

6th European Rural Parliament and European Rural Youth Parliament

The 6th European Rural Parliament (ERP) and the European Rural Youth Parliament (ERYP) were held in Inverurie in October, and I was delighted to attend as a full delegate courtesy of Scottish Rural Action (SRA).

The ERP (in Scotland for the first time) brought together over 70 organisations from 40 countries and was a great opportunity to engage with rural leaders, youth representatives, and policymakers from across Europe, on the overarching theme of *Rural Community Solutions to Global Challenges*. The event opened with a welcome from Theona Morrison (Chair of SRA) who reminded us that 98% of Scotland is classified as rural; and that “rural life keeps the rest of life going”. This sentiment set the tone for the days ahead.

The next morning began with a welcome from Councillor Judy Whyte, Provost of Aberdeenshire, followed by greetings from the ERP Steering Group and a video address from Raffaele Fitto of the European Commission. Keynote speaker, Ryan Howard of SECAD Partnership CLG, spoke about global challenges facing rural communities: youth mental health, climate crisis, conflict, and biodiversity loss. He emphasised the importance of investing time and people into community-led solutions and shared examples from his own work, including running youth service centres.

Next was a panel session on the same topic where Anneli Kana from the Estonian Village Movement Kodukant spoke about preparedness and civil protection, especially in the context of war and natural disasters. Her message was that these issues are not distant, they are happening in our backyard (referring to Kyiv being only 100km from Estonia). The panel also highlighted the need for equal access to health and economic opportunities in rural areas.

Delegates then had the opportunity to attend a wide range of workshops across research, skills, local development, innovation and resilience. I participated in the *Living Together: Building Shared Understanding and Collaboration Between Agriculture and Community Sectors* and spoke about the role of SAYFC and the importance of supporting rural youth. Young people in rural areas are not just the future, we are the present, and we are already contributing, already leading, and already shaping their communities.

We must ensure we create opportunities that allow rural youth to thrive where they are, not force them to leave in search of development or careers. In the remainder of the session, we explored how to encourage closer relationships between agriculture and other communities, discussing access to land, social media, and the concepts of a “licence to farm” and “social contracts”.

Our group agreed that farming cannot happen in isolation and that mutual respect is essential. We also discussed shared values like environmental stewardship, water quality, and soil health, and the importance of soft education and communication, including initiatives like the Royal Highland Educational Trust and school farm fairs. It

was fascinating to hear from an Estonian delegate that they have an event similar to the UK's Open Farm Sunday where a third of their entire population visit/take part in one of these events.

The ERYP at Thainstone Mart began that afternoon with delegates attending themed sessions such as *Sharing Stories*, *Building Bridges*, and *Shaping the Future*. I participated in the workshop on *Generational Renewal and Succession Planning in Agriculture*, where we explored the challenges of succession from multiple stakeholder perspectives. Communication emerged as the key barrier and solution, alongside financial planning, retirement support, and additional income opportunities.

The panel session *Mechanisms for Impact* featured youth leaders and policymakers: Scotland's Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Mairi Gougeon MSP; Alistair Carmichael MP; Eva Kotnik from the Council of Europe; and Antonia Husberg from the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry of Finland.

There was a great variety of knowledge and impressive experiences within the panel, and it was noted by Eva that many rural policies ignore youth, and many youth policies ignore the rural. The solution, she said, is intersectoral collaboration: a point that was escalated in the panel session that evening where there was a call for greater integration of youth voices into the main ERP, rather than treating the youth parliament as a side event.

On Wednesday, I joined the land management study trip to Muir of Dinnet Nature Reserve, a Ramsar site (a wetland of international importance) managed by NatureScot. The team shared their work on managing the native woodland, ditch blocking and tree removal on bogs, and wetland restoration to mitigate flooding. The reserve has 80,000 visitors annually and a strong public engagement programme.

We then visited Tarland Development Group's Oldtown Walled Garden, a community garden owned by the MacRobert Trust Estate and on a 30-year lease to the community group. It hosts three initiatives. *Gone to Seed* is a seed swap programme that aims to encourage people to grow their own vegetables and flowers from seed and to share seeds with other gardeners at events twice a year. The Bee Group aims to increase the number of beekeepers in the area and to improve the health of honeybees by promoting good practice and high standards of husbandry, while Tarland Apple Pressing allows the community to bring their apples in September and October to be pressed into juice. The group also hires out apple pressing equipment to individuals and community groups.

We then moved to the community garden in Tarland, again owned by the MacRobert Trust Estate and leased to the community. It was created to address a lack of access to land and now involves around 40 households: most of whom have a planting area inside a polytunnel and one outside. There is also disabled access and raised beds to assist those with mobility difficulties. Members pay a small fee and produce is grown for personal use only, all managed by the community. It also features communal planting beds to encourage shared activity and social connection; and initiatives like

the Monday Club provide regular opportunities for engagement and wellbeing. The garden benefits from the expertise of former farmers and includes a composting scheme for sharing and swapping materials. Apple trees around the garden's perimeter are also donated to the Tarland Apple Pressing group, creating a strong link between community initiatives.

Our final stop was MacRobert Hall in Tarland which was gifted to the community in 1956 and remains a hub for local events and gatherings. Ross Lilley of NatureScot, gave a strategic overview of land management in Scotland to set context for our European visitors. He said degraded peat accounts for 15% of Scotland's carbon emissions and referenced 5 of the 66 pieces of legislation related to land use in Scotland. We also heard from local residents about Tarland and the Howe of Cromar, where the MacRobert Trust owns and manages (through land stewards) 7,200 acres.

As with previous European Rural Parliaments, the 2025 gathering concluded with the production of a formal statement: the Declaration of Inverurie. This document captures the collective voice of rural communities across Europe and outlines both commitments and demands for future action.

The declaration:

- States that rural people, from all generations and backgrounds, are central to Europe's future;
- Calls for recognition of their contributions and a genuine partnership with authorities at all levels;
- Asks for support that enables them to continue driving change;
- Urges governments to apply rural proofing to all policies, embed rural voices in decision-making, ensure funding is accessible and transparent, and ensure education, leadership, and innovation in rural areas are priorities.

At the European level, it also advocates for opportunities for the rural workforce, and for inclusive governance, and asks for partnership, respect, and the removal of barriers that hold them back.

Attending the ERP and ERYP showed the passion, strength and diversity in rural communities not just here in Scotland but across Europe. It was a privilege to be able to attend this event and contribute to discussions on youth, rural industries, and community collaboration.