



The Moorland Association

The Moorland Association response to the Labour Rural Research Group call for evidence on the future of the rural economy

Active Upland Management: A Locally Led Model for Rural Growth, Resilience and Environmental Delivery

Submitted: 5 May 2026

I. Introduction

The Moorland Association represents owners and managers of heather moorland across England and Wales. Our members are responsible for more than one million acres of upland landscapes, including heather moorland, blanket bog, rough grazing, in-bye land, woodland and watercourses. These landscapes contain a high proportion of nationally and internationally designated sites and support rural employment, biodiversity conservation, carbon storage, water regulation, wildfire mitigation, managed public access and private investment in land management.

England's uplands are not empty landscapes. They are working rural places, supporting employment, small businesses, tourism, conservation, carbon storage, water regulation, public access, wildfire resilience and cultural identity. Their future depends on keeping skilled people economically active on the land and ensuring that policy recognises the practical realities of managing remote, fragile and highly designated landscapes.

The central lesson from the uplands is that rural growth and environmental recovery cannot be delivered by remote prescription alone. They require locally accountable delivery, clear outcomes, practical knowledge, long-term private investment and viable land-based enterprises. Gamekeepers, shepherds, farmers, contractors, estate staff and rural businesses are not peripheral to environmental delivery; they are the delivery capacity.

This is why the Moorland Association welcomes the Labour Rural Research Group's focus on the future of the rural economy to 2040. Upland communities illustrate many of the issues LRRG has already identified: weak infrastructure, limited labour markets, high transport costs, housing pressure, service withdrawal, rural crime, poor connectivity and hidden economic fragility. These pressures are compounded by regulatory uncertainty and by policy approaches that too often separate nature recovery from the people and businesses needed to deliver it.

A future rural economy strategy should therefore treat active upland management as rural economic infrastructure. Moorland management supports year-round employment, practical skills, local contracting, hospitality, tourism and conservation activity in some of England's most remote communities. It also brings private investment into outcomes that government wants but cannot fund entirely itself: habitat management, peatland restoration, wildfire mitigation, legal predator management where necessary to support vulnerable ground-nesting birds, access maintenance, biodiversity monitoring and landscape-scale stewardship.

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The scale of this contribution is significant. In England, grouse moor management creates around 42,500 work days a year and is responsible for over 1,500 full-time posts, including around 700 directly involved in grouse moor management and a further 820 in related services and industries. It is worth approximately £67.7 million a year to England's economy. Estates in England and Wales have also been cited as spending around £52.5 million each year on grouse moor management, much of which flows into local employment, contractors, conservation activity and rural supply chains.

The risk is that well-intentioned policy undermines the very capacity it needs. If land-based enterprises become commercially unviable, skilled workers leave, local supply chains contract and management capability is lost. The result is not necessarily better environmental outcomes. In many cases, it means higher future costs for the public purse, greater reliance on short-term project funding, weaker local accountability and reduced resilience to threats such as wildfire, invasive species and biodiversity decline.

The Moorland Association's submission is therefore based on a simple proposition:

The uplands can make a major contribution to rural growth, environmental recovery and national resilience, but only if policy keeps people, skills, businesses and decision-making rooted in the landscapes they are expected to sustain.

For LRRG, the question is not whether the uplands should change. They already are changing, and they will be asked to deliver more by 2040. The question is whether that change is shaped through locally led, outcome-focused and economically viable land management, or through centralised processes that risk displacing rural livelihoods without securing better results for nature, climate or communities.

2. Executive summary

England's uplands are working landscapes. They support rural jobs, small businesses, tourism, conservation, carbon storage, water regulation, public access, wildfire resilience and cultural identity. Their contribution to the rural economy is therefore wider than sporting activity alone. Moorland management provides the practical people, skills, infrastructure and private investment needed to sustain some of England's most remote and economically fragile communities.

The Moorland Association welcomes the Labour Rural Research Group's call for evidence on the future of the rural economy to 2040. The uplands illustrate many of the issues already identified in LRRG's previous work: higher costs, weaker infrastructure, poor connectivity, limited transport, housing constraints, thin labour markets, rural crime and service withdrawal. These pressures are particularly acute for land-based enterprises operating across large, remote and highly regulated landscapes.

Our central argument is that rural growth, environmental recovery and resilience are interdependent. The uplands cannot deliver biodiversity, carbon, water, access and wildfire mitigation if the businesses and people responsible for active management are made economically

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unviable. Gamekeepers, farmers, shepherds, contractors, estate staff and rural trades are not incidental to nature recovery; they are the local delivery capacity.

A future rural economy strategy should therefore recognise active upland management as rural economic infrastructure. Moorland enterprises sustain employment, training, local supply chains, hospitality, tourism and conservation work in areas where alternative economic opportunities are often limited. They also bring significant private investment into public goods, reducing reliance on the public purse and supporting outcomes that government cannot deliver alone.

The available figures underline this point. Grouse moor management in England supports over 1,500 full-time posts, creates 42,500 work days a year and contributes around £67.7 million annually to the economy. These are not abstract figures: they represent keepers, contractors, hospitality businesses, rural trades, accommodation providers, game dealers, transport operators and seasonal workers in some of the country's most remote communities.

The main risk to the upland rural economy is not environmental ambition. Moorland managers support nature recovery, peatland restoration, species conservation, clean water, public access and climate resilience. The risk is that policy pursues these objectives through centralised, process-heavy and restrictive approaches that weaken the local businesses and skills base needed to deliver them in practice. If economic activity is removed from the land, environmental management does not become cost-free; it becomes more dependent on public funding, external delivery bodies and short-term projects.

The Moorland Association therefore urges LRRG to recommend a model of upland policy based on local delivery, clear outcomes, adaptive management and economic viability. Rural communities should not be treated merely as consultees in decisions made elsewhere. Land managers, farmers, commoners where relevant, and local authority representatives should have the central decision-making role in locally led upland delivery, supported by Fire and Rescue Services, rural businesses, local communities, Natural England, the Environment Agency and other relevant bodies as advisers, consultees or delivery partners.

The submission makes the following key points:

1. **The uplands are an economic asset, not an empty policy space.**

Moorland management supports direct employment and a wider network of small and micro-businesses, including contractors, hospitality, accommodation, transport, machinery, rural trades and tourism. In England, grouse moor management creates around 42,500 work days a year, supports over 1,500 full-time posts and contributes approximately £67.7 million annually to the economy.

2. **Environmental delivery depends on viable land-based enterprises.**

Biodiversity recovery, peatland management, wildfire mitigation, access, water regulation and habitat conservation require people with practical knowledge, equipment and a long-term presence on the land.

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3. **The rural penalty is also a business penalty.**
Poor transport, high fuel costs, weak broadband, limited mobile signal, sparse services and long distances increase the cost of doing business in upland areas and reduce productivity.
4. **Policy should support private investment in public goods.**
Moorland owners and managers invest in habitat management, conservation, wildfire prevention, access and rural employment. Government should crowd in this investment, not displace it through uncertainty or inflexible regulation.
5. **Environmental markets must strengthen working landscapes.**
Carbon, biodiversity and nature recovery schemes should support local employment, long-term stewardship and measurable outcomes. They should not incentivise absentee ownership, land-use withdrawal or the displacement of existing rural livelihoods.
6. **Wildfire resilience should be treated as economic resilience.**
Upland vegetation management, including cutting and controlled burning where appropriate, access routes, local staff, water points, equipment and collaboration with Fire and Rescue Services are essential resilience infrastructure. Policy should support evidence-led risk management rather than blanket assumptions.
7. **The upland workforce is a strategic asset.**
Gamekeepers, land managers, shepherds, contractors and rural workers hold place-specific skills that cannot be replaced quickly. Rural skills, apprenticeships and housing policy should recognise their importance.
8. **Locally led delivery is essential.**
LRRG should recommend piloting locally led Upland Economy and Environment Boards, with decision-making membership drawn from land managers, farmers, commoners where relevant, and local authority representatives. Natural England, the Environment Agency, Fire and Rescue Services, National Park or National Landscape bodies, rural businesses, local communities and independent scientific advisers should support the boards as advisers or consultees. The aim should be to align economic growth, nature recovery and resilience around locally agreed outcomes while keeping accountability rooted in the landscapes concerned.

In summary, the Moorland Association believes the Government's rural economy strategy should be built on a simple principle:

Rural growth and environmental recovery will be strongest where policy keeps people, skills, investment and decision-making rooted in the landscapes they are expected to sustain.

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The uplands can make a major contribution to national growth, climate resilience, nature recovery and rural opportunity by 2040. But that contribution will only be secured if active management is recognised as part of the solution, not treated as a barrier to it.

Response to Question 1: productivity, growth and rural economic activity

The uplands make a distinctive and often under-recognised contribution to rural productivity and growth. Their economic value is not limited to conventional measures of output, nor to sporting activity alone. Moorland management sustains employment, small businesses, tourism, hospitality, environmental delivery, access, wildfire resilience, water regulation and long-term private investment in some of England's most remote communities.

This contribution is measurable. Moorland Association figures show that grouse moor management in England creates around 42,500 work days each year, supports over 1,500 full-time posts and contributes approximately £67.7 million annually to the economy. Around 700 posts are directly involved in grouse moor management, with a further 820 supported in related services and industries.

In many upland areas, economic activity and environmental delivery are inseparable. The same people, equipment and infrastructure that support moorland businesses also deliver practical conservation and resilience work: maintaining tracks, managing vegetation, restoring peat, controlling invasive species, reducing wildfire risk, monitoring wildlife, repairing walls and grips, supporting grazing systems and protecting access. This means that upland productivity should be understood not only in terms of market income, but also in terms of delivery capacity.

The rural economy strategy to 2040 should therefore recognise that active upland management is a form of productive rural infrastructure. Gamekeepers, shepherds, farmers, contractors, estate staff and local rural businesses are the people who keep these landscapes functioning. If those jobs and enterprises are lost, the practical capacity to deliver biodiversity, carbon, water, fire prevention and access outcomes is also weakened. In many cases, that capacity would then have to be recreated through public funding, short-term project delivery or external organisations, often at greater cost and with weaker local accountability.

Moorland management also supports a wider rural supply chain. A managed grouse moor does not operate in isolation. It supports local contractors, fencing businesses, wallers, builders, machinery suppliers, mechanics, vehicle services, vets, feed suppliers, accommodation providers, pubs, hotels, caterers, transport providers, game dealers and tourism businesses. These are often small and micro-businesses operating in places where alternative markets are limited. The loss of moorland activity can therefore have an effect well beyond a single estate or landholding.

This economic role is reinforced by private investment in land management. Estates in England and Wales have been cited as spending around £52.5 million each year on grouse moor management. That expenditure supports employment, practical conservation, habitat management, access infrastructure, wildfire mitigation, machinery, buildings and local contractors. It is private money flowing into rural delivery capacity in places where public provision is often thin.

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This is particularly important because upland areas often face limited employment opportunities, sparse populations, poor connectivity and long travel distances. In those circumstances, even relatively small amounts of sustained local expenditure can be significant. Moorland management provides year-round employment and seasonal work, while also supporting associated spending during the shooting season and throughout the wider management year. The value lies not only in direct jobs, but in maintaining a dispersed rural business ecosystem.

The Moorland Association believes that rural productivity policy too often overlooks this type of economic activity because it is place-based, dispersed and linked to land management rather than urban-style business growth. However, for remote rural communities, this is exactly the kind of economic activity that matters: rooted locally, dependent on practical skills, connected to natural capital and capable of sustaining wider public goods.

A central challenge for the uplands is that policy can unintentionally weaken productive capacity by treating land management primarily as a regulatory risk rather than as an economic and environmental asset. Restrictions, delays, uncertainty and inconsistent decision-making can reduce confidence to invest. Where businesses cannot plan, they are less likely to employ, train, maintain infrastructure or commit private capital to long-term environmental management. The result is lower productivity, weaker resilience and greater dependence on public intervention.

This is why any rural economy strategy should avoid separating economic policy from environmental policy. In the uplands, the two must be designed together. Nature recovery, peatland restoration, clean water, carbon storage and wildfire mitigation require viable businesses and skilled people on the land. Equally, future upland growth will increasingly depend on the ability of land-based enterprises to deliver recognised environmental and resilience outcomes alongside traditional rural economic activity.

The MA therefore recommends that LRRG should urge government to:

1. recognise active upland management as rural economic infrastructure within any future Rural Strategy;
2. measure upland productivity in terms of employment, local supply chains, private investment, environmental delivery and resilience, not only conventional output;
3. ensure Defra, Treasury, Natural England and local growth policy assess the economic consequences of land-use and environmental decisions in remote upland communities;
4. support long-term private investment in moorland management, conservation, access and wildfire resilience;
5. ensure environmental schemes fund ongoing management and skilled labour, not only capital works, consultancy, plan-writing or short-term restoration projects;
6. include upland businesses, gamekeepers, land managers and rural contractors in rural growth, skills and productivity programmes;
7. develop locally led upland delivery models that align economic growth, nature recovery and resilience around measurable outcomes.

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Response to Question 2: small and micro-businesses, entrepreneurship and access to finance

Small and micro-businesses are central to the upland rural economy. Moorland management does not operate as a single isolated land use. It supports a network of local enterprises, sole traders, contractors, family businesses and seasonal workers whose viability often depends on continued investment in active land management.

A managed moor creates demand across a broad local supply chain. This includes fencing contractors, dry-stone wallers, builders, joiners, plumbers, electricians, machinery suppliers, mechanics, vehicle services, vets, feed merchants, game dealers, caterers, pubs, hotels, accommodation providers, transport operators, rural accountants, ecologists, surveyors and environmental contractors. Many of these businesses are small, locally rooted and highly exposed to changes in land management policy or estate investment.

The economic significance of moorland management therefore extends well beyond the boundary of the moor itself. When an upland estate invests in habitat management, access tracks, buildings, vehicles, staff, grazing, peatland work or sporting activity, that expenditure circulates through the local rural economy. Conversely, when regulatory uncertainty, poor policy design or loss of business confidence reduces that investment, the impact is felt by the self-employed contractor, the village pub, the local garage, the fencing team, the seasonal worker, the hotel and the young person seeking practical outdoor work.

This is especially important in upland communities because alternative markets are often limited. Small rural businesses face higher costs, longer travel distances, smaller customer bases, weaker broadband, poorer mobile connectivity and more limited access to training, finance and professional services. For many of them, land-based enterprises are not simply one customer among many; they are anchor clients that help sustain year-round trading.

The wider shooting economy illustrates the scale of these supply-chain effects. Recent sector analysis cited by the MA reports that shooting supports 172,700 FTE jobs across the UK, including 152,200 in England, and generates £3.3 billion in GVA. Shooters are also reported to spend £4.4 billion annually on the UK-based supply chain. While these figures cover shooting as a whole rather than grouse moor management alone, they demonstrate the breadth of businesses connected to land-based sporting activity, from hospitality and accommodation to equipment, vehicles, food, clothing, professional services and rural trades.

The Moorland Association believes that rural business policy should pay more attention to these anchor relationships. A moorland enterprise may be the organising hub for a wider rural business ecosystem. It brings together land management, hospitality, tourism, environmental work, rural trades and seasonal employment. Its viability can determine whether other small businesses have enough demand to remain active in remote places.

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Access to finance is also a challenge. Small upland businesses and contractors often need to invest in vehicles, machinery, tools, trailers, kennels, storage, safety equipment, digital systems and staff training. These investments are made more difficult by uncertainty in the policy environment. Where future land management rules, environmental scheme requirements or permitted activities are unclear, businesses become less confident about borrowing, hiring or expanding.

Environmental markets and public grant schemes could help address this, but only if they are designed around delivery on the ground. Too often, funding is absorbed by project development, consultancy, administration and complex application processes before any practical work is undertaken. Small and micro-businesses frequently lack the capacity to navigate these systems, even though they may be the very people best placed to deliver the work.

The same problem applies to entrepreneurship. Upland areas have opportunities for new rural enterprise in habitat management, wildfire resilience, nature recovery, venison and game processing, rural tourism, access management, ecological monitoring, education, heritage, low-impact recreation and practical conservation. But these opportunities will not be realised if policy displaces existing enterprises, imposes excessive administrative costs, or channels funding only through large organisations with dedicated bid-writing capacity.

A future rural economy strategy should therefore ensure that environmental and economic policy actively supports small and micro-businesses in the uplands. That means simplifying access to schemes, recognising local supply chains, funding practical delivery, and designing finance mechanisms that are accessible to smaller rural operators rather than only to large institutions or consultancy-led partnerships.

The MA also believes that government should avoid assuming that all rural diversification is equally viable everywhere. In remote upland areas, businesses often operate across harsh terrain, seasonal markets and long distances from large populations. Diversification into tourism, environmental delivery or recreation can be valuable, but it should be additional to, not a forced replacement for, existing land-based enterprises. A resilient rural economy depends on a mix of income streams, not the removal of one established sector in the hope that another will appear.

The MA therefore recommends that LRRG should urge government to:

1. recognise moorland enterprises as anchor businesses within remote rural economies;
2. assess the wider supply-chain impact of land-use and environmental policy decisions;
3. ensure rural business support is accessible to small contractors, sole traders and family businesses, not only larger organisations;
4. simplify grant and finance schemes so that practical rural businesses can participate without disproportionate administrative burden;
5. direct a greater share of environmental funding toward delivery, skilled labour and local contractors rather than only plan-writing and project administration;
6. support investment in equipment, training and business resilience for upland contractors and land-based enterprises;

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7. design environmental markets so they strengthen local employment and small-business opportunity;
8. recognise sporting, conservation, tourism and land-management activity as interconnected parts of the upland business ecosystem;
9. avoid policy changes that unintentionally remove anchor enterprises from remote communities without a credible replacement for the jobs, supply chains and investment they sustain.

Response to Question 3: business-related tax environment

The business-related tax environment has a direct bearing on the future of the upland rural economy. Tax policy influences whether land-based enterprises can reinvest, employ, diversify, plan for succession and continue delivering the public goods expected of them. In remote upland areas, where margins are often fragile and management costs are high, poorly designed tax policy can have consequences far beyond the individual business concerned.

The central question is not simply how much revenue can be raised from rural land and rural businesses. It is how the tax system affects the flow of private investment into rural employment, conservation, wildfire prevention, infrastructure, housing, skills and long-term stewardship. If tax policy discourages active management, accelerates fragmentation, or pushes businesses toward short-term asset disposal, the result may be a weaker rural economy and higher future costs for the public purse.

Moorland enterprises are long-term businesses. They invest across decades in staff, buildings, access routes, habitat management, peatland work, predator control, machinery, vehicles, walls, tracks, water infrastructure, public access, sporting infrastructure and local supply chains. Many of these investments do not produce immediate commercial returns, but they are essential to maintaining the landscape and supporting wider public goods. A stable and predictable tax environment is therefore vital.

Inheritance and succession policy are particularly important. Upland businesses often combine farming, sporting, environmental, residential, tourism and heritage assets. They may be asset-rich but cash-poor, with high fixed costs and limited liquidity. If succession tax treatment does not recognise the operational nature of these businesses, it can force sales, fragmentation or reductions in management activity. That may weaken local employment, reduce continuity of stewardship and disrupt long-standing relationships with contractors, tenants, commoners and communities.

The MA's concern is not to argue for special treatment, but for policy that understands the practical economics of remote land-based enterprise. A moorland estate is not simply a passive asset. It is often an operating rural business and an environmental delivery platform. Where tax policy treats it only as wealth-holding, it risks undermining the very activity government relies on to deliver nature recovery, wildfire resilience, carbon storage, public access and rural employment.

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The same principle applies to diversification. Upland businesses are increasingly encouraged to diversify into tourism, accommodation, environmental services, carbon, biodiversity, renewable energy, education, access and recreation. Diversification can strengthen resilience, but it often requires substantial capital investment and long planning horizons. Tax rules should support responsible diversification where it sustains local employment and active management, rather than penalising mixed rural business models or creating uncertainty about future treatment.

Environmental markets raise further questions. Carbon, biodiversity net gain, nutrient mitigation and other nature-based income streams may become increasingly important to the rural economy by 2040. However, the tax treatment of these income streams must be clear, consistent and compatible with continued land management. If environmental income is treated in ways that discourage active stewardship, complicate succession, or favour passive ownership over working landscapes, the result could be perverse.

There is also a risk that poorly designed tax and market signals encourage land to move away from locally rooted enterprises toward absentee ownership, speculative environmental investment or single-purpose land use. That may produce headline environmental claims, but it will not necessarily sustain jobs, skills, supply chains or community resilience. The tax system should therefore support environmental investment that keeps people economically active on the land and delivers measurable outcomes.

Business rates and local taxation also matter. Rural hospitality, sporting facilities, kennels, workshops, offices, stores, accommodation and other estate-linked buildings can face costs that are difficult to absorb in remote areas with seasonal or variable income. Where rates or tax burdens rise without regard to rurality, seasonality and limited market access, businesses may reduce investment, employment or diversification.

Fuel, vehicle and machinery costs are another major issue. Upland land management is transport-intensive. Staff and contractors often travel long distances across difficult terrain to reach work sites, maintain infrastructure, manage livestock, respond to fire risk and support rural tourism or sporting activity. Tax changes affecting vehicles, fuel, machinery or rural transport can therefore have a disproportionate effect on remote upland businesses. These costs should be considered through a rural-proofing lens.

Tax policy should also recognise the value of private investment in public goods. When a land manager funds habitat management, wildfire prevention, access maintenance or environmental monitoring, that expenditure may reduce future public costs. A tax system that supports reinvestment in such activity is not a subsidy to private interest; it is a way of crowding in private capital to deliver public outcomes.

The MA therefore recommends that LRRG should urge government to:

1. rural-proof tax policy affecting land-based enterprises, particularly in remote upland areas;
2. recognise active moorland management as an operating rural business model, not simply passive asset ownership;

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3. ensure inheritance and succession policy supports continuity of stewardship, employment and environmental delivery;
4. provide clear tax treatment for income from environmental markets, including carbon, biodiversity and nature recovery schemes;
5. ensure environmental tax incentives reward active management, local employment and measurable outcomes;
6. avoid tax changes that unintentionally accelerate fragmentation, under-management or loss of private investment;
7. support responsible rural diversification where it strengthens employment, resilience and long-term land management;
8. consider the disproportionate effect of fuel, vehicle, machinery and business-rate costs on remote upland enterprises;
9. allow tax and grant policy to encourage reinvestment in wildfire mitigation, access infrastructure, peatland work, biodiversity monitoring and skilled rural employment;
10. assess the cumulative effect of taxation, regulation and environmental scheme design on the viability of upland businesses.

Response to Question 4: workforce, skills and labour market dynamics

The future of the upland rural economy depends on retaining and developing a skilled land-based workforce. In the uplands, skills are not generic. They are practical, place-specific and built over time through direct experience of the landscape. Gamekeepers, shepherds, farmers, contractors, estate staff and rural tradespeople hold detailed knowledge of weather, vegetation, hydrology, fire behaviour, access routes, grazing patterns, bird populations, predator pressures, peat condition and seasonal risk.

This local knowledge is part of the productive capital of the rural economy. It cannot be replaced quickly if lost. A workforce that understands the land is essential not only for sporting activity, but for conservation, peatland restoration, wildfire prevention, access management, grazing, species recovery, invasive species control, walling, fencing, monitoring and emergency response. In the uplands, environmental delivery depends on people with practical skills and a long-term presence on the ground.

The labour market in upland areas is already under pressure. Many communities face ageing populations, limited affordable housing, weak public transport, poor connectivity and fewer opportunities for young people. These pressures make it harder to recruit and retain staff. Young people who may want to work in land management, conservation, farming, tourism or rural trades often find it difficult to remain in the communities where those jobs exist. Once they leave, the skills base becomes harder to rebuild.

This challenge is particularly acute for gamekeeping and moorland management. These roles require a blend of ecological knowledge, animal husbandry, machinery skills, habitat management, predator control, public engagement, fire awareness, health and safety, and practical resilience work. They are

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modern rural jobs, but they are too often misunderstood or excluded from mainstream rural skills policy. That needs to change.

The employment contribution is material. Grouse moor management in England supports over 1,500 full-time posts, including approximately 700 directly involved in grouse moor management and 820 in related services and industries. Keeping and moorland management also support significant seasonal and casual work, with larger moors bringing in additional workers during the season.

The MA believes that a future rural economy strategy should recognise gamekeepers and upland land managers as part of the skilled environmental workforce. Their work contributes directly to many of the outcomes government wants: biodiversity recovery, wildfire mitigation, access, peatland management, rural tourism, landscape maintenance and local employment. Excluding them from skills and workforce planning would weaken both the rural economy and environmental delivery.

There is also a risk that policy uncertainty drives people out of the sector. Where land managers believe that established management tools may be removed without site-specific evidence, or that businesses may become unviable through regulatory change, younger workers are less likely to enter the profession. Employers are less likely to recruit apprentices or invest in training. The consequence is a gradual erosion of skills and confidence, even before any formal business closure occurs.

The upland workforce is also linked to a wider network of rural trades. Fencers, wallers, mechanics, machinery operators, ecologists, builders, peatland contractors, hospitality staff, beaters, pickers-up, dog handlers, transport providers and seasonal workers all form part of the labour market supported by moorland management. Many of these people work across several rural sectors. Sustaining moorland activity therefore helps sustain the wider pool of practical rural skills.

Workforce policy must also recognise the realities of remote rural employment. Many upland jobs involve early starts, long days, lone working, outdoor conditions, travel across difficult terrain, limited mobile signal and seasonal pressures. Training, health and safety support, mental health provision and professional development must be designed around those realities. A purely urban or office-based model of skills delivery will not work.

Apprenticeships and vocational training have an important role to play. There is a need for clearer pathways into moorland management, practical conservation, wildlife management, peatland restoration, wildfire management, rural machinery operation and habitat monitoring. These pathways should be developed with employers and land managers, not imposed from outside. Training should combine environmental knowledge with practical land-based skills.

Housing is inseparable from workforce retention. Land-based workers need to live close to where they work, especially where their roles involve animal care, fire response, security, access management or emergency duties. If workers cannot afford to live locally, recruitment becomes harder and operational resilience is weakened. Rural worker housing should therefore be treated as

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part of the workforce infrastructure needed to sustain both rural businesses and environmental outcomes.

The MA also believes that the upland workforce should be actively involved in shaping local delivery. Too often, land managers are consulted after decisions have already been made. This wastes practical knowledge and weakens trust. If rural policy is to deliver by 2040, those who manage the land should have a formal role in designing, testing and adapting policy locally.

The MA therefore recommends that LRRG should urge government to:

1. recognise gamekeepers, moorland managers, shepherds and upland contractors as part of the skilled rural and environmental workforce;
2. include upland land management in rural skills, apprenticeships and workforce strategies;
3. support practical training in moorland management, habitat restoration, wildfire resilience, predator control, machinery operation, access management and ecological monitoring;
4. ensure environmental schemes fund skilled labour and ongoing management, not only capital works or consultancy-led planning;
5. improve rural worker housing provision for land-based employees who need to live close to their place of work;
6. support local training partnerships between land managers, colleges, rural businesses and conservation bodies;
7. design mental health, safety and workforce support around the realities of remote, seasonal and lone-working rural employment;
8. reduce policy uncertainty so employers have the confidence to recruit, train and retain staff;
9. involve land managers and rural workers directly in local decision-making structures;
10. recognise that losing skilled people from the land increases future public cost and weakens environmental resilience.

Response to Question 5: infrastructure and connectivity

Infrastructure and connectivity are central to the future of the upland rural economy. In remote moorland areas, infrastructure is not simply a matter of convenience. It determines whether businesses can operate, workers can remain safe, environmental work can be delivered, visitors can be supported, and emergency incidents can be managed effectively.

Upland enterprises operate across large, sparsely populated and often difficult landscapes. Staff and contractors may work alone, travel long distances, cross rough ground, manage livestock, maintain habitats, respond to wildfire risk, support public access and deal with incidents far from main roads or settlements. In that context, roads, tracks, mobile signal, broadband, power supply, water access, vehicles, machinery and emergency routes are all part of the basic infrastructure of rural productivity and resilience.

Poor digital connectivity remains one of the most significant barriers. Weak broadband and unreliable mobile signal affect day-to-day business administration, environmental reporting, mapping, online compliance systems, safety communication, tourism bookings, emergency response and access

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to public services. The problem is especially acute for lone workers, who may be operating in areas with little or no signal. Connectivity failures are therefore both an economic constraint and a safety risk.

Digital systems are also becoming increasingly important to environmental delivery. Land managers are expected to use online portals, mapping tools, reporting systems, remote monitoring, digital records and electronic communications with regulators and scheme administrators. These requirements are reasonable only if the basic infrastructure exists. Where it does not, digital-by-default policy increases the burden on remote rural businesses.

Mobile coverage should also be treated as part of wildfire and emergency resilience. Moorland managers are often among the first to identify and respond to wildfire, illegal access, livestock worrying, machinery theft, public safety incidents or damage to infrastructure. Poor signal can delay reporting, coordination and response. In landscapes where incidents can escalate quickly, especially wildfire, communication infrastructure is essential.

Physical access infrastructure is equally important. Moorland tracks, bridges, gates, water points and turning areas are not only sporting or estate infrastructure. They allow land managers, contractors, emergency services and conservation workers to reach remote areas. They support peatland work, vegetation management, grazing, predator control, monitoring, public access maintenance and wildfire response. If this infrastructure is neglected or made harder to maintain, both economic activity and environmental resilience suffer.

There is a tendency in some policy discussions to treat tracks and access routes as environmental risks in themselves. They can be if poorly designed or badly maintained. But in many upland landscapes, well-planned and well-maintained access infrastructure is essential to achieving environmental outcomes. Without it, restoration materials cannot be moved, fire cannot be reached, staff cannot work safely, and monitoring becomes more difficult. The test should be whether infrastructure is necessary, proportionate and well managed, not whether it fits a simplistic view of “wildness”.

Transport is another significant constraint. Public transport is limited or absent in many upland areas. This increases dependence on private vehicles and raises costs for workers, contractors, visitors and businesses. It also narrows the labour market, because people without access to a car may be unable to take jobs in land management, hospitality, tourism or rural trades. For young people in particular, poor transport can limit access to training, apprenticeships and employment.

Energy infrastructure also matters. Many upland businesses face high energy costs, limited grid capacity, older buildings and difficulties upgrading heating, power and efficiency. These pressures affect workshops, kennels, accommodation, offices, hospitality premises, processing facilities and rural homes. Investment in energy efficiency and resilient local energy systems could reduce costs and support diversification, but schemes need to be accessible to remote rural businesses.

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The infrastructure needs of upland areas are also linked to public access and tourism. Visitors increasingly expect reliable information, safe routes, parking, signage, emergency communication, accommodation and digital booking systems. If rural tourism is to contribute sustainably to upland economies, supporting infrastructure must be planned and funded. Otherwise, the costs of access are borne by land managers and local communities without sufficient economic return.

The MA believes that government should treat upland infrastructure as part of national resilience. These landscapes are expected to contribute to carbon storage, water regulation, biodiversity, access, food and sporting economies, tourism and wildfire mitigation. Those functions cannot be delivered without the practical infrastructure that allows people to work on, move through and manage the land.

Infrastructure policy should therefore be rural-proofed. Programmes designed around towns and cities often fail to reflect the realities of sparse populations, long distances, difficult terrain and low commercial returns for providers. Without targeted intervention, upland communities will remain at the back of the queue for broadband, mobile, transport and energy investment, despite being asked to deliver nationally important outcomes.

The MA therefore recommends that LRRG should urge government to:

1. prioritise remote upland areas in broadband and mobile connectivity programmes;
2. recognise mobile coverage as essential for lone-worker safety, business productivity, environmental monitoring and emergency response;
3. ensure digital-by-default regulatory and grant systems are matched by reliable digital infrastructure;
4. recognise well-designed moorland tracks, water points and access routes as resilience and environmental delivery infrastructure;
5. support proportionate maintenance and improvement of access infrastructure where it enables wildfire response, conservation work, grazing, monitoring and public safety;
6. rural-proof transport policy so that upland workers, apprentices, contractors and visitors are not excluded by lack of public transport;
7. support investment in rural energy efficiency, local energy resilience and grid capacity for upland businesses and buildings;
8. ensure tourism and access policy includes funding for the infrastructure required to manage visitors safely and sustainably;
9. involve land managers, Fire and Rescue Services and local authorities in planning infrastructure for wildfire and emergency response;
10. assess infrastructure investment not only by population density, but by the economic, environmental and resilience functions that remote landscapes are expected to deliver.

Response to Question 6: housing

Housing is one of the most important constraints on the future of the upland rural economy. Rural businesses cannot recruit and retain skilled workers if those workers cannot afford to live near their

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place of work. In the uplands, this is not only a social problem; it is a direct barrier to economic activity, environmental delivery and landscape resilience.

Land-based work often requires people to live close to the land they manage. Gamekeepers, shepherds, farmers, estate staff and some contractors need to be available outside normal working hours for animal welfare, wildfire risk, security, severe weather, public safety incidents, livestock issues and emergency response. Long-distance commuting is often impractical, expensive or unsafe, particularly where public transport is limited and roads are remote.

Affordable rural worker housing should therefore be treated as part of the basic infrastructure of the upland economy. Without it, businesses struggle to recruit younger workers, apprentices and families. Over time, this weakens the skills base, reduces community resilience and makes active land management harder to sustain.

The housing challenge is especially acute in attractive upland and protected landscapes. House prices are often inflated by second homes, holiday lets, retirement demand and external purchasing power. Local wages rarely match these housing costs. As a result, people working in land management, farming, hospitality, tourism, rural trades and public services can be priced out of the communities that rely on their labour.

This creates a damaging cycle. Young people leave because they cannot afford to stay. Local businesses find it harder to recruit. Schools, services and community institutions lose population. Rural economies become more dependent on commuting, seasonal labour or external contractors. In the uplands, this also means that fewer people remain locally available with the practical skills and knowledge needed to manage the landscape.

The impact is not limited to private businesses. Environmental delivery is also affected. Peatland restoration, habitat management, wildfire mitigation, access maintenance, species recovery and monitoring all depend on skilled people being present and available. If housing policy prevents those people from living locally, the cost and complexity of delivery increase.

Current planning and housing policy often fails to reflect this link between housing, land management and environmental outcomes. Rural worker housing is sometimes treated narrowly, as though it is only justified by traditional agriculture. In the uplands, the test should be broader. Housing need can arise from moorland management, conservation, sporting management, forestry, grazing, tourism, access management, fire resilience and other land-based roles that support the rural economy.

There should also be recognition that tied or occupational housing can play a legitimate role where it enables essential rural work. Such housing must be well managed and fair to employees, but it can be vital in places where open-market housing is unaffordable and where work requires close proximity to land, livestock or infrastructure. Removing or discouraging such provision without realistic alternatives risks making rural employment less viable.

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Small-scale rural housing development should also be easier where it is genuinely linked to local need. Many upland communities do not require large developments. They need a small number of affordable homes, rural worker homes or local occupancy homes that allow young people, workers and families to remain. Planning policy should support this kind of targeted provision, particularly where it sustains employment and community resilience.

The design of housing policy should also avoid unintended consequences. Environmental or landscape protections are important, but they should not be applied in ways that prevent communities from remaining viable. Protecting the character of upland landscapes should include protecting the working communities that have shaped and maintained them. A landscape without resident workers, families and local businesses is not a resilient rural economy.

The MA believes that housing policy should be integrated with rural skills, business and environmental policy. If government expects the uplands to deliver nature recovery, carbon storage, public access, tourism, fire prevention and local growth by 2040, it must ensure that the people delivering those outcomes can live there.

The MA therefore recommends that LRRG should urge government to:

1. recognise affordable rural worker housing as economic and environmental infrastructure;
2. broaden rural worker housing policy so it reflects the full range of land-based employment, including moorland management, conservation, sporting management, grazing, forestry, tourism and access management;
3. support small-scale affordable and local occupancy housing in upland communities where it sustains local employment and services;
4. ensure planning policy allows essential workers to live close to the land, livestock and infrastructure they manage;
5. protect and modernise appropriate tied and occupational housing where it supports essential rural employment;
6. assess the impact of second homes and holiday lets on the availability of housing for land-based workers and rural families;
7. align housing policy with rural skills and apprenticeship policy, so young people can train, work and live in upland communities;
8. ensure environmental and landscape designations do not unintentionally prevent the modest housing needed to sustain working rural communities;
9. encourage local authorities to identify land-based employment needs when assessing rural housing requirements;
10. include housing for land-based workers in any future Rural Strategy or upland economy plan.

Response to Question 7: land use and the environmental economy

Land use and the environmental economy will be central to the future of the uplands to 2040. These landscapes are increasingly expected to deliver carbon storage, biodiversity recovery, water regulation, flood mitigation, managed public access, tourism, food production, wildfire resilience and rural employment. The question is not whether the uplands should contribute to environmental

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recovery. They already do, and they will be asked to do more. The question is whether policy enables that contribution through viable working landscapes, or whether it unintentionally displaces the people, businesses and skills needed to deliver it.

The Moorland Association believes that environmental recovery and rural economic viability must be designed together. In the uplands, nature recovery is not delivered by land becoming unmanaged. It depends on skilled, continuous and adaptive management: grazing, cutting, controlled burning and other vegetation management where appropriate, peatland restoration, legal predator management where necessary, invasive species control, track maintenance, wildfire planning, access management and long-term monitoring. These activities require people, equipment, local knowledge and private investment.

The practical scale of this management should not be underestimated. The Moorland Association published a report in 2025 that of 58 surveyed estates, they actively managed over 273,000 acres of vegetation annually through controlled burning, mowing and grazing. This illustrates the scale of active management capacity that already exists in the uplands and would be costly to replace if lost.

A future environmental economy should therefore strengthen active stewardship rather than replace it. Carbon, biodiversity net gain, nutrient mitigation, peatland restoration and nature recovery markets have potential to bring new investment into rural areas. But they will only command rural confidence if they support local employment, practical management and measurable outcomes. They should not become mechanisms for absentee ownership, speculative land acquisition, or the replacement of working rural economies with externally financed land-use change.

There is a risk that environmental policy treats land use as a choice between economic activity and nature. That is the wrong starting point for the uplands. The most resilient model is not withdrawal from management, but better management. The people who manage the land are often the same people who can deliver peatland work, wildfire mitigation, species recovery, access maintenance and habitat improvements. If those enterprises are undermined, the state or large delivery bodies may later have to recreate capacity that already existed locally.

The MA is concerned that some current approaches to environmental delivery place too much emphasis on plans, processes, restrictions and short-term projects, and too little emphasis on long-term stewardship. Public and private funding can be absorbed by project development, consultancy, partnership administration and reporting before practical work is delivered on the ground. This risks weakening value for money and reducing the share of funding that reaches local workers and businesses.

The environmental economy should be judged by outcomes, not by activity alone. Success should be measured by whether habitats improve, species recover, wildfire risk is reduced, peat condition improves, water quality benefits, local employment is sustained and rural communities become more resilient. Producing plans, designations or restrictions is not enough. If a scheme does not deliver measurable improvement, it should be reviewed and adapted.

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Land-use policy must also recognise trade-offs. Upland landscapes are complex systems. A policy that benefits one target may create risks for another. For example, reducing management without considering vegetation fuel load can increase wildfire risk. Rewetting without local design and aftercare can affect access, grazing, infrastructure or neighbouring land. Tree planting in the wrong place can harm open-ground habitats or wading birds. Predator pressure can undermine species recovery even where habitat appears suitable, particularly for ground-nesting birds such as curlew, lapwing and golden plover. Legal predator management should therefore be recognised as one of the practical tools that can be necessary to deliver species recovery, alongside habitat management, grazing, monitoring and restoration. These issues require local judgement and adaptive management, not blanket prescriptions.

Wildfire resilience should be treated as a central part of the environmental economy. Severe wildfire can release carbon, damage peat, destroy habitat, threaten public safety, harm wildlife, disrupt tourism and impose large costs on emergency services and land managers. Upland vegetation management, firebreaks, tracks, water points, trained staff and cooperation with Fire and Rescue Services are therefore not ancillary activities. They are environmental and economic resilience infrastructure.

Public access should also be managed responsibly and in ways that are compatible with conservation, wildfire prevention, livestock management, biosecurity and public safety. Access can support tourism, wellbeing and rural economies, but unmanaged or poorly planned access can create costs and risks for land managers, wildlife and emergency services.

The MA also believes that land-use change should be assessed for its effect on rural employment and communities. If a proposal reduces local jobs, weakens supply chains, removes grazing, reduces keeping, or transfers delivery to external organisations, those impacts should be considered alongside carbon or biodiversity claims. Environmental markets should be required to demonstrate community benefit and local economic contribution, not simply environmental accounting.

A better model would be locally led, outcome-focused and adaptive. Land managers, farmers, commoners where relevant, and local authority representatives should have the central decision-making role in setting local priorities and agreeing practical delivery. Natural England, the Environment Agency, Fire and Rescue Services, National Park or National Landscape bodies, rural businesses, local communities and independent scientific advisers should support that process as advisers, consultees or delivery partners. This would help align nature recovery, wildfire resilience, rural employment, access and investment around shared outcomes, while keeping accountability rooted in the landscapes concerned.

This approach is not a call for lower environmental ambition. On the contrary, it is a call for environmental ambition to be made deliverable. The uplands are too important to be managed through distant assumptions or single-purpose policy. They need a framework that recognises their multiple functions and keeps skilled people economically active on the land.

The MA therefore recommends that LRRG should urge government to:

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1. recognise active upland management as a core delivery mechanism for the environmental economy;
2. ensure land-use policy supports working landscapes, local employment and long-term stewardship;
3. design carbon, biodiversity and nature recovery markets so that they reward active management and measurable outcomes;
4. require environmental schemes and markets to demonstrate local economic and community benefit;
5. direct more funding toward practical delivery, skilled labour and long-term aftercare rather than excessive administration or plan production;
6. ensure land managers are decision-making partners in environmental delivery, not merely consultees or contractors;
7. assess land-use change proposals for their impact on employment, supply chains, wildfire risk, access, grazing and rural community resilience;
8. adopt an evidence-led wildfire resilience framework that allows appropriate vegetation management tools where local risk assessments justify them;
9. apply adaptive management so that schemes can be revised where outcomes are not being delivered;
10. pilot locally led Upland Economy and Environment Boards to align nature recovery, economic growth and resilience around locally agreed outcomes.

Response to LRRG Question 8: public services, access and rural crime

Public services, access and rural crime are not separate from the upland economy. They shape whether people can live, work, invest and remain confident in remote rural communities. In the uplands, weak public service provision, long emergency response times, poor transport, limited policing and hidden crime all increase the cost and risk of doing business.

Moorland businesses operate across large, isolated landscapes. Staff may work alone and far from settlements. Contractors and visitors may travel along minor roads and tracks with limited mobile signal. Emergency services may face long journey times, poor access and limited local knowledge of terrain. In this context, public service resilience is a direct economic issue.

Rural crime has a particular impact on upland businesses. Equipment theft, vehicle theft, fuel theft, fly-tipping, arson, livestock worrying, illegal off-road access, damage to gates and walls, poaching and antisocial behaviour can impose substantial costs. These crimes may appear minor when viewed individually, but collectively they undermine business confidence, increase insurance and repair costs, divert staff time and weaken confidence in the justice system.

The dispersed nature of rural crime also means it is often under-reported and under-recorded. Businesses may not report incidents if they believe response times will be slow or if previous reports have not led to action. This creates a cycle in which official data underestimates the scale of the problem, leading to weaker prioritisation and further loss of confidence.

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Arson and deliberate fire-setting are particularly serious in upland landscapes. A fire started in remote moorland can spread quickly, especially where vegetation fuel loads are high, access is difficult and weather conditions are unfavourable. The consequences can include damage to peat, carbon release, biodiversity loss, destruction of infrastructure, risk to life, harm to livestock and wildlife, air pollution, disruption to tourism and major costs for Fire and Rescue Services.

Land managers are often part of the informal resilience infrastructure of rural Britain. In many upland areas, they are among the first people on site when something goes wrong. They know the tracks, gates, water points, access routes, weather patterns, fuel loads and vulnerable habitats. They have vehicles, equipment and staff who can assist in early response. This local capacity should be recognised and integrated into rural resilience planning.

Access to public services is also a major issue for upland communities and workers. Distance from GP surgeries, hospitals, dentists, schools, training providers, police stations, courts, banking services and advice centres affects recruitment, retention and quality of life. It also affects business productivity, because time spent travelling to services is time and cost taken out of work. For rural families and employees, service withdrawal can make it harder to remain in remote communities. Public transport is often limited or absent, increasing dependence on private vehicles. This affects workers, apprentices, seasonal staff, young people and older residents. It narrows the labour pool available to rural employers and makes training or employment harder to access for people without a car. For the upland economy, transport is therefore not simply a social service; it is part of labour market infrastructure.

Digital access to services can help, but only where broadband and mobile connectivity are reliable. In too many upland areas, public services are moving online faster than rural connectivity is improving. Digital-by-default service delivery risks excluding the very communities most affected by physical distance. Public service reform should therefore be rural-proofed, with offline, outreach and mobile provision retained where connectivity and transport barriers remain.

The MA believes that rural crime and weak public services should be treated as barriers to growth. A rural business is less likely to invest if it cannot rely on emergency response, policing, digital connectivity, local services or a stable workforce. Conversely, stronger rural services and better crime enforcement support confidence, resilience and local economic activity.

There is also a need for better partnership working between land managers, police, Fire and Rescue Services, local authorities, health providers and regulators. Local knowledge can improve prevention, response and targeting. For example, land managers can help identify high-risk fire areas, access points, illegal off-road routes, fly-tipping hotspots and vulnerable infrastructure. This should be built into local rural resilience planning rather than treated informally.

The MA therefore recommends that LRRG should urge government to:

1. recognise rural crime and weak public service access as barriers to upland economic growth;
2. improve rural crime reporting, recording and data collection so that dispersed incidents are properly understood;

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3. strengthen rural policing capacity, including better coverage of equipment theft, fuel theft, fly-tipping, arson, poaching, illegal off-road access and livestock worrying;
4. ensure Fire and Rescue Services work closely with land managers on wildfire prevention, access planning, training, water points and response protocols;
5. treat land managers as partners in rural resilience because of their local knowledge, equipment and presence on the ground;
6. improve mobile and broadband coverage to support emergency communication, lone-worker safety and access to online public services;
7. rural-proof public service reform so that digital-by-default or centralised models do not exclude remote communities;
8. maintain outreach, mobile and locally accessible services where transport and connectivity barriers are significant;
9. improve public transport and community transport links where they support access to work, training, healthcare and essential services;
10. include upland areas in any future Rural Strategy's work on public service access, emergency resilience and rural crime.

Cross-cutting recommendation: locally led Upland Economy and Environment Boards

The Moorland Association believes that many of the barriers facing the upland rural economy arise from a common problem: decisions affecting remote landscapes are too often made through fragmented, centralised and process-heavy systems, rather than through locally accountable delivery focused on outcomes.

This affects rural growth, environmental delivery, wildfire resilience, public investment and trust. Land managers, farmers, rural businesses and local communities are frequently consulted on policy, but they are not given a meaningful role in shaping or delivering it. Meanwhile, responsibility is spread across multiple bodies, including Defra, Natural England, the Environment Agency, local authorities, National Park Authorities, National Landscapes, conservation organisations, water companies, funding partnerships and private markets. The result can be duplication, delay, uncertainty and weak accountability for outcomes.

The MA therefore recommends that LRRG should support the creation of locally led Upland Economy and Environment Boards in major upland areas. These boards should be decision-making bodies made up of land managers, farmers, commoners where relevant, and local authority representatives. For these purposes, land managers should include moorland estates and other land-based businesses with direct responsibility for delivery on the ground. Their role would be to align rural economic growth, nature recovery, wildfire resilience, access, infrastructure and public investment around locally agreed outcomes.

Natural England, the Environment Agency, Fire and Rescue Services, National Park Authorities or National Landscape bodies, rural businesses, local communities and independent scientific advisers should participate as technical advisers or consultees where relevant, but should not hold the primary decision-making role. This distinction is important. The purpose of the model is to move

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from fragmented external control toward locally accountable delivery by those with practical responsibility for managing the land, supported by expert advice and national standards.

Their purpose would be practical: to align rural economic growth, nature recovery, wildfire resilience, access, infrastructure and public investment around locally agreed outcomes. They should not become another layer of bureaucracy or another advisory forum. To avoid that, the boards should have a defined delivery mandate, with delegated responsibility for coordinating local action and relevant funding against agreed outcomes. They should replace fragmentation with a clearer local mechanism for delivery, problem-solving and accountability.

The principle is simple. If upland landscapes are expected to deliver national public goods, the people who manage those landscapes must have a real role in deciding how those outcomes are achieved. Local knowledge should not be treated as an afterthought. It should be built into governance from the start.

An Upland Economy and Environment Board could help address several problems at once. It could identify local economic priorities, coordinate environmental schemes, support wildfire planning, advise on infrastructure needs, assess the effects of land-use change, improve communication between public bodies and land managers, and ensure that funding is directed toward practical delivery rather than excessive administration. Where responsibilities or funding are delegated to the board, they should be matched by clear accountability for delivery, costs and outcomes.

This model would also help bridge the gap between rural economic policy and environmental policy. Too often, these are treated separately. In the uplands, they are inseparable. Decisions about peatland restoration, biodiversity, access, burning, grazing, tree planting, predator control, tracks, housing and tourism all have economic consequences. Equally, decisions about rural business, workforce, infrastructure and housing affect whether environmental outcomes can be delivered.

The boards should therefore be explicitly outcome-focused. Their success should be judged by whether they help deliver measurable improvements: stronger rural businesses, better habitat condition, species recovery, reduced wildfire risk, improved access infrastructure, sustained employment, better use of public funding and greater confidence among rural communities. They should not be judged by the number of meetings held, plans produced or processes completed.

For the model to work, land managers and rural businesses must be able to participate on equal terms. At present, landowners, farmers and practitioners are often expected to contribute to consultations, partnerships and advisory groups without payment, while public bodies and NGOs participate through salaried staff and funded programmes. This creates an imbalance in who can engage consistently. If local delivery is to be real rather than symbolic, participation should be properly resourced, with modest allowances and expenses for those taking on formal responsibilities.

The boards should also operate on the basis of adaptive management. Upland landscapes are complex and dynamic. Policies that work in one catchment or moor may not work in another. A

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locally led board should be able to test, monitor and adjust approaches, rather than locking land managers into rigid prescriptions. Where evidence shows that an intervention is not delivering, it should be reviewed and changed.

A locally led model would also improve value for money. Public funding for environmental delivery can be diluted by repeated consultations, consultancy work, project administration and overlapping institutional processes. By contrast, a board rooted in local delivery could help ensure that a greater share of funding reaches practical work on the ground: skilled labour, contractors, equipment, habitat management, wildfire mitigation, monitoring and long-term aftercare.

This proposal is not a call for lower environmental standards or weaker regulation. It is a call for better delivery and clearer accountability. National government should set clear objectives and statutory baselines, while locally accountable boards should determine how those outcomes are delivered in practice. Natural England and the Environment Agency should act as technical advisers and guardians of national standards, not as routine veto-holders over locally agreed delivery. The purpose is to simplify fragmented decision-making, not to add another layer of process.

The MA recommends that LRRG should urge government to pilot Upland Economy and Environment Boards in selected upland areas, with the following features:

1. a clear remit to align rural economic growth, environmental recovery, wildfire resilience and community benefit;
2. decision-making membership drawn from land managers, farmers, commoners where relevant, and local authority representatives, with Natural England, the Environment Agency, Fire and Rescue Services, National Park or National Landscape bodies, rural businesses, local communities and independent scientific advisers engaged as advisers, consultees or delivery partners as appropriate;
3. a requirement to set measurable local outcomes linked to national environmental, economic and resilience objectives;
4. proper funding for participation by land managers and rural businesses, so that engagement is not limited to organisations with salaried policy staff;
5. a duty to assess the economic and community impact of land-use and environmental policy decisions;
6. a defined delivery mandate, including responsibility for coordinating wildfire risk planning, access infrastructure, habitat management and emergency response where appropriate;
7. a focus on directing funding toward practical delivery, skilled labour and long-term management;
8. transparent reporting on outcomes, costs and lessons learned;
9. an adaptive management approach, allowing interventions to be reviewed where they are not delivering;
10. a commitment to simplify, not add to, existing bureaucracy.

Final recommendations for the LRRG

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The Moorland Association recommends that the Labour Rural Research Group urges government to place active upland management at the heart of any future Rural Strategy. The uplands can make a major contribution to rural growth, nature recovery, climate resilience, public access, tourism, water management and wildfire prevention by 2040. However, that contribution will only be secured if policy recognises that these outcomes depend on viable rural businesses, skilled people and locally accountable delivery.

The following recommendations are intended to support that objective.

1. Create a dedicated upland strand within the Rural Strategy

Government should recognise that upland communities face distinct economic, environmental and service-delivery pressures. A future Rural Strategy should include a specific upland strand covering rural business viability, land management, workforce, housing, infrastructure, environmental markets, wildfire resilience, access and public services. This should not treat the uplands as a marginal or purely environmental concern. They are working landscapes and should be recognised as part of the national rural economy.

2. Recognise active upland management as rural economic infrastructure

Active management should be understood as part of the infrastructure that allows upland landscapes to function. Gamekeepers, farmers, shepherds, contractors, estate staff and rural trades deliver the practical work needed to sustain habitat, access, fire resilience, tourism, water management and local employment. In England, grouse moor management creates around 42,500 work days a year, supports over 1,500 full-time posts and contributes approximately £67.7 million annually to the economy. Government should assess the economic consequences of policies that reduce management capacity, employment or private investment in upland areas.

3. Rural-proof Defra, Treasury, Natural England and planning policy

Policy affecting the uplands should be assessed for its effect on remote rural businesses, workers, local supply chains, housing, wildfire risk and environmental delivery. Too often, national policy is designed around urban or lowland assumptions and then applied to upland landscapes without sufficient consideration of practical consequences. Rural-proofing should apply to tax, regulation, planning, environmental schemes, public service reform and infrastructure investment.

4. Support private investment in public goods

Moorland owners and managers invest private capital in habitat management, employment, access, conservation, peatland work, wildfire mitigation, rural buildings and local supply chains. Estates in England and Wales have been cited as spending around £52.5 million each year on grouse moor management. Government should seek to crowd in this investment, not displace it. Environmental schemes, tax policy and regulation should give businesses the confidence to invest for the long term.

5. Ensure environmental schemes reward ongoing management and measurable outcomes

Environmental funding should support practical delivery, skilled labour, monitoring, aftercare and adaptive management. It should not be absorbed disproportionately by plan-writing, consultancy,

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administration or short-term project structures. Schemes should be judged by outcomes: habitat condition, species recovery, wildfire risk reduction, peat condition, water benefits, local employment and value for money.

6. Design environmental markets to strengthen working landscapes

Carbon, biodiversity net gain, nutrient mitigation and nature recovery markets should support local jobs, long-term stewardship and active management. They should not incentivise absentee ownership, speculative land acquisition or the displacement of existing rural livelihoods. Government should require environmental market projects to demonstrate community benefit and local economic contribution.

7. Pilot locally led Upland Economy and Environment Boards

Government should pilot locally led boards in selected upland areas to align rural economic growth, environmental recovery, wildfire resilience, access, infrastructure and public investment. These boards should have decision-making membership drawn from land managers, farmers, commoners where relevant, and local authority representatives. For these purposes, land managers should include moorland estates and other land-based businesses with direct responsibility for delivery on the ground. Natural England, the Environment Agency, Fire and Rescue Services, National Park or National Landscape bodies, rural businesses, local communities and independent scientific advisers should be engaged as advisers, consultees or delivery partners as appropriate. Their purpose should be to simplify delivery, improve trust, focus on outcomes and ensure that decisions are informed by local knowledge.

8. Properly fund land manager participation in local delivery structures

Land managers, farmers and rural businesses are often expected to engage in consultations and partnerships without payment, while public bodies and NGOs participate through salaried staff and funded programmes. This creates an imbalance. Where local delivery structures carry formal responsibilities, participation should be properly resourced through modest allowances and expenses. This would enable those with practical delivery responsibility to engage on equal terms.

9. Develop an evidence-led wildfire resilience framework

Wildfire should be treated as a major economic, environmental and public safety risk. Government should support an evidence-led framework for upland vegetation management, including cutting and controlled burning where appropriate, firebreaks, access routes, water points, training and coordination with Fire and Rescue Services. Policy should allow appropriate management tools where local risk assessments justify them, rather than relying on blanket assumptions about acceptable and unacceptable practices.

10. Support rural worker housing for land-based employment

Affordable housing for land-based workers should be recognised as economic and environmental infrastructure. Planning policy should support small-scale rural worker housing where it sustains essential land management, conservation, farming, sporting, tourism or access roles. Housing policy should allow workers and families to remain in the communities that depend on their skills.

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The Moorland Association

11. Prioritise upland connectivity and access infrastructure

Government should prioritise remote upland areas for broadband, mobile coverage and emergency communications. Connectivity is essential for business productivity, lone-worker safety, environmental reporting, tourism and emergency response. Well-designed tracks, gates, bridges, water points and access routes should also be recognised as practical infrastructure for conservation delivery, wildfire response, managed public access, public safety and rural business.

12. Include the upland workforce in rural skills policy

Gamekeepers, moorland managers, shepherds, contractors and other land-based workers should be recognised as part of the skilled rural and environmental workforce. Government should support apprenticeships and practical training in moorland management, habitat restoration, wildfire resilience, access management, legal predator management for conservation outcomes, ecological monitoring, machinery operation and rural trades.

13. Strengthen rural crime enforcement and emergency resilience

Rural crime should be treated as a barrier to economic growth and community confidence. Government should improve reporting, data collection and enforcement relating to equipment theft, fuel theft, fly-tipping, arson, illegal off-road access, poaching and livestock worrying. Land managers should be treated as partners in emergency resilience because of their local knowledge, equipment and presence on the ground.

14. Shift from process-based regulation to outcome-based delivery

The MA urges LRRG to recommend a wider cultural shift in rural and environmental policy: away from centralised process management and toward locally accountable, outcome-focused delivery. Success should be measured by real-world results: stronger rural businesses, more skilled jobs, better habitat condition, increased species recovery, reduced wildfire risk, sustained private investment and more resilient communities.

Closing recommendation

The uplands should not be treated as empty spaces on which national policy objectives are imposed. They are working landscapes, shaped and sustained by people, skills, businesses and long-term investment. If government wants them to deliver more for nature, climate, growth, access and resilience by 2040, it must keep those people economically active and give them a meaningful role in decision-making.

The Moorland Association therefore recommends that LRRG's rural economy report should adopt the following principle:

Rural growth and environmental recovery will be strongest where policy keeps people, skills, investment and accountability rooted in the landscapes they are expected to sustain.

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