

Cross-Party Group on Islands

28 February 2024 – 13:00 – Online via Teams

Meeting Minute

Present

MSPs

Liam McArthur MSP
Jamie Halcro Johnston MSP
Alasdair Allan MSP

Non-MSP Group Members

Artemis Pana, Secretariat
James Paterson
Bryony Nelson
Christine Fairbairn
Alan Whiteside
Finlay MacLennan
Naomi MacDonald
Rebecca Munro
Claire Thomson
Linda Bamford
Robbie Drummond
Steve Mathieson
Elizabeth Taggart
Adele Lidderdale
Theona Morrison
Alastair Dobson
Colin Buchanan
Carol Norton
Philip Coghill
Terry Hegarty
David Cameron
Ian Hopkins
John Forbes
Lucy Conway
Kirsten Gow
Anne MacLeod
Rhoda Meek
Carol McKay
Mary Schmoller
Sheena Stewart
Jemma MacVicar

Graeme Howell
Jenny Milne
Frank Corcoran
Trudy MacKenzie
Janey McNaughton
Diana Scott
Kathryn Duffus
Lauren Worrell
John Clarkson
Shona Flanagan
Amy Esslemont
Harriet Warman
Roger Jackson
Kieron Brogan
Kevin Morrison
Liz McKnockiter
John Maughan
John Holliday
Kenneth MacLennan
Jane Cooper
Sarah Baird
Melissa Thomson
Pippa Milne
Vanessa Halhead
Kirsty MacFarlane
Fiona Davies
Scott Currie
Naomi Bremner
Jean Mary Knowles
Andy Wilcox
Will Coulter
Lorna J Philip
Al Walker
Alex Morrison
Valeria Borta
Kaydence Drayak
Maria Oleszczk
Issac Hulse
Kirsty MacColl (Secretariat)

Apologies

Arianne Burgess MSP
Rhoda Grant MSP
Francesca Couperwhite
Catriona Mallows
Vicki Nairn
Brian Fulton
Sheila Gilmore

Cllr Robin Currie
Beatrice Wishart MSP

1. Welcome & apologies

Jamie Halcro Johnston MSP welcomed attendees to the 5th CPG Islands meeting, focused on the National Islands Plan (NIP), currently under review by the Scottish Government, and on identifying island community priority themes for future CPG meeting agendas. Meeting apologies were listed in the chat.

The 4th CPG had been the AGM, and it was confirmed that office bearers were elected as follows: Jamie Halcro Johnston MSP as Convenor and Beatrice Wishart MSP and Alasdair Allan MSP as Deputy Convenors. Scottish Rural Action and Scottish Islands Federation were re-appointed as secretariat.

2. Minutes of previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting on 5 February were agreed with corrections requested to Jamie Halcro Johnston's name spelling (Proposed by Alasdair Allan MSP and seconded by Liam McArthur MSP).

3a. Adele Lidderdale, Institute of Northern Studies (UHI)

Funded by the three island authorities, Adele is currently researching the impact of the NIP and set the scene for the CPG discussion with the history of the NIP, the 13 strategic objectives included within it, and reflections on some of the current and future challenges and opportunities in its implementation.

Adele belongs to Orkney, and prior to her current PhD research, continued her education through UHI, before taking forward a career in green energy, managing large scale green hydrogen projects.

The National Islands Plan

Looking at the NIP, it covers a vast and varied area, and it has been good to see the recently published work from the Rural & Environment Science & Agricultural Services (RESAS) and the development of a new Island Typology by Kirsten Gow, contributing greatly to island data.

Having the NIP and the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 that sits behind it, for the first time, provides a legally defined definition of an island and an island community – an island community is defined as 2 or more individuals that permanently inhabit an island.

The NIP is the delivery framework for the Act and was published in 2019 with a budget of around £28.5 million over 5 years. It has delivered a number of funding streams through the Islands Programme, initially providing much needed funds directly to community development organisations, particularly around the time of the pandemic, and latterly, around 21/22, funding Local Authorities.

Other, larger projects have included the Carbon Neutral Islands (CNI) project, which is supporting six islands, spread across each Local Authority area, to conduct carbon audits and develop a range of green programmes based on the needs and opportunities of the local community.

The Young Islanders Network (YIN) is another supported project. Living in an island can be different depending on how old you are, what services are available, what education you do etc and the YIN has been valued by the young people involved and the direct access to government and decision makers it has enabled.

The Islands Bond proposal didn't go ahead as a result of feedback from island communities which clearly indicated it wasn't a policy that was needed or wanted in that form. Although it proved controversial in a Scottish context, other governments such as Japan, Croatia, and Ireland, are looking at similar interventions to support island population sustainability.

Timeline & how people interact with island policy

Adele outlined that people, in particular island residents, can interact with island policy in a number of ways, as individuals through consultations or through democratic structures such as Local Authorities, Community Councils and other organisations that interact with island decision-making. The Scottish Government also has a range of stakeholder groups around different policy areas, and, more recently through the Act, we have seen the introduction of the Island Community Impact Assessment (ICIA).

Island policy has always been shaped by islanders in certain ways and therefore, the NIP didn't just come from nothing. In 2013, councils in Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles joined together to seek more power, more decisions to be taken locally and the ability to use island resources, green energy for example, to deliver better outcomes for island communities. From this grew the 'Our Islands, Our Future' campaign, taking advantage of the opportunity for policy change presented by the independence referendum.

There are numerous examples of instances where national policy has led to unintended adverse impacts in island situations and therefore, a key part of Our Islands, Our Future looked at 'island proofing' to ensure that islands were properly considered and enabled to inform decision making.

The campaign also looked at island resources and how these could be better used with energy once again being a focal point as it was many years ago with oil development in Orkney and Shetland.

Outputs from this work have included changes to the Crown Estate, the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 and a suite of processes including ICIA's that go through

different layers of governance leading to policy change. While there are quick wins, bigger shifts take a much longer time.

NIP themes & progress

The NIP has 13 strategic objectives, many of which are inter-related such as housing, population, fuel poverty, economy, transport etc.

Climate change and energy transition has become a growing theme and it could offer huge potential for positive impact in islands if the decision-making and benefits become more localised. For example, reducing energy costs, creating high quality jobs, enabling the development of additional infrastructure (some islands have been able to access good digital connectivity in an expedient manner as a result of hosting industry).

Across the 13 strategic objectives there are 113 commitments and trying to measure outcomes across 93, very diverse, inhabited islands makes it difficult to monitor. A Scottish Government Cabinet scrutiny meeting in May 2023 estimated around 20% of the outcomes had been achieved.

Adele's research, involving interviews with multiple stakeholders, has not identified any strategic objectives to add or remove, suggesting the current Plan captured the right things. However, it was felt that ICIAs (which are not part of the current NIP), who is involved in this decision making and how islanders interact with the process needs further consideration.

There have been 100 Scottish Government ICIAs over the last year, and while it is still a fairly new tool, there are some good examples emerging of communities making use of them e.g. Mull & Iona Ferry Committee and the CalMac advanced standby proposal.

Adele shared the NIP stakeholder map that she has developed as part of her research, noting that while community input does feature strongly, there is still a lot of representation and input from people outside island communities.

Summing up

There are big decisions being made around islands, particularly as they hold natural resources that will be key to the next period of transition in our economy. However, the NIP and the Act sit within central government and there is a sense that decisions as well as service delivery have become more centralised and remote from island communities.

There are challenges around legitimacy with Local Authorities feeling bypassed in some instances, quick and short-term decision making, sparse island data (but progress in building this) and a need for more communication and on-going engagement.

Benefits have included the initial ground-up development of the NIP, and strong emphasis on community-based organisations and drawing on the local knowledge of islanders. The rights of islanders are now enshrined in law and there are mechanisms in place to allow us to challenge and influence decisions.

We are now at the point where the NIP is being reviewed and there is potential for it to be re-written which gives us an opportunity to reassess what and how it should deliver, and to promote improved relationships between the many stakeholders.

Adele finished by sharing the results of a survey which asked participants how the NIP had influenced their lives. Of the 179 people that took part, 92% answered 'not at all'. This doesn't mean this is the case, but it highlights the need for ongoing communication and engagement to show the contribution of the NIP to the outputs and changes we see at a local level.

3b. Discussion

Sheena Stewart: Chief Officer for Uist Council of Voluntary Organisations (UCVO) and partnered with the Third Sector Interface Western Isles. UCVO and the TSI had been fully involved in the initial NIP consultation and has continued to engage with the Scottish Government Islands team throughout the current NIP. TSI's are fully embedded within their communities, with a hugely valuable role as a conduit for policy engagement and would like to see a much closer working relationship with Scottish Government decision-makers. TSI's are not currently listed on the NIP stakeholder map.

Kirsty MacFarlane: Kirsty, living in Coll, shared some observations – struck by the definition of an island community and the sense that people outwith the islands have more influence in decision making than permanent islanders. Centralised decision making is a key concern with the current approach. The Islands Bond proposal highlighted a chasm between the visions of central government and islanders. The Bond gave the impression of islands needing to persuade new people to come in with energy and new ideas, which was at odds with reality. There are plenty of ideas, and people that would like to live, work and set up a business in islands, but it is very difficult due to fundamental issues around infrastructure, connectivity, cost of living, access to services, bureaucracy, etc. These are the things we need government to tackle and perhaps, therefore, the next NIP needs to be simplified and go back to the basics. Kirsty also highlighted concern around the growing emphasis on energy, environment and the green agenda which doesn't suit every island, and in terms of housing/energy improvements, can be too expensive to deliver.

Kirsten Gow: Kirsten lives in Jura and has recently completed an internship with the Scottish Government to develop the Scottish Islands Typology which provides a more nuanced approach to islands, recognising the differing needs and opportunities rather than just seeing them as a single homogenous group. Kirsten noted the opportunity of the next iteration of the NIP and the value in developing a baseline of knowledge on the positives and negatives to date to feed in. The current NIP is a delivery framework and Kirsten suggested the next NIP take a different approach with a high level, overall, strategy for islands combined with more granular plans developed at a local level.

Adele: Adele underlined the key role of TSI's and third sector organisations within island communities, dealing with all sorts of issues and barriers and increasingly having to fill the gaps in the provision of many services.

In terms of concerns around the green agenda, Adele's research highlighted that community-based renewable projects, designed and delivered by the community, are a model that can allow smaller island communities to keep up with the growing deficit in service provision, with income generated used for what the community needs e.g. fuel pumps, community spaces, subsidised energy vouchers etc.

In drafting her thesis on the NIP, Adele will also highlight the lack of any strategic vision for the replacement of what EU funds did for islands. The actual amount isn't readily available but likely to be tens of billions of pounds. Also, the way the funding programmes were delivered, with a wide mix of organisations able to feed in, and each running over a period of 7 to 10 years, differs from the current situation where funding is year to year and some projects having to be delivered within weeks.

Adele commented on the value of the Island Typology that Kirsten has developed and its potential application to a wide range of opportunities for islands. Looking at transport infrastructure, for example, or education and the impact of school closures, and using it to improve the ICIA process. Adele mentioned the Future Generations Act in Wales which has a commissioner to look through every piece of policy from the perspective of future generations, as a good potential model for island proofing.

Lauren Worrell: Regional Manager with NFUS, covering Argyll and islands. NFUS members were consulted on the NIP review and the majority knew little about the NIP or its impact on island life. It was felt that a new NIP was needed, broken down to a more local level, and getting back to the fundamentals such as connectivity. While the green agenda is important and better homes/heating are needed, renewable heating incentives in their current form, are not fit for purpose for older housing in the islands and more work is needed to find solutions.

Rhoda Meek: Tiree Development Trust, Rhoda highlighted frustration at the continuous talk and plans - NIP, Gaelic Act, Gaelic Development Plan, jobs for young people, population action plan etc – while this week the budget for Gaelic development officers, who are often young people, who had job opportunities and the chance to either stay or come home, had been cut. This is a massive blow to a lot of island communities and highlights what is frustrating about all of these plans, which is that they seem to talk to themselves quite happily but it's not clear whether one department talks to the other. A £350,000 cut sends enormous ripples across communities and completely undermines the goals of the NIP.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: underlined some of the discussion so far that, while policy can often be aimed at attracting new people to the islands, what islanders actually want to see is ferries, housing, the ability to deliver services, broadband etc, in order to keep the people already living there.

Adele: agreed, adding that resettlement programmes often outline higher standards required for someone moving to an island than the support for those already living there. These messages around creating sustainable conditions for living in islands,

and supporting the things that are important to islanders, still don't seem to get through to some policy, and the frustration this causes can lead to disengagement.

With the potential for a new NIP, there is a good opportunity to pause and work out what we need to enable more local decision-making and the delivery of the fundamental things we need in islands.

Through the natural assets islands have and the many large scale green energy projects, the means are already there to fund the things we need and plug the gaps and it is vital that a significant proportion is re-directed locally. At the moment, the donations from onshore and offshore wind are suggested rather than required and are not nearly enough for the communities that will host these industries.

Confidence, longer term planning and policy needs to be strengthened around what islands have to offer, and good deals made that bring benefits to the islands. Care must also be taken to ensure a strong island remit continues and it isn't rolled into the current work on rural policy.

Alasdair Allan, MSP: commented on the need to make sure the messaging around people moving to/living in the islands is tailored to the local demographic need. In the Western Isles for example, there is a real need to attract more people to move to the area to work in the NHS. There is often a perception that there are no jobs in the islands, but the reality is many unfilled vacancies.

Where there is a need for new people, there is a need to promote the islands to a variety of ages, backgrounds and skills. There is also an urgent need to regulate the housing market as currently, unless you are wealthy, it isn't accessible.

Adele: agreed there is an issue around the rural idyll view of island life that is often presented externally as well as the cost and type of housing that is available. Service provision to support lifestyle and social fabric also needs further consideration. For example, getting on and off islands, in Adele's experience, has become more difficult over the last 2 to 3 years. Childcare is another example. Wraparound childcare enables opportunity, equality and a much easier lifestyle, but isn't available in many islands. Limited service provision also means many islanders often need to take on a number of jobs and commitments both paid and unpaid within their community. Adele noted examples in the Faroe islands of policy consideration into lifestyle and quality of life that we could learn from.

Kevin Morrison, Cothrom, South Uist: Cothrom provides adult learning and child care and Kevin noted frustration at the gaps yet to be filled from EU funding. He also underlined the positive role of the third sector in what can be delivered in the islands and how things can be achieved more quickly at a local level. Third sector organisations should be much closer to strategic planning and decision-making rather than just consultees.

Alastair Dobson, Arran: reflected that there is never likely to be more funding and we therefore need to look at smarter delivery. Rather than an ongoing series of plans, Alastair would prefer to see a forward critical path of where the NIP could take us and what things could look like in 5 and 10 years time. Alastair is involved in Arran's own island plan, supported by North Ayrshire Council, HIE and the Scottish

Government, and it has 3 key themes – economy, community and environment – and is a keen advocate for more sharing of learning and best practice. Scotland's islands can be Scotland's future but public infrastructure, the main driver for population growth, is badly needed

Theona Morrison, Uist/SRA: noted that over 80% of land in the western isles is under community ownership and it is widely acknowledged that people have a greater sense of empowerment when they control local assets. We must also look at what the islands contribute to Scotland. For example, crofting and its contribution to environmental and climate change aspirations; Scotland's larder with food and fishing, underpinning a rich cultural heritage and indigenous skills which also contributes to our local island economies – the more you have locally, the more sustainable you are. The Uist Beò platform is working to shift the narrative, showcasing islands as vibrant places to live and work all year round.

Colin, Luig: the NIP was widely consulted at the start, and communities were part of it. The issue is around its delivery where, having got the plan, a lot of communities feel powerless and not involved. ICIA's are handed to communities largely without the ability to take part in the process or change the outcomes. Going forward, Colin didn't feel the NIP should be completely re-written, but there needs to be a move away from talking and more focus on delivering.

Adele: in summing up, Adele's research has indicated that the strategic objectives of the NIP are largely the right ones. There are also new tools in place to enable decision-making to be challenged. However, in its next iteration there is a need to improve communication and local decision making and regain a sense of ownership from islanders. The role of third sector organisations is key in islands and should be recognised and supported more and finally, the things that are already working in islands should be amplified rather than continually trying to find new solutions.

4. AOCB

Nothing raised.

5. Date of next meeting

Jamie Halcro Johnston MSP closed the meeting by thanking Adele and all those who participated. He noted that the next meeting of the CPG on Islands, would be held on the 22nd of May and the Secretariat will circulate a short poll to help set the topics for future CPG meetings.

Meeting Concludes 2.20pm

Meeting Chat

Please see below some links, points and suggestions from the meeting chat:

- Island Typology (2024): classifies Scotland's islands into ten categories based on combinations of population, access to local amenities, and access to mainland. Noted that there are 89 islands covered by the Islands Act / Islands Plan. The previous figure of 93 was based on the Inhabited Islands Report from 2011 census data which predates the Act and includes islands in freshwater, such as Friarton / Moncreiffe Island in the River Tay.
- <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-islands-typology-overview-2024/>
- Food security suggested as a theme for inclusion within the NIP with the example given of Orkney being without meat for part of January due to weather related ferry cancellations for days at a time.
- Adding Integrated Joint Boards to the NIP stakeholder map suggested.
- Human Rights Framework should underline the NIP.
- Island Commissioner role suggested, similar to the example from Wales.
- ICIA's could be improved with more feedback/transparency on the outcomes/mitigations. While good to have as a tool, some seem based on the bare minimum required and don't engage with island communities fully. Revisions are needed to make ICIA's more transparent and accessible to communities.
- A recruitment policy that enables public sector jobs to be undertaken from island and remote and rural locations would be welcome and, in terms of governance, ensuring island views are at the Board level where strategic direction is shaped.
- Example given of how transport policy and investment can favour urban areas: Funding for bus services - the data on Under 22 scheme shows expenditure per young person on the scheme between start and end May 2023 of £356 per young person in Edinburgh, compared to £47.37 per young person in Orkney (and as low as £41.67 per young person in the Western Isles). The urban-focussed model for funding distribution does not work, and including when IoMD is used as island and remote / rural areas do not demonstrate pockets of deprivation, but rather deprivation and poverty is dispersed and often well hidden.
- Connectivity, housing and healthcare were felt to be key themes that need tackled.
- The contribution that islands make to Scotland and the UK needs more recognition and promotion, for example, renewable energy, tax from whisky, food, tourism, culture and lots more.
- Better access to training to grow skills, jobs and resilience.
- North Ayrshire Islands Programme, funded by SG, HIE and NAC highlighted: [Islands Recovery and Renewal \(north-ayrshire.gov.uk\)](https://www.north-ayrshire.gov.uk/islands-recovery-and-renewal)