



**Friends of
the Earth
Scotland**

Communities and transition mineral mining in Scotland

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Introduction

This report presents evidence from Scottish communities on their concerns about local transition mineral mining exploration. These concerns include the failure of companies and the UK and Scottish Governments to fully consider communities in transition mineral mining plans and the impact of mining on people globally in the name of the energy transition. It is based on interviews conducted in 2024 with people living in communities in Aberdeenshire, Dumfries and Galloway and the Highlands – three places in Scotland which have recently undergone drilling by mining companies with exploration license looking for transition minerals.

Transition minerals, such as lithium, cobalt and nickel, are materials required for the energy transition away from fossil fuels. The term 'critical raw materials' is sometimes used as well, although this includes materials with supply chain concerns which are important not just for the energy transition but for technological developments and military uses as well. Demand for these minerals is rapidly increasing globally as they are required to build critical infrastructure such as

wind turbines, solar panels and batteries for electric vehicles.¹ Globally, demand often outstrips supply meaning that disruptions, price volatility and geopolitical concerns around transition minerals are common. Scotland has a long history of small-scale transition mineral mining but there is currently no full-scale extraction happening here. Several companies have licenses from SEPA to explore for transition mineral deposits in Scotland.

Globally, exploration, extraction and processing of transition minerals creates serious and extensive social and environmental harm. Mining often creates conflict because it happens in a fixed place, which means companies must disturb people or nature to extract the resources they seek. So far, mining companies have failed to eliminate the damage that stems from these conflicts, despite international requirements to 'do no harm'.² In fact, there was a five-fold increase in mining conflicts between 2005 and 2015.³ Reducing demand for transition minerals is therefore necessary to limit extraction and the resulting damage as much as possible. However, the Scottish Government, like many other governments in their rush to transform national energy systems, is failing to consider how these supply chain impacts can be minimised.

Communities across the world are increasingly alarmed by the lack of protection and consultation they have experienced when resisting corporate powers seeking to extract the valuable minerals from underneath the land they live on.⁴ In Scotland, although transition mineral mining is only at the exploration stage, this research shows that the pattern of harm is already being repeated here, including:

- Transition mineral mining companies do not properly engage with local people, whose concerns about damage their communities and the environment are unheard,
- Planning policies are insufficient to protect communities and nature from transition mineral mining activities,
- Political representatives from Councillors, to MSPs and MPs are failing to support their constituents in addressing their concerns,
- Communities believe that benefits from transition mineral mining are unlikely to reach them.



This report interviews local community members from three mining exploration sites in Scotland and international comparisons from Spain and the Philippines, where mining for transition minerals is already a reality. The report then considers the social impacts of transition mineral mining exploration in Scotland through four themes: company engagement, political representation, local perspectives and international resource justice.

The interviews were conducted in 2024 by Tamsin Wake as part of an Edinburgh University placement-based dissertation with Friends of the Earth Scotland. One or two semi-structured interviews were conducted with volunteers from each area, each interview lasting for about an hour.

Scottish transition mineral mining case studies

This report covers three areas in Scotland where transition mineral mining exploration has happened:

- Gairloch near Loch Maree in Wester Ross, in the Highlands,
- Blackcraig near Newton Stewart in Dumfries and Galloway,
- Arthrath near Ellon in Aberdeenshire.

Gairloch, Wester Ross, the Highlands

Loch Maree and Gairloch are part of the Wester Ross Biosphere management zones. The Loch itself is a Site of Special Scientific Interest and a National Nature Reserve⁵. Canadian company Galantas Gold currently holds the exploration and development rights to “the Gairloch Project” which it describes as a 217 km² mineral licence covering an area known as the Gairloch Schist Belt. This includes the Kerry Road deposit which was surveyed in the late 70s/early 80s and remains “underexplored”⁶. The minerals that Galantas is interested in are zinc, copper, lead, silver and gold.

A single hole was drilled in 2018⁷ and in 2023 it was revealed that Galantas had sought permission to drill several boreholes up to 400m deep near Kerrysdale, south of Gairloch⁸. The Highland Council reminded Galantas that the area was a National Scenic area but approved the proposed boreholes.

The Ross-shire Journal reported that residents felt “*kept in the dark*” and that Gairloch community councillors said they had hoped for better communication from Galantas⁹. Drilling machinery was visible and had been stored at the Gairloch harbour. Calls for a community benefit fund to ensure locals needs are met was backed by regional MSP Ariane Burgess¹⁰. As of July 2024, the future of the Gairloch project is unknown, but it is still listed on the Galantas website¹¹.

Blackcraig, Dumfries and Galloway

The mining exploration site at Blackcraig is found within the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere. British company, JDH Exploration, holds three exploration licences in Dumfries and Galloway over an area of approximately 750 km². In 2022, the company was taken over by Walkabout Resources, an Australian based mining company with projects in Tanzania, Namibia and Northern Ireland. In Northern Ireland, locals expressed concerns about the company’s plans. A 2018 petition opposing the mine was signed by more than 1,600 people¹² and said mining in the area “can only be seen as a short-term gain for foreign investors which will inevitably change the lives of our future generations”.

The area has a history of mining and produced high grade zinc, lead and silver in the mid-1700s¹³. This history and information from a report by the British Geological Survey¹⁴ may have prompted new interest from JDH/Walkabout who say there are numerous occurrences of lead, zinc, copper,

nickel, gold and silver they'd like to exploit¹⁵. Geological mapping and surveys began in June 2020 and exploratory drilling took place in Blackcraig in summer 2021.

Blackcraig and nearby Newton Stewart are known as the Gateway to the Galloway Hills. Locals are worried that any potential mining would destroy this natural beauty. They expressed concerns about the potential for noise, dust and negative impacts on tourism which largely support the region's economy¹⁶. Local environmental campaign groups such as Galloway Against Mining (over 1,000 members)¹⁷ and Galloway Mines Action Group (over 200 members)¹⁸ formed as a result of these concerns and the lack of communication from JDH/Walkabout. According to Walkabout the work is "very low impact"¹⁹.

Arthrath, Aberdeenshire

A local company, Aberdeen Minerals, was set up in 2018 and is dedicated to "*investing in mineral exploration for bedrock deposits of nickel, copper and cobalt in Northeast Scotland*"²⁰. The company hit headlines in 2022 when a helicopter surveying for minerals caused a power cut to over 1,000 homes in Balmedie village after hitting an electricity pylon²¹. Land around Ellon, New Deer, Methlick, Maud, Pitmedden, Oldmeldrum, Tarves and Huntly were also surveyed.

In 2023, the company received £294k in a grant from the UK Government through the Automotive Transformation Fund (ATF).²² In 2024, an international mining company called Central Asia Metals Plc invested £3m, making it the largest shareholder in the company. Central Asia Metals Plc owns a lead and zinc mine in Macedonia where there was a tailing dam failure in 2020²³. Toxic pollution spilled out into the local river, which flows into the Vardar River, which affects the ecosystems of five municipalities.

Aberdeen Minerals says it is focused on the Arthrath site, where it started drilling in February 2023²⁴ and where the company is headquartered²⁵. This drilling expanded on the activity carried out in the region by Rio Tinto, the Anglo-Australian global mining group, in the 1970s. "*Significant amounts*" of nickel, copper and cobalt were confirmed by drilling at this site which is part of the largest known nickel deposit in the UK²⁶.



Aberdeen Minerals Ltd. exploratory drilling site in Arthrath, Aberdeenshire in February 2023 (Image: Facebook)

The Press and Journal reported that Aberdeen Minerals considers the drilling a success and are optimistic about future progress²⁷. Aberdeen Minerals is still active as of July 2024, speaking at several events including a lobby event at Scottish parliament in May 2024²⁸.

Worryingly, community members who contributed to this report alluded to feelings of intimidation around the mining activity and were cautious about speaking out. One participant suggested that the community were waiting and hoping that the mining would not go ahead. Locals noticed that Aberdeen Minerals did not clean up properly after a small-scale exploration project. This could indicate a disrespect for the community and the environment which does not bode well for future work.

International comparisons

Galicia, Spain

The transition mineral mining industry in Spain is well established and there are hundreds of existing projects across the country extracting many different minerals from copper to tungsten to niobium.

Galicia has more cases of mining injustices than anywhere else in Spain²⁹. For example, the Braña da Serra mine which is a proposed open pit mine for nickel, copper and cobalt. According to local groups, part of the site was sold without proper approval to Swedish company Eurobattery Minerals in April 2019 which started drilling illegally in September 2019³⁰. The site is home to the endangered *Centaurea Ulreiae* plant species. There is no restoration plan for after the mining activity has ended³¹.

Communities both locally and nationally in Spain are mobilising against these environmental and social injustices. The Ecologistas en Acción movement is composed of over 300 Spanish environmental groups³². A Galician local, interviewed as part of this research, emphasised that this could happen to anyone, anywhere in the world: *“The problem when you open the door to these companies is that you never know when they might find a place where they want to open up a mine, and that can change your life completely, and the best way to prevent that from happening is to prevent drilling from happening.”*

Tampakan, the Philippines

Like in Spain, transition mineral mining is well established in the Philippines.³³ The government has repeatedly tried to regulate the mining industry, but the sector continues to flourish at the expense of environmental and social justice.³⁴

The community members interviewed for this research are from the B’laan Indigenous group and are affected by the Tampakan mining project in South Cotabato. Conflict around the Tampakan mine has been ongoing for more than twenty years and the mine is not yet operational because of community resistance. If the project went ahead, it would be one of the biggest open pit copper and gold mines in the world. Filipino company Sagittarius Mines Inc (SMI) is the company currently developing the project and affirms its commitment to ethical behaviour and responsible mining.

SMI argues that the Tampakan project would be beneficial to the economy of the Philippines and would enable a better future for the local people.³⁵ However, if the project went ahead, approximately 5,000 people would have to be resettled, including the Indigenous B'laan people who have been on the land for centuries.³⁶ SMI sees resettlement as an opportunity to enhance their standard of living³⁷.

Local communities are divided over Tampakan, clans and families have been split for decades over their opposition or support for SMI which has promised to support them with education, health and other development projects in affected communities. Those who oppose the mine are concerned about the resettlement, loss of livelihoods for farmers and irrigators if water supplies are reduced or contaminated, and the destruction to the land from drilling, blasting and vegetation clearing. Both Filipino interviewees considered that mining currently does not sufficiently benefit the Filipino people, instead *“only those who are rich get richer”*.

Those who protest risk a great deal. The Philippines is repeatedly listed as one of the most dangerous countries in the world for environmental defenders³⁸ and this is partly due to the practice of ‘red tagging’ whereby the government publicly accuses those who protest of being involved with the communist armed group New People’s Army. The military in the Philippines has long been responsible for extrajudicial killings and torture of alleged communists.³⁹ As for Tampakan, at least two dozen people, including Indigenous children, have been killed within the mining site.⁴⁰

Community concerns in Scotland

Company engagement

In Scotland, planning policy is set out in the National Planning Framework 4 which states that “Throughout the planning system, opportunities are available to engage in development planning and decisions about future development.”⁴¹ This engagement “should be early, collaborative, meaningful and proportionate”. However, exploratory drilling is not usually considered a ‘development’ and therefore there is no legal requirement for planning permission and consultation.

According to our interviews, Scottish communities do not feel they have been properly consulted about local transition mineral mining plans and activity and this has led to feelings of disempowerment, isolation and community divisions. Some community members have reported feeling intimidated by mining companies which contributes to a lack of trust towards these companies. These injustices in Scotland mirror violations experienced by communities internationally, albeit on a smaller scale given transition mineral mining in Scotland is a relatively unexplored currently.

The lack of proper consultation and failure to engage meaningfully with local communities in current transition mineral exploration projects in Scotland is undemocratic and unjust. Even if a company is relatively small and local, as is the case with Aberdeen Minerals, consultations are not

conducted in a meaningful and open way. A local person commented: *"I feel like the whole community is in the dark"* on Aberdeen Minerals' activities.

In Dumfries and Galloway, local trust in the community council broke down when community council members were pictured in the local news meeting with JDH/Walkabout representatives and then evidence emerged of a meeting where no minutes were taken because it was *"informal"*. One local said: *"Immediately people had no confidence in the community councillors representing their views because they felt they were in bed together with the company JDH who haven't got a good reputation anyway."* And another stated: *"the lack of honesty and openness that the company displayed did them no favours whatsoever."*

For many locals, witnessing exploration activity happening was the first they knew of mining plans. Seeing such equipment which is often large and noisy can be *"shocking"* and leaves locals *"worried"* and *"horrified"*. Local opposition can *"explode because people just hadn't been told about it"*.

In Dumfries and Galloway, where there were attempts at consultation, these were not well organised and largely deemed unsuccessful by the interviewees. At a meeting organised by JDH/Walkabout, locals grew concerned when the company representative *"couldn't answer any questions"*.

It is unimportant to communities that exploratory drilling is not officially classed as a planning development and meaning companies did not legally have to consult. Communities feel excluded and disempowered if they are not consulted before any drilling happens. Even when the activity stops, communities remain worried that companies might come back: *"we're just left with uncertainty [...] getting on for three years now."*

Communities want to be consulted early, thoroughly and in diverse ways to ensure everyone can participate. Informing a community of mining plans at the extraction stage is too late. Consultation should begin before exploration activity starts and continue throughout each stage of the process. Meaningful engagement requires companies to listen, respond to and mitigate the concerns of local communities, who must be given enough information to understand the potential impacts of mining activities. People cannot fully consent if they are not fully informed.

"Somehow these companies have to come to the community and say just on a very basic level: we are thinking about this. Not doing all this work for two years and then coming along and saying, we're going to do this. It automatically gives a feeling of disempowerment."

A local person from Newton Stewart, Dumfries and Galloway

Political representation

Planning, including for mining, is a fully devolved matter in Scotland but the strategic approach around minerals for the energy transition is led by the UK Government. The first aim set out in the UK's 2023 Critical Mineral Strategies is to *"maximise what the UK can produce domestically"*⁴² and a follow up report by the British Geological Survey highlighted that many sites in Scotland have the *"potential for critical raw material prospectivity"*.⁴³

Scottish communities feel that their representatives are not supporting them in their concerns about the impacts of local transition mineral mining.

“[The community] don’t know what’s going on, and I think the council has a responsibility. I think the Scottish Government has a responsibility. I think the UK Government has a responsibility.”

— A local person from Ellon, Aberdeenshire

“People felt let down that something as major as that [could happen without consultation]. The majority of people are really proud of their area. And why weren’t people informed? It was such a dereliction of duty.”

— A local person from Dumfries and Galloway

One person who reached out to their MP were told that they “*couldn’t get involved because it was a devolved matter*” which the locals felt was “*an easy get out*”. They had initial support from MSPs but this “*fizzled out*”.

The lack of support that communities felt from their local political representatives aligns with the UK and Scottish Government’s failure to meaningfully engage on transition mineral mining at a national level. In response to a question raised in the Scottish Parliament in 2023 on “*how it is assisting efforts to explore potential reserves of critical minerals in Scotland*”, the Scottish Government stated, “*Critical mineral mining relates to powers reserved to the UK Government and the Scottish Government is supportive of the UK Critical Mineral Strategy*.”⁴⁴ However, Jim Shannon MP said in UK Parliament in 2024 that “*mineral planning policy is a devolved matter*” and he was not corrected.⁴⁵ The UK Government, the Scottish Government and parliamentary representatives appear to be avoiding responsibility on this matter, which is having serious impacts on the affected communities.



Gillian Martin SNP MSP for Aberdeenshire East and then the Scottish Government Minister for Energy, visiting the Aberdeen Minerals site in May 2023 (Image: Facebook)

The Scottish Government refused to include an amendment to consider the social and environmental impacts of transition minerals in the Circular Economy (Scotland) Law because, Gillian Martin, Minister for Energy, Just Transition and Fair Work said “*what is critical for the energy sector in the 2020s may no longer be critical in the 2040s or 2050s*”.⁴⁶ Instead, the Scottish Government will consider what can be included in the Scottish Government’s Energy Strategy and Just Transition Plan, which is not legally binding and has been much delayed and criticised in its draft form.

Local perceptions of transition mineral mining

Most community members interviewed opposed transition mineral mining in their area and described it as a divisive issue within the community. Scottish communities understood that mining can exacerbate existing distributional injustices around land ownership and job opportunities. It is clear to them that developments are unlikely to benefit them.

People were concerned about damage to the natural landscape and environmental degradation. Damages to peatlands – which are valuable carbon sinks and have already been damaged by wind turbine installation – were of particular concern in the Highlands and in Dumfries and Galloway. Communities are concerned about mining companies not properly managing waste and toxic substances, which could damage nearby (often protected) waterways and the wider ecosystems.

“**“There’d be a general concern that whatever the promises a company makes, they do tend to be a little bit lax on [environmental and health standards].”**

— A local person from Wester Ross, the Highlands

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As in Scotland, communities in Spain and the Philippines were very concerned about the destruction of the natural environment from mining projects. A Spanish interviewee felt like they are often supposed to “*look the other way*” when it comes to injustices committed in the name of the energy transition. In the Philippines, legislation has made mining companies the biggest rights holders to water which is deeply unfair to communities. As one interviewee stated: “*God did not create the water for them alone*”.

Regarding the economy, communities are concerned that any mining developments could negatively impact tourism. They are not convinced that job promises from mining companies will come to fruition, and if they do it won’t be long term employment.

Scottish communities have a good understanding of environmental injustices, including resource injustices in relation to transition mineral mining, even if they do not use these specific terms. They are particularly concerned about unequal distribution of benefits and do not currently consider themselves the main beneficiaries of such projects, only considered after landowners and mining corporations.

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“The only benefits are for landowners.”

— A local person from Dumfries and Galloway

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When mining companies prioritise or work solely with private landowners, as has been the case in the Highlands and in Dumfries and Galloway, this excludes and isolates communities. Scottish communities understand and have lived experience of this. Community benefit funds may be a solution to these concerns, but these have yet to be established and there are no clear independent standards to ensure such funds are appropriate and fair.

International resource justice

Our interviews found that people in Scottish communities have a good understanding of how international resource justice relates to Scotland's excessive material consumption which fuels rights violations to communities and nature across the world. Many people see demand and consumption reduction as the obvious solution. One person didn't want mining to happen in Wester Ross but believed it would be wrong for it to be pushed onto somewhere else that has the same mineral properties, whether elsewhere in the UK or abroad.

Someone from Dumfries and Galloway thought it was *“very difficult”* to see how the larger quantities of transition minerals we're being told are needed for the energy transition can be provided. Instead, a circular economy and resource justice sound like *“a much better idea”* because of the reduced extraction and increased reuse and recycling. Another person from this community agreed and added that there should be *“better connected public transport”* to avoid more demand for transition minerals. People wanted government to do more.

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“Government policy should be moving to make [recycling] happen rather than waiting for industry to pick it up and run with it.”

— An interviewee from Dumfries and Galloway

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In Aberdeenshire, there were concerns around a planned battery storage facility after a fire at a recycling plant in Aberdeen in 2022 which was probably caused by a lithium battery. One person said that they didn't consider batteries to be a clean resource, because of the issues that come with extraction, lack of proper recycling and decreasing efficiency over time.

People in Scotland are aware that 'green' extraction can be just as problematic as any other form of extraction because it operates in the same system that prioritises economic growth above all else. One Scottish interviewee considered transition mineral mining was more likely to happen in the Global South because of bigger mineral deposits but also as it is more cost effective for mining companies to operate in poorer countries where environmental protections are lax and poorer labour laws mean they can pay workers less.

Some Scottish community members thought that transition mineral mining could be done in a fair way if it was done in Scotland because of stronger regulations. However, some people were concerned that regulations can be overturned or ignored in favour of extraction, no matter the country because the potential for economic growth overrides social and environmental impacts.

One interviewee said they were less sure that transition mineral mining could be done justly in Scotland: *“my gut reaction is probably not [...] there would need to be the government will there I think, to make sure it was socially just”*.

The synergy of these comments with international interviewees is striking.

“If there are plenty of wants, that means plenty of waste. If we focus on needs, then that’s sufficient. If it is too much, that’s wants not needs.”

— An interviewee from the Philippines

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These cases show there is an awareness that people in Scotland and other rich countries are over-exploiting the world’s resources. Interviewees understood the idea of sufficiency and for some, this is what just mining would look like. Harm and injustice run through the entire supply chain, from extraction to end of life when ‘waste’ resources are often dumped on marginalised communities instead of being reused which would reduce harm. Scottish communities understand that when profit is the motivation for extraction, environmental and health regulations will be sacrificed, no matter the country or how ‘strong’ the regulations are. Demand for transition minerals is fuelling resource injustices.

Conclusions

Transition mineral mining exploration is happening in Scotland and where this is happening communities feel they have not been properly consulted or supported in dealing with the impacts that these mining activities have had. People report feeling intimidated, disempowered and isolated by improper consultation and engagement. The concerns in Scottish communities' echo those of international communities. Local people feel ignored by their political representatives, who often seem to be avoiding their responsibilities at all levels of government.

Scottish communities have a good understanding of environmental injustices, including those in relation to transition mineral mining, both locally and internationally. It is clear to communities that they are not getting a fair share of the benefits of mining activity. They do not trust mining companies to respect nature and people.

Scottish communities understand that Scotland’s excessive material consumption is linked to international resource injustices, even when this is in the name of the green transition, and many are in favour of demand reduction and circular economy policies to mitigate this.

Recommendations

Company engagement

- All transition mineral mining activity, including exploratory work, in Scotland must have the free, prior and informed consent of local communities. People should have the right to say no to transition mineral developments on their doorstep.

- The Scottish government must work with local authorities to ensure that planning policies, especially Local Development Plans, fully and clearly include community consultation at all stages of transition mining activity, including a requirement to consult on exploration before drilling can begin. Clearly, current levels of engagement are not enough so the requirement for consultation should be strengthened to ensure companies are more proactive in seeking views of communities.

Political representation

- All policy makers, especially Councillors, MSPs and MPs representing local communities affected by transition mineral mining in Scotland, must take their responsibilities to communities facing transition mining conflicts seriously. They must represent the interests of their communities, not the companies that seek to profit from them.
- The Scottish and UK Government must work together to put communities at the heart of decision making about transition mineral mining in Scotland.
- The Scottish Government should appoint a Minister for Transition Minerals to oversee transition mineral work in Scotland or clarify the work as the responsibility of an existing minister.

Transition mineral mining in Scotland

- The Scottish Government must develop due diligence guidance for mining companies operating in Scotland that puts early, comprehensive and clear community consultation at the centre of all decision making.
- The Scottish Government must consider how transition mineral demand can be minimised in existing and new policies through demand reduction and circular economy measures.
- Extraction of transition minerals in Scotland should not go ahead without comprehensive consideration of communities, including how community benefit funds and land reforms can be used to support fair extraction of transition minerals in Scotland.
- The UK Government must amend its Critical Mineral Strategy to prioritise demand reduction and community consultation.

International Resource Justice

- The UK Government must create a UK due diligence law which requires public and private organisations to minimise the environmental and human rights harm in their supply chains.
- The Scottish Government must fulfil its legal obligations under the UN Aarhus Convention to ensure Scottish citizens have access to legal justice to challenge environmental decisions, acts or omissions in a court of law.⁴⁷

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