst decision-makers at the local, national and EU scales. In addition, it was also mentioned that the Rural Parliament has the capacity to influence the direction of research and evidence gathering, as well as policy and practice.

3.5 How have conflicts and tensions been addressed?

This section briefly examines the conflicts and tensions reported by interviewees in the course of establishing the Rural Parliaments in their country, and the paths they have taken to negotiate these.

- *Presenting 'one rural voice'*

A number of Rural Parliaments produce a document on the basis of the event, which seeks to draw together the key messages of the event for policy-makers. This is a synthesis of the themes which have emerged throughout the event. The process of distilling these into a message with which everyone agrees can be challenging, as this falls to a small number of the organisers to coordinate. The approach taken by the Estonian Rural Parliament, having found it challenging to identify the key messages in a collaborative way, has been to invite participants to vote for the proposals which they feel are most important. Whilst there may be distinctions between villages and regions in terms of their priorities, it is felt that the outcomes fed back to policymakers are of sufficient breadth to allow for their tailoring to local contexts.

- *Funding*

Funding appeared to be drawn from a diverse mix of sources. It was highlighted that where these were from organisations (public, third, and particularly private) it was important to ensure that all were aware of the motivations of the organisation for the sponsoring of the event. It is important that the Rural Parliaments are politically unbiased, are neutral, and are perceived to be so. It is also important to emphasise that funding was successfully sought across public, private and third sectors and is clearly fundamentally important to the continued development of the Rural Parliaments however. In addition, it has been suggested that a lack of funding – particularly in the current economic climate – may mean increased competition between organisations to secure financial support. Co-ordination and partnership working was positioned as very important to the continued financial support. Finally, it was also suggested that it can be challenging to retain experienced workers as part of the Rural Parliaments, as they can often find better pay outwith the NGO sector.

- *Maintaining a high profile*

Whilst it was generally not considered a challenge to maintain involvement of stakeholders in-between the Rural Parliaments (indeed, for some it was important to emphasise that Rural Parliaments were in themselves two year processes), once the concept of a Rural Parliament had become normalised, it was sometimes a challenge to maintain press

interest. This has been maintained with reference to the ‘ambassadors’ highlighted above, and by seeking to engage with ‘hot topics’ of contemporary relevance as themes for each of the Parliaments.

- *Remaining clear about the purposes of the Rural Parliament*

Whilst the co-organising and co-funding of the Parliaments was seen as an important asset, it also meant that there could sometimes be competing views regarding the role of, and direction for, the Parliament. This appears to be particularly likely once the Rural Parliament has been established for some time. Dialogue between stakeholders is very important in ensuring that the Rural Parliament does not lose focus with regard to its aims and objectives.

3.6 What are the key lessons to learn from existing Rural Parliaments

The final part of section three discusses the key pieces of advice the interviewees wished to convey to both a Government seeking to establish a Rural Parliament, and also to other rural movements looking to establish a Rural Parliament. Section 4 then concludes by reflecting on the findings of the report for the establishing of a Rural Parliament in Scotland.

- *Contextually-sensitive Rural Parliament development*

There appears no ‘one size fits all’ model of Rural Parliament development and it is important to take into account the national and regional history and culture of participation, as well as institutional and governance landscape.

- *The role for government in supporting the establishment of a Rural Parliament*

It is clear on the basis of interviews that, whilst governmental engagement with, and support for, the establishment of a Rural Parliament is very important, it is not advisable for the government to lead such a parliament, but to do so in collaboration and cooperation with others. It appears very important for an initial event – perhaps a Rural Parliament – to be held in order to discuss what such a Parliament should or could look like as an exercise to which all stakeholders might contribute. The emphasis from interviewees with regard to the development of Rural Parliaments has been the importance of a ‘bottom-up’, ‘grassroots’ approach to development. This is not to suggest, however, that a Rural Parliament *must* be initiated *only* by communities, individuals and NGOs, but that the nature of its establishment is likely to influence its trajectory and how it is perceived by others.

- *Involve all stakeholders from the beginning of development*

To ensure that the Rural Parliament is understood as inclusive, it is critical to include all those who could be seen as stakeholders from the earliest possible opportunity. These could include residents of rural areas, community groups, charities, development agencies, civil servants, politicians and other individuals with an interest in rural areas, including perhaps those who have retired from professional jobs in the rural sector. These could be from the local, national and international levels. It is particularly interesting to note the comments of one interviewee who suggested that the term ‘umbrella’ with reference to the Rural Parliament should be avoided, instead preferring ‘hub’, so as to emphasise the contribution that everyone can make.

- *Draw on existing knowledge and networks*

There appears a great willingness to share experiences and knowledge from all those participants involved in this study with regard to the successes and challenges faced in

establishing and sustaining a Rural Parliament. This has been accompanied with a strong suggestion that it is important to develop international networks of learning and practice between Rural Parliaments. In addition, the role of particularly well established Rural Parliaments (such as Sweden) in acting as catalysts and mentors for the subsequent development of such events in other countries has been highlighted particularly strongly.

- *Be clear about the aims and objectives of the Rural Parliament*

It was emphasised that it is important to be clear from the outset about *why* the Rural Parliament is being established, *what* are the key issues it is seeking to address, and *who* is to be included in the Rural Parliament. This should shape the nature and direction of the Parliament. It was also emphasised that rules, roles and responsibilities both of the Parliament and also the wider rural movement should be clear.

4. What are the implications for establishing a Rural Parliament in Scotland?

4.1 Introduction

The final section of this report builds on the preceding information and analysis, and the knowledge of the report authors about the institutional infrastructure in rural Scotland, to draw out the key implications for establishing a Rural Parliament in Scotland. Nine key factors are highlighted as being particularly important.

4.2 Building on existing knowledge and experience

The idea of a Rural Parliament in Scotland is not new, and there is much existing information, knowledge and experience that can usefully inform current discussions. A national Rural Forum existed in Scotland during the 1980s and 1990s, and alongside this, there was a regional Highlands and Islands Forum. In the early 1990s, work was put into establishing a Scottish Community Network as a successor to Rural Forum.

In 2007, a report was undertaken for the Scottish Consumer Council on 'Rural advocacy in Scotland'¹⁵, which contained a recommendation that a 'grass-roots-based representative network of rural community groups' be established in Scotland. The report also recommended that the network has a regional dimension to enable it to engage more flexibly and effectively with decision-makers. This recommendation was supported at the time by both the Minister and by rural communities. In 2009, the Scottish Government organised the Rural Gathering in Perth, which involved Scottish Ministers and the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs as well as organisations working in rural Scotland and community representatives.

Involving individuals from these organisations/reports in future discussions about establishing a Rural Parliament in Scotland would help to ensure that lessons are learned about the successes and challenges faced in these previous initiatives¹⁶.

4.3 The commitment of the Scottish Government

Based on the evidence from reports and interviews reviewed in this project, the commitment of the Scottish Government to taking forward proposals for a Rural Parliament is an important condition for success, but it is not sufficient in and of itself. For example, the commitment and support of the Government was critical in Sweden and Estonia but it was not available in Finland from the outset. The commitment is particularly vital for ensuring that the Rural Parliament is well resourced, and that recommendations emanating from discussions at the Parliament are acted upon. Translating the messages from the Rural Parliament into actions early on will ensure that participants see outputs being transformed into outcomes, demonstrating Government commitment to engaging with the voices of those living, working and operating in rural areas of Scotland.

¹⁵ This report is available online at: <http://www.ini.smo.uhi.ac.uk/projects/Rural%20Advocacy%20Research.pdf>. A summary report is also available at: <http://www.ruralgateway.org.uk/en/node/171>.

¹⁶ For example, Vanessa Halhead who is active in the European rural movement and has attended several Rural Parliaments across Europe, was centrally involved in this earlier work and has expressed her willingness to engage in future discussions.

However, most key informants also stressed that equally, if not more, important than a Government commitment is drive and engagement from the grassroots level. A Rural Parliament cannot be imposed from the top-down. One interviewee commented that the Rural Parliaments that in their opinion have been the most effective are bottom-up and strongly “in the domain of communities” (for example, Sweden and Estonia). Rural Parliaments in some other countries are less bottom-up (e.g. Slovakia) and tend to be more dominated by NGO representatives. Although Scotland does not have an existing rural movement (see Section 4.4), considerable commitment and enthusiasm was shown from the grassroots with respect to earlier initiatives, as described in Section 4.2.

It also appears important to consider the role that the Local Authority tier of governance might play in contributing to a Rural Parliament. Whilst more local-scale levels of governance were highlighted as being significant in the organisation of the Rural Parliaments elsewhere, an important recommendation gained in the course of interviews was that regional governance had become increasingly significant (for example in Finland), and was therefore of great value to engage with as part of the decision making process.

Interviewees noted that a financial commitment from the Government can be critical to ‘match’ a political will. Funding levels for existing Rural Parliaments vary, with the Estonian Rural Parliament being one which is reported as highly successful on a more limited budget than the Swedish Rural Parliament, for example. Funding may be available from elsewhere to match Government funding, including the Local Authority in the area in which the Parliament will be held, charitable foundations and NGOs more generally, as well as, the Rural Development Programme. The private sector - including companies such as BP or the Co-operative which designate some money for ‘corporate social responsibility’ type activity of which a Rural Parliament might be an example - may also be potential sources of financial support.

4.4 A Rural Parliament embedded within an existing rural movement

In all of the countries studied, the Rural Parliament is embedded to a greater or lesser extent within a wider rural movement. The Rural Parliaments were initiated by this existing rural movement (in most cases made up of village/local level associations), which tends to have strong links with the municipal layer of local government. This wider movement provides an important backdrop to the Rural Parliament event, without which interviewees felt that the impact of the event would be much more limited.

Such a movement does not exist in Scotland, and Community Councils which are generally regarded as the local level layer of democratic governance could be seen as relatively weak. However, there are an increasing number of community organisations and development trusts (focused around land and other asset ownership, for example), although these are not present everywhere in rural Scotland. Scotland also has a diverse NGO landscape many of which have different boundaries both in terms of jurisdiction and geography. That is not to say that hosting a Rural Parliament event, which focused on engaging from the bottom-up, would not be worthwhile, nor indeed beneficial. However, stakeholder engagement, both in the event itself, and in the build-up, and follow-on, to the event, is critical.

Scotland will need to decide how best to ensure that representatives of local communities are included in the Rural Parliament, without such a movement already being in existence. Interviewees who were knowledgeable about the Scottish political and institutional context noted that, while they may have their limitations, existing structures should not be ignored, and a first meeting of the Rural Parliament in Scotland could bring together a range of existing local-level organisations to discuss how best to ensure local-level grassroots engagement in the initiative going forward. These organisations might include LEADER

groups, Community Councils, Local Development Trusts (including, for example, community land or woodland trusts) and Community Planning Partnerships in rural Local Authorities. Moreover, organisations that exist to represent certain types of community groups might also be included, such as Community Energy Scotland, Community Land Scotland and Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations.

For example, the Highlands and Islands Forum operated one particular 'participative' approach to ensuring that the key messages were transferred between the regional and local levels through the use of representatives for designated 'districts' within the Highlands and Islands. The individuals were selected to represent a cross-section of society in each district and were trusted individuals who could take messages to and from regular community conferences, in particular through working groups held at local level.

Other local organisations could also be engaged at the start, including sports, music, theatre, youth, older peoples' and cultural groups. In Sweden it was commented that some local groups started with a relatively narrow focus (e.g. music or sport) but then expanded to take on broader, more holistic local development roles. Representatives from both Sweden and Finland suggested that this could be an option in Scotland. Other key local actors in rural areas in Scotland may also need to be engaged, including farmers and private estates.

4.5 Maintaining dialogue towards and between Rural Parliament events

Review of the literature and interviews with key informants suggest there are two key ways in which dialogue between Rural Parliament events appears particularly critical.

First, it appears important that in the time (up to 18 months) preceding an event, all stakeholders are engaged in discussion about the key issues to be covered at the event. The Rural Parliament therefore serves as the culmination of this thorough and open dialogue where actions relating to the issues are discussed, agreed and taken forward to the politicians and policy-makers. This is where the presence of an existing rural movement is particularly helpful. A decision will therefore need to be taken in Scotland as to how this dialogue can be managed without such a movement in place. The dialogue process should be kept simple and brief and should not be too formalised (for example, in the sense of a formal consultation). NGOs (of which there are many in Scotland) could be used as intermediaries to connect to the grassroots level, although careful consideration will be required as to how this can be most effectively achieved.

Second, it appears important that frequent contact is maintained with politicians and policy-makers between the Rural Parliament events. Again, this process is made easier by the presence of an existing rural movement.

However, there may be other channels already in existence to enable this dialogue to continue¹⁷. Regular, periodic reporting to rural policy analysts in Scottish Government could also be appropriate, and to politicians through the Scottish Parliament's Rural Affairs, Climate Change and Environment Committee (and other Committees, such as those covering transport, enterprise or housing issues, as appropriate). Further, it may be important to consider updating policy analysts in other sections of Government, for example health, empowerment and renewal, transport, third sector, digital connectivity, since themes proposed by the Rural Parliament may be of significance to these sectors of policy, or require cross-sectoral working to be most effectively addressed.

¹⁷ One such channel is the Cross Party Group in the Rural Parliament on Rural Policy. SAC provides the Secretariat for this Group and updates on Rural Parliament activities could be regular items on the agenda.

Finally, many interviewees noted that maintaining press interest in the event and the ongoing work between events is important. However a considered decision would need to be taken about press involvement during the event itself (for example, with the press invited to some parts of the event only).

4.6 Format of Rural Parliament events

The number of participants at the Rural Parliaments reviewed in this study varies, with the majority falling between 100 and 450. It would therefore seem sensible to suggest an initial Rural Parliament in Scotland might seek to engage approximately 300 delegates. This would seem to be an ideal number, ensuring adequate representation, but not being too big so as to be unwieldy. Given the diversity of rural Scotland, the Estonian model of representation per county or region may be worth examining, to ensure that all parts of rural Scotland are invited to be represented. A two-day event is felt to be best to allow participants plenty of time for networking over two nights.

A key message conveyed by several interviewees was the importance of ensuring that the Rural Parliament is a positive and dynamic ‘celebration’ of, and ‘shop-window’ for rural life. If it is held in a rural location, the host region can use the event as a showcase for its produce, culture, music, traditions etc. Indeed, this is one of the key benefits of having the event in a rural area, and it shows the government that rural areas are active in ‘doing things for themselves’. This allows for both celebration of the strengths of rural areas, as well as space for discussion of challenges in the course of the Rural Parliament.

At the same time, there are important logistical considerations to take into account, including the cost for people to attend from across the country, and the availability of a suitable venue. There may also be some benefit to having the Rural Parliament event within a nationally significant building, such as the Scottish Parliament. This would be highly symbolic in taking the event into the ‘heart of government’ and might encourage politicians to take the event more seriously. Equally however, there may be a danger of the event becoming lost in other Parliamentary activity and of it being seen as rather top-down. In any case, it might be especially important that the Rural Parliament had a ‘strapline’ to explain that it is different from a national Parliament.

4.7 Focussing on success stories

Key informants in Sweden, the Netherlands and Estonia emphasised the importance of highlighting ‘best practice’ or success stories through the Rural Parliament. If there could be some way to systematise these examples so that best practice processes can be identified, this could be an important progression from otherwise disparate case studies. One interviewee mentioned a website in his country which contains examples of best practice projects which can be searched by other community groups wishing to undertake similar work. It might be worth considering such a website in Scotland, or building on existing web information, such as that available through the Scotland National Rural Network website.

4.8 Learning from other countries

A number of Rural Parliaments (including the Netherlands) were established as a direct consequence of a visit to the Swedish Rural Parliament by Dutch representatives. Information has also been exchanged between the Swedish Rural Parliament and Rural Parliaments (or discussions leading up to Rural Parliaments) in Estonia, Lithuania, Hungary,

Slovenia, Slovakia, Germany and Bosnia. These examples illustrate the importance of learning from countries that already have Rural Parliaments. Several key informants interviewed for this study expressed their willingness to assist Scotland in taking the proposals forward, and some individuals stated that they would be keen to come to Scotland to discuss the idea further with key stakeholders, including the Scottish Government. Such an event involving international representatives could be organised as part of an existing series of events, such as the Rural Scotland in Focus debates organised by SAC¹⁸ or 'The Gathering' events organised annually by SCVO. The European Rural Community Association (ERCA) could also be engaged in this event. The authors understand that a similar event has been held recently in Germany and that a decision has been taken on the basis of discussions at this event to go ahead with setting up a Rural Parliament.

Closer to home, lessons could also be learnt from the UK context, by reviewing experiences in Wales with the Welsh Rural Forum, with the Irish Rural Link and with the Rural Community Network in Northern Ireland.

At the same time as drawing ideas and information from elsewhere, it was also acknowledged by interviewees that all Rural Parliaments are unique and have different atmospheres which fit their national contexts, culture, history, etc. While lessons can be shared between Rural Parliaments, they will all be different in terms of the issues they focus on and the approaches taken to address them.

4.9 Engaging key individuals as ambassadors for the Rural Parliament

A key message to emerge from several Rural Parliaments (including Sweden and the Netherlands), is the usefulness of engaging well-known individuals in driving the process forward, and in raising awareness of the event itself. In other countries, Prime Ministers have contributed to the Rural Parliaments, demonstrating buy-in from high-level decision-makers. There may therefore be a place for the First Minister to do so in a Scottish context.

In addition or alternatively, however, these may also be TV, sports, music, or cultural personalities (for example), or former politicians who have an interest, or live in, rural Scotland. While the former may encourage 'popular' interest in the Rural Parliament, the latter are likely to be particularly helpful in securing political and policy interest and engagement in the Rural Parliament.

4.10 Taking time but having the confidence to proceed

The process of establishing a Rural Parliament will take considerable time and careful thought. All interviewees in this project expressed their willingness to assist Scotland in the process of setting up a Rural Parliament. They also conveyed a unanimous belief that, despite the differences between Scotland and the countries studied for this report (particularly in terms of local level governance), a Rural Parliament can be established in Scotland. What is critical is that all key stakeholders and players exhibit long-term commitment to the Rural Parliament and that they all feel included and engaged from the outset, with discussions not dominated by one sector/group.

¹⁸ See: <http://www.sac.ac.uk/ruralpolicycentre/news/pastevents/> for information on recent Rural Scotland in Focus Debates.

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