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Convener of Rural Affairs and Islands Committee
Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
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30 August 2023

Dear Finlay,

National Islands Plan Annual Report 2022 - Follow-up Information

I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to provide an update on the National Islands Plan Annual Report 2022 at the session on 24 May 2023.

As I set out in my opening statement, the Annual Report for 2022 covers a particularly difficult period for our island communities, who still face many challenges across the board which have only been amplified by the likes of Brexit, Covid-19, Russia's war against Ukraine and the ongoing cost crisis.

The National Islands Plan continues to provide the Scottish Government with a framework for improving the lives of the people on our islands, and I am happy to provide further clarification around several aspects of the Plan that were raised during the session. At Committee, I agreed to provide more detailed background into various areas, these are included at Annex A.

As you can see from our discussions, my priorities remain to support island communities to flourish and thrive under the most difficult of circumstances. I trust this letter and the information it contains, provide the additional detail to support the Committee's scrutiny.

Yours sincerely,



MAIRI GOUGEON

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Island Communities Impact Assessments

Action: Provide a list of bodies that are expected to undertake island communities impact assessments.

Response: There is a list of 71 relevant authorities, including the Scottish Government who are required to undertake island communities impact assessments. These are set out in the [schedule](#) of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018.

Population

Action: Provide information on practical policy tests.

Response: When identifying and developing our Practical Policy Tests, we took an iterative and collaborative approach. Building on the feedback received through the Islands Bond consultation, we reengaged with island communities, stakeholders and relevant local authorities to define specific challenges related to the key issues impacting on population retention and growth. We ensured that there would be a geographic spread of projects, and that we would also consider islands with different characteristics, including population size.

Positive examples of this collaborative approach include our Island Skills and Repopulation Projects which have been delivered in partnership with Argyll and Bute Council, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, and North Ayrshire Council. These projects covered islands with populations ranging from around 150 to over 6000 and were developed to test the impact of a targeted, place-based approach which is aligned and responsive to local skills and employment needs.

We also worked with Highland Council and a local development trust in Mull and Iona, to further identify potential solutions to the challenges facing childcare and childminding in rural and island areas. These projects have helped to further strengthen the evidence base, and our understanding of, the challenges and potential approaches to addressing depopulation. This learning is informing the development of the forthcoming Addressing Depopulation Action Plan, and may also help shape discussions with local authorities, communities, enterprise agencies and other key stakeholders on developing further solutions.

Of course, not every project or proposal was able to be taken forward. Where a community project has not been able to progress, we have remained engaged to help identify alternative opportunities for support. However, these projects demonstrated that resource issues for communities do not solely concern financial investment. For example, when we are working to empower communities to deliver projects, it is essential that the capacity of community staff/volunteer directors are factored in and that it is not solely about providing project investment. This importance of non-financial support for communities will be highlighted in the Addressing Depopulation Action Plan.

Ferries

Action: Clarify whether any port development projects have been affected, cancelled or delayed because of the increasing costs of the two Ferguson Marine ferries.

Response: There have not been any delays or cancellations to port projects as a result of the delays at FMPG. We are committed to the completion of Glen Sannox and hull 802, securing a sustainable future for the yard and supporting our island communities that rely on this type of vessel on a daily basis.

Islands Spend

Action: Provide further information on the split between the capital and resource elements of the funding to support the delivery of the National Islands Plan in 2022/23.

Response:

The Scottish Government invested £4.45 million of capital funding through the Islands Programme in 2022/23 to ensure delivery of the National Islands Plan. Details of specific projects are provided below:

Argyll and Bute Council

Island Community Halls Digital Hubs, £100,000. Coll, Iona, Islay, Tiree. Argyll and Bute Council

This project created four Digital Hubs in island community halls for a variety of uses including hybrid meetings, access for online services and NHS “Near Me” clinics. It acted as a pathfinder for other potential sites across other islands and builds on experiences from the pandemic to provide inclusive digital access and a reduction in travelling time, costs and emissions.

Tobermory Seawall and Railings Improvements, £250,000. Mull.

This project provided critical sea front infrastructure to the community of Tobermory by adding resilience against tidal surges and helping to reduce the impact of climate change. The work also supported the sustainability of existing businesses and provided a safer and more welcoming environment.

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar

Ionad Hiort – RIBA Stage 4 design fees, £167,000. Lewis. Comhairle nan Eilean Siar

The Ionad Hiort/St Kilda Centre project aims to build a £6.25 million visitor centre in Uig in the Isle of Lewis. This project was for RIBA stage 4 work which provided the necessary detailed specifications to progress to the tender stage. Ionad Hiort has been recognized by the UNESCO World Heritage Centre as a global exemplar for remote access to the hundreds of World Heritage Sites where visitor access in large numbers is either impossible or undesirable. The project aims to provide critical employment thereby supporting retention and growth in population and will contribute to re-invigorating a living Gaidhlig community.

Community Facilities Programme – Uist, £347,781. Berneray, North Uist, Eriskay.

The Community Facilities Regeneration Programme is a series of three regeneration projects for a community hall; reconfiguring a building into a digital co-working space and safeguarding another community building prior to establishing a community hub. The programme will have significant impacts in future proofing each group's facilities while increasing the level of service provision. The energy efficiency measures taken with incorporation of Renewable Energy solutions will lead to a dramatic reduction annually in carbon emissions across the three projects.

The Highland Council

Old Surgery Housing Enablement, £72,000. Eigg.

This project delivered the enabling ground works, bore hole and electricity connections in preparation for the main construction phase of two new homes in as timely a manner as possible. This project has strong links to population retention and growth, housing and uses off grid and renewable energy connections. The application is focused solely on infrastructure to "unlock" the site, comprising a new, robust water supply and establishing an electrical connection to Eigg Electric Ltd (Eigg's Green Energy Grid).

The Old Man of Storr, £440,000. Skye.

The ambition of the overall project is to deliver a world class experience for visitors to the Old Man of Storr that showcases Skye's unique heritage and culture. This project was focused on the provision of a retail/visitor unit on-site and EV charging points. There are strong links with sustainability, education, and sustainable economic development in addition to increased awareness of Gaelic and local culture.

North Ayrshire Council

Regeneration of Millport Town Hall – phase 2, £509,450. Cumbrae.

Phase 2 of a multi-funded development to use the building's basement to provide a central community space, delivering a package of activities and attractions within a heritage building. The renovated space provided additional operational income to sustain the project and extend options for use. The project has high levels of community involvement, partnership working and builds on previous investment. Natural light, solar panels and air source heat pumps provide a significant amount of the building's energy and LED lighting. New conservation standard double-glazed windows and insulation were also installed.

Island Pit Stops, £540,000. Arran and Cumbrae.

This project aimed to manage the challenges of increased visitor numbers by re-purposing and improving existing infrastructure to encourage visitor dispersal and cope with over-visitation at key sites. It sought to increase the quality of the visitors' experience by providing better facilities, thereby supporting increased dwell time and spend on the islands. Island toilet buildings are being redeveloped into accessible and eco designed Island Pit stops across nine locations. This project provides a replicable example of sustainable tourism.

Orkney Islands Council

New Kirkwall Nursery, £1,500,000. Mainland Orkney.

New build nursery facility located next to Orkney College campus, to replace an existing building earmarked for demolition and which is the only current nursery facility in Orkney. The project has strong links to population retention, addressing child poverty and meeting net zero ambitions. The proposed nursery is located adjacent to Orkney College, leading to opportunities to support Childhood Practice Students as they develop their skills, therefore supporting a key sector which has had recruitment challenges. The new-build facility will save

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approximately 20 tonnes of CO2 in moving the nursery service from the old 1960 CLASP building to the new highly insulated building.

Shetland Islands Council

Aald Skul Enterprise Development £88,095. Mainland Shetland.

By investing in a new portable cabin, additional access and parking, this social enterprise in a small community will be able to expand the range and volume of repaired, donated items offered for sale. This project is a strong replicable example of working towards net zero ambitions in a remote community and is a clear model of the circular economy in action. The Scrapstore strives to meet net zero ambitions through reducing travel and energy associated with disposing of goods which are still in good/repairable condition or with travelling to buy new items. This can help to reduce overall household expenses, and influence perception that the community can be an affordable place to live in comparison to other areas and centres.

Papa Stour Kirk Development £252,505. Papa Stour. Shetland Islands Council

This second phase of a three-phase project will help safeguard and improve the building fabric of Papa Stour Kirk, the only community facility on the island. The work will protect the building for continued use and provide a steppingstone ultimately to a new community hub and visitor centre. There are strong links to supporting NIP Strategic Objective 10 empowered local communities and incorporates net zero ambitions.

The Scottish Government also utilised £1 million of resource funding in 2022/23 to support delivery of the National Islands Plan. This included (but is not limited to) grants to the Scottish Islands Federation to promote, publicise and advance the interests of Scotland's inhabited islands; funding to Scottish Futures Trust to provide expertise, resource and capability to help lead the delivery aspects of the Islands Programme; the delivery of the Islands Heritage and Culture Posts across all six of our island local authorities; the provision of the Island Skills and Repopulation Pilots in both Argyll and Bute and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar; funding for the Young Islanders Network; and a review and update of the Island Communities Impact Assessment Guidance and Toolkit.

In terms of Rachael Hamilton's request for further information around specific staff costs for 2022/23, these came to £555,210 which funded a total of ten staff - six core Scottish Government staff posts and four inward secondees to support the delivery of the National Islands Plan.

Action: Provide further information on whether the National Islands Plan has led to a focusing of financial resources on islands which would not have happened if the Plan did not exist.

Response: The National Islands Plan has introduced and increased financial resources specifically to islands. This is evident through the ongoing implementation of the £25.8 million Islands Programme, as well as the delivery of the Islands Cost Crisis Fund in both 2022/23 and 2023/24, with funding of £1.4 million and £1 million respectively. Additionally, the delivery of the Carbon Neutral Islands Project has resulted in an investment of over £3million since its inception in 2021 and aims to further utilise three key finance drivers: existing public funding, public-private partnerships and private investment.

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