

Cross-Party Group on Islands

22 May 2024 – 13:00 – Online via Teams

Meeting Minute

Present

MSPs

Jamie Halcro Johnston MSP
Beatrice Wishart MSP
Katy Clark MSP

Non-MSP Group Members

Adele Lidderdale, UHI
Aimee Labourne, Bressay Development Ltd
Alan Robertson, Scottish Rural Network
Alastair Dobson, Taste of Arran
Alex Reid, Scottish Rural & Islands Transport Community
Alona Roitershtein, Robert Gordon University
Amy Esslemont, HIE
Andrew Jennings, UHI
Ann MacDonald, Scottish Futures Trust
Anne Macleod, Mobility & Access Committee for Scotland
Artemis Pana (Secretariat)
Christine Fairbairn, Scottish Rural Action
Darragh Keenaghan, Community Energy Scotland
David Wardrop-White
Diane Forsyth, Turner & Townsend
Douglas Lyons
Elizabeth Taggart, Scottish Islands Federation/Raasay Development Trust
Emma MacDonald, Shetland Islands Council
Erin Simpson, IPSOS MORI
Francesco Bertoldi, Scottish Government Islands Team
Harriet Warman, Regional Screen Scotland
Iain Kennedy, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar
Irina Protasova Del Villar, Scottish Rural Action
Isla Farley, Local Energy Scotland
James Paterson, Scottish Parliament
Jamie Macfarlane, Crown Estate Scotland
Jane Cooper, Orkney Boreray
Jane Nelson, Greener Orkney
Janet McNaughton
Jean Mary Knowles

John Clarkson, Home Energy Scotland
Karl Johnson, Queen Margaret University
Juliet Knight, Scotland Office, UK Government
Kathlene Morrison, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar
Kathryn Duffus, Bressay Community Council
Katy Beasley, Scottish Islands Passport
Kaydence Drayak, Young Islanders Network
Kieron Brogan, Sanday Development Trust
Kirsten Gow, University of Aberdeen, JHI
Kirsty MacFarlane, Coll
Kirsty MacColl (Secretariat)
Liam Holly, Sanday Community Council
Linda Bamford, Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland
Lydia Rohmer, UHI North, West and Hebrides
Margaret McSporrán, HIE
Mary Morrison, Culture, Heritage & Arts, Argyll & Isles (CHARTS)
Mary Stewart
Michael Danson
Mira Byrne, Outer Hebrides CLLD
Naomi Macdonald, Young Islanders Network
Neil Gow, Islay Energy Trust
Nicola Bowman, The Poverty Alliance
Outer Hebrides Heritage Forum
Owen Wild, Oban Times
Paula Duffy, University of Aberdeen
Philip Coghill
Philippa Brosnan, Scottish Fuel Poverty Advisory Panel
Rachel Creaney, James Hutton Institute
Rebecca Munro, Pragmatix Advisory
Robyn Stewart, RSPB
Roule Wood, Turntown UK
Sandra MacInnes, Comann Eachdraidh Eirisgeidh
Sarah Baird, North Ayrshire Council
Shona Flanagan, HIE
Seán Ó Drisceoil, Co-Chomunn Na Pairc/Ravenspoint
Stuart Grant
Susan Thomson
Terry Hegarty, The AMAZE Project - Mull
Theona Morrison, CoDeL/Scottish Rural Action
Thomas Fischer, CoDeL
Vaila Simpson, Shetland Islands Council
Zelda Bradley, Orkney Rape & Sexual Assault Service (ORSAS)

Apologies

Liam McArthur, MSP
Evan Beswick, Argyll and Bute HSCP
Sheila Keith, Shetland Fishermen's Association

Pippa Milne, Argyll & Bute Council
Alex Mackenzie, Tagsa Uibhist
Tom Tracey, Arran Development Trust
Sheila Gilmore, Visit Arran & The Arran Trust
Lucy Sumsion, NFU Scotland
Colin Buchanan, Isle of Luing Community Trust
Ruth Wilson, James Hutton Institute

Welcome

Jamie Halcro Johnston MSP welcomed attendees to the 6th meeting of the CPG on Islands.

He reminded participants that the 5th CPG took place on 28/02/2024 and that it welcomed Adele Lidderdale, from the Institute of Northern Studies (UHI) to discuss the National Islands Plan (NIP). The Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 requires the Scottish Government to present to Parliament a long-term improvement strategy for the islands. The first National Islands Plan was published in December 2019 and covered 13 strategic objectives which have been identified through consultation.

The Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 also requires the Scottish Government to regularly review the National Islands Plan and to update it where necessary. Jamie noted we are currently in a period of review, which is why the topic has been set as the focus of two consecutive CPGs on Islands. February's CPG covered the governance of the NIP, its delivery framework and specific objectives including culture and transport. This CPG will hear the views of young people and reflect on the outcomes of the recent public consultation.

Minutes

The minutes of the 5th meeting were agreed by Jamie Halcro Johnston MSP and seconded by John Clarkson.

Presentations from Young Islanders Network and Scottish Government Islands Team, followed by general discussion

Jamie Halcro Johnston MSP invited **Kaydence Drayak** and **Naomi Macdonald** from the Young Islanders Network to present their film. The film can be viewed here: www.yin.scot

The Young Islanders Network (YIN) was established in 2021 as a platform to meaningfully involve young islanders in the implementation of the National Islands Plan. It is supported through Youth Scotland.

The Network kicked off with a Young Islanders Challenge which asked young people between the ages of 5 to 25 about their experiences living on Scottish islands. Through this challenge a framework for YIN was developed and a number of young people signed up to be involved on an ongoing basis.

YIN members meet online every month and get together for face-to-face meetings and residential. It is not all serious discussion – members organise fun activities, they develop learning and leadership skills as well as make friends. They meet with decision makers and service providers at all levels to discuss young islanders' priorities. In 2022, YIN designed the Young Islanders Transport Challenge which highlighted the need for accessible, affordable, and reliable transport options.

The focus for 2023 was the Young Islanders Housing Challenge. YIN members researched and consulted on the issues and have produced an interim report which can be found on their website.

YIN members spoke of different aspirations for their islands, and for themselves, but underpinning their participation in the Network was a shared belief in **the right of young people to have a say in the matters that affect them**, as well as in the powerful positive impacts of giving younger people agency to affect change in their communities.

Jamie Halcro Johnston MSP thanked the two presenters and asked to what extent there was a difference in **transport** experiences between young islanders on mainland islands and those on the outer isles. Kaydence and Naomi identified that the difference can be acute, especially, in terms of young people being able to access extracurricular opportunities, or social opportunities. The cost of ferry transport can also throw up complex barriers for young people and their families who not only need to plan their lives around the smallest possible number of trips for essential shopping or visits to a health service, to stay within budget, but also have to contend with very expensive food and goods in local shops where the price of items reflects the additional freight charges.

Kathryn Duffus asked for views on free inter-island ferry transport for younger people. Kaydence and Naomi confirmed that YIN has raised the matter of extending free inter island ferry travel for young people and schools with Calmac's Community Board and that YIN members have received some assurance that this is something the Scottish Government is considering, at least in relation to under 22-year-olds' foot fares. There are however other barriers that need addressed including the integration of bus and ferry timetables and continued promotion of the Young Scot card amongst island young people, particularly smaller islands.

Beatrice Wishart MSP asked whether the matter of **digital connectivity** had arisen in YIN's consultations. Naomi Macdonald reported that there were no young people from the Ross of Mull currently able to engage with the online YIN meetings as their connectivity is so poor. Kaydence confirmed this and suggested poor connectivity was

normalised - both young people and their families compensate through things like switching cameras off during meetings, or coordinating activities so only one household member is using the available bandwidth at a time.

Jamie Halcro Johnston MSP invited **Francesco Bertoldi**, Team Leader, Scottish Islands Team at the Scottish Government to present on the findings from the public consultation on the National Islands Plan.

Francesco put forward the following points:

- The Scottish Government's Islands Team is responsible for implementing the NIP and will be leading on the development of any new framework. While it is not directly responsible for developing policy in areas like housing, transport, or digital inclusion, all of which are objectives of the NIP, its role is to influence policy and ensure coordinated delivery of these areas across islands. Within its remit sit the Island Community Impact Assessments and several large-scale funding mechanisms including the Islands Programme, Islands Cost Crisis Emergency Fund and the Carbon Neutral Islands Project. The Islands Team works in partnership with policy colleagues across the Scottish Government, and externally with multiple stakeholders including local authorities, the Young Islanders Network, and the Scottish Islands Federation.
- With respect to the specifics of the recent NIP consultation, this was open to the public between July and December 2023, and intended to inform the NIP review process. In addition to a dedicated online portal, 16 workshops were delivered by the Islands Team, 13 in person on different islands and 3 online. A total of 39 organisations and 128 individuals responded to the online consultation and a combined total of 231 people took part in the workshops. Key findings included:
 - **Awareness of the NIP is still low**, more so amongst individuals than organisations. A quarter of those responding to the consultation knew nothing about the NIP. This points to a need for a better communication strategy to bring the NIP to the attention of island communities. It is also something that needs to be born in mind while considering the results of the consultation.
 - The picture was also mixed on perceived impact with roughly a third stating they had positive views, a third had negative views and a third were unsure. Again, organisations were more likely to have positive views than individuals. 50% of organisations thought the NIP had a positive impact compared to only 10% of individuals.
 - Respondents suggested that the **current NIP focuses on too many strategic objectives and too many commitments**. Some objectives, which were consistently prioritised by respondents included housing, transport and population. These priorities chime with the areas the Young Islanders Network have chosen as priorities. Respondents felt limited progress has been made in relation to 11 out of the 13 strategic objectives included in the NIP. On a positive note, it was felt there was some progress on the digital connectivity, and the culture & language priorities.
 - Most respondents felt the NIP must be reviewed but there was no clear direction for the level of review. Some respondents felt the NIP required

- relatively modest tweaks, others felt it should be comprehensively rewritten. A common ask was for more flexible local implementation to mirror the fact that different islands have different development priorities and opportunities.
- In terms of next steps, Scottish Ministers **have agreed that a new plan is necessary, so work commences on a new NIP, due in 2025**. This will necessitate additional but proportionate consultation, recognising that communities have said themselves that they are experiencing consultation fatigue.

Jamie Halcro Johnston MSP thanked Francesco and asked for clarification on the proportion of Islands Team staff who have lived experience of islands. Francesco confirmed it was the majority of the team.

Karl Johnson asked about recognition of the **impact of short-term budgeting** on the delivery of NIP objectives, particularly objectives dependent on or linked to decarbonisation targets. Jamie Halcro Johnston MSP concurred that discussions at the Scottish Parliament Finance Committee frequently revolved around the need for multi-year budgets. Francesco Bertoldi acknowledged this and confirmed that the Scottish Government is aware of the impact on local government, communities and business but has to act within constraints, including reliance on the UK Government budget setting, that Scotland has little control over.

Kirsty MacFarlane highlighted the disparity between the interests of organisations many of which may receive work, funding and contracts through the NIP and are therefore positive about the NIP status quo, and the interests of island residents and businesses. She suggested that greater effort must be made to engage with the latter groups, and that this would require a rethink of the NIP's governance, as well as a broader redesign of Scotland's democratic institutions and processes. She noted the **sheer number of government plans and strategies that are in existence and the lack of tangible outcomes** for local communities and whilst she acknowledged that, in the current landscape, the NIP is "filling a vacuum" of focus on islands, it must go further in empowering islanders, especially young islanders.

Jamie Halcro Johnston MSP acknowledged the validity of these comments, noting the negative impacts of centralised control and the need to work from the bottom up with communities who know their islands best.

Francesco Bertoldi agreed, noting that the focus of the NIP implementation is on "delivery in partnership" with local authorities, the Convention of the Highlands and Islands, local organisations, agencies, businesses and communities. He emphasised that the role of the NIP was not to duplicate what's already available in a busy island policy landscape, but to enable and support coordinated delivery of strategies for the benefit of islands. The Islands Strategic Group which mirrors this commitment to partnership and coordination, will help inform the content of the new plan. A key challenge will be prioritising the objectives should this be the direction the NIP takes. Francesco invited CPG members to consider whether they would be happy to drop

certain existing priorities from any new NIP, so that focus would shift entirely to housing and transport, and what this would mean for the big picture. He also invited CPG members to consider how best to deliver community engagement, to make the NIP 'visible' on islands, while balancing the need to avoid consultation fatigue.

Sarah Baird asked for clarification on the **alignment between the NIP, which is statutory, and the proposed Rural Delivery Plan**, so there is no duplication.

Francesco noted, as Sarah said, that the NIP is a legal requirement, reflecting the Scottish Government's understanding that even within the wider rural context, islands face unique circumstances, opportunities and threats. Any islands' section of the Rural Delivery Plan will be fully aligned with the NIP and to ensure this happens, the Islands Team is working closely with colleagues in the team responsible for developing the Rural Delivery Plan. Community engagement will also be streamlined to ensure there is no overlap. Francesco noted a positive development in the growing availability of both island specific and rural specific data which will help structure both the new NIP and the Rural Delivery Plan.

Beatrice Wishart MSP took over as Convener of the CPG on Islands and invited Liam Holly to speak.

Liam Holly, in response to Francesco's points on balanced community engagement, emphasised the need for the NIP to "guide the vision and values of how Scotland is organised politically and democratically" so that existing structures, such as Community Councils, are recognised as the **mechanism for democratic governance in the isles**, especially the outer isles, and properly supported to shape the NIP implementation, including setting local priorities/objectives.

Francesco Bertoldi noted he could not speak on behalf of other levels of government and that discussions were ongoing between the Scottish Government, local government and communities on the future shape of democracy in Scotland. He suggested that the NIP could set out a clear statement on the contribution of Community Councils to the NIP implementation, though it would require further thought as to the degree to which all Community Councils are able to set local NIP objectives. He invited further representation and advice from Liam and others on this point.

Seán Ó Drisceoil noted that while it was impossible for the Scottish Government to extrapolate from the consultation process what might be local priorities for every single island community, it was possible to (a) make an educated assumption that most local priorities will fall within the menu of 13 NIP objectives and (b) to identify some unifying trends including, for example, the need to improve transport options for the outer isles.

Once these priority objectives are identified, it should then be relatively straightforward to identify action that is possible for the Scottish Government to take forward so, for example, in relation to transport, ensuring that the CalMac Board has

island representatives controlling it. On matters such as island healthcare, however, actions are less straightforward as the Scottish Government has less influence over the NHS, so a lot will depend on advocacy rather than immediate delivery. This creates a hierarchy of objectives based on their priority, but also on the ability for Government to support delivery. Seán suggested that **in the new NIP there should be two sections**, one giving heavier weight to local priorities that unify places and that are achievable to address in the short/medium term, and one that are much broader and will require legislation, long-term advocacy and full partnership approaches such as tackling climate change or decentralising healthcare delivery.

Francesco Bertoldi acknowledged this was a useful and logical approach which would enable focus on local priorities while not losing sight of the broad policy context, and that he would take it back to the Islands Team as a proposal for consideration.

Theona Morrison offered reflections on the **need to shift focus away from always presenting islands as requiring help** (a deficit model) to presenting what islands contribute – economically, culturally and in terms of mitigating the climate and biodiversity crises - to Scotland, and wider, and how to strengthen this contribution. She suggested that community engagement and research on the NIP should be designed to gather information on island resilience, innovation and strengths, not just the problems. She noted that the members of the Young Islanders Network perfectly captured this balance in their film.

Francesco Bertoldi agreed that the new NIP would be framed in a positive narrative, including recognising the green energy revolution and local food production, and noted that improvements in collecting data on islands, combined with improved community and local authority engagement, has provided a rich evidence base on their contributions and resilience.

Beatrice Wishart MSP thanked everyone for taking part in the CPG on Islands and apologised for the rushed close of the meeting.

AOCB

The meeting closed at 13.57 to enable MSPs attend Parliamentary business. The next CPG on Islands will take place after the summer recess, date to be confirmed.

It was noted in the Microsoft Teams chat that several participants asked for longer discussion time. This request will be considered by the Secretariat and Conveners.