



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee

Wednesday 13 November 2019

Session 5



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RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

31st Meeting 2019, Session 5

CONVENER

*Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con)

*John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

*Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con)

*Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP)

*Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP)

*Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP)

*Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD)

*Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab)

*Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Erica Clarkson (Scottish Government)

The Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands (Paul Wheelhouse)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

James Johnston

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament
Rural Economy and Connectivity
Committee

Wednesday 13 November 2019

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:15]

Decision on Taking Business in
Private

The Convener (Edward Mountain): Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee's 31st meeting in 2019. I ask everyone to ensure that their mobile phones are on silent.

Agenda item 1 is a decision on whether to take items 4 and 5 in private to allow the committee to discuss its output from today's evidence session on "The Proposed National Islands Plan" and its approach to the Agriculture (Retained EU Law and Data) (Scotland) Bill. Do members agree to take those items in private?

Members *indicated agreement.*

"The Proposed National Islands
Plan"

09:16

The Convener: At item 2, we will take evidence from the Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands on the Scottish Government's document, "The Proposed National Islands Plan". I welcome the minister, Paul Wheelhouse, along with his Scottish Government officials: Erica Clarkson, who is islands lead; Heather Cowan, who is head of transport strategy and European funding; and Don Morrison, who is island policy officer.

Minister, would you like to make a brief opening statement, given that time is of the essence?

The Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands (Paul Wheelhouse): Sure, convener—I will try to truncate my remarks. I thank you and the other committee members for inviting me to give evidence today and for the opportunity to talk about "The Proposed National Islands Plan", which sets out our ambitions for Scotland's islands and island communities.

First, I acknowledge the support that we have received from stakeholders, including the Scottish Islands Federation, our partners at the University of Strathclyde and our local authority colleagues. The proposed plan is based on a wide-ranging consultation process, which would not have been possible without their input and support. I also take the liberty of thanking my islands team for their efforts—they worked extremely hard during the consultation process and were often away from home, travelling around 40 islands and holding 61 events.

The proposed plan stems from the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, which is a groundbreaking piece of legislation of which Scotland should be proud. There are very few countries in the world that have passed a piece of legislation that is devoted to islands and their communities. Croatia passed a similar act in 2018, and Finland has a long history of island policy. Apart from those countries, however, there are very few such examples, not just in Europe but around the world. In addition, island policy in Scotland is acquiring a global reputation because of its content, and I stress that the whole Parliament, rather than just the Government, can take credit for that.

The proposed plan is a fair, integrated, green and inclusive plan. Those are the four themes on which the document focuses, and we believe that we are providing leadership across those aspects. The plan is just the start, and we are moving towards developing an ambitious implementation strategy that will include clear actions and

indicators to explain how we will deliver on the commitments that appear in each of the plan's 13 strategic objectives.

That is only the beginning. I reiterate that, in implementing the plan, we wish to continue to work in an integrated manner. Sometimes integration exists only on paper, and implementation can move quite quickly—as I am sure we have all seen—back to sectoral or silo-driven approaches. That particular approach just will not work for islands and island communities. We want to ensure that, as respondents to the consultation identified, we develop each strategic objective in line with the four key principles underpinning the plan. We intend to ensure that we avoid silo thinking and get departments, agencies and stakeholders to work together to deliver on those objectives.

The plan is devoted to improving outcomes for island communities. However, although we face challenges—I am sure that our session today will focus on some of the negative issues that we need to address—we should remember that islands are already great places to live, visit and work. Islands are already, in many respects, hubs of innovation because, as is often the case, necessity is the mother of invention.

Energy is a key example of an area in which islands and their communities have thrived by developing a close and strong alliance with the incredible natural resources that the islands possess, working with renewables and often community renewables. They capture the energy from the wind, tides, waves and so forth, but that is not possible without the hard work and innovation of the islanders themselves.

I am conscious of time, so I will mention just a couple of other significant points that may arise in our forthcoming discussion. First, we want to build on some of the success stories that have taken place in our islands, and to try to make them even greater places to live for those who are already there and for people who may want to move there.

We are very aware that depopulation has come through as one of the biggest themes in the document and I am sure that members are too. However, positively, we are aware that there are people who want to move to our islands. Just last week we heard that more than 300 people have filed their interest in moving to the small island of Ulva in Argyll and Bute, which is tremendously encouraging. That would mean a 6,000 per cent increase in population.

Although Ulva may be a particular story with a romantic notion around trying to rebuild its population, it highlights that, given the right circumstances, there will be people, whether islanders or non-islanders, who will consider

moving to our islands. The plan and, critically, its implementation will allow us to better understand those circumstances and, we hope, to develop a sound policy framework to repeat the success factors that we have identified elsewhere that have encouraged people to move to islands. In our programme for government, we have committed to publishing the final national islands plan before the end of this year, and we are on track to do that. That aspect will be a key focus of that document.

Finally, so as not to overstay my welcome at this point, I will tie in the issue of young islanders, as appealing to young people will be critical. I remind the committee that we also said in the programme for government that we would establish a new young islanders network. Young people are clearly a key element in determining the future success of our islands. Being able to capture their desires, dreams and aspirations is crucial for a successful plan and to deliver a sustainable future for each of our island communities, but we believe that our young people can be much more than just a sounding board for ideas. We see more every day of how young people are now key actors in driving forward change and initiative, most obviously in the climate emergency debate and the work of Greta Thunberg and other young people.

The new young islanders network will give young people on islands not only an outlet for their voice but a place at the heart of the implementation of the plan. What we mean by that is that, in implementing the plan, we wish young islanders, through the network, to be key and active stakeholders and to shape the future direction of island policy and policies that affect our islands. We hope that that will help us to produce a dynamic and forward-looking implementation strategy for the plan.

There is much more that I could say, but I will end there because I know that there will be many issues that colleagues want to raise.

The Convener: Thank you, minister. I am sure that the team that is drawing up the islands plan loved the opportunity to visit all the islands around Scotland. Who would not?

Stewart Stevenson (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I have a couple of themes, and I am going to ask everything at once to help us to make progress in a limited time.

The first theme relates to consultation. I welcome what has been said about the young islanders network as an indication of an attempt to bring new people to the discussion. However, the question remains as to whether, in the 60-plus meetings to which you referred, we have essentially seen the usual suspects or successfully managed to get individuals and

interests who would not normally have engaged in the process.

The other thing is that underpinning a lot of what you do will be having appropriate data. It seems, from what the committee has heard, that there are difficulties in getting island-scale data. There is data from larger areas from councils that include mainland areas and islands, but there are difficulties. How are you addressing that difficulty and what are you aware of? In relation to data, the plan cross-references the national performance framework and United Nations sustainable development goals, looking in the other direction to wider goals rather than at communities. How will you assess against that?

Paul Wheelhouse: Thank you, Mr Stevenson. You raise some important points. It is helpful to focus on the range of people who are involved. We have tried to avoid the trap of just talking to the usual suspects and that is why the team, led by Erica Clarkson and Don Morrison, have pushed as far as they could to reach as many islands and islanders as possible. The online consultation and the 61 public events and meetings were held across 40 islands, which I appreciate is nowhere near the total of 96 inhabited islands. We have a job to do to pick up messages from the islands that we were not able to visit during the consultation.

We reached almost 1,000 individuals through that process; members who have experience of it will know that that is a pretty extensive number of consultees compared with most Government consultations, which have attracted less feedback. The live events, which were backed up by online consultation, received a total of 414 responses from 356 individuals and 58 organisations. I may be corrected by colleagues, but I understand that 99 per cent of individuals who responded to the consultation indicated that they already live on an island, or are linked to one. Geographically, respondents were from all the relevant local authorities that are covered by the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018. I am pleased that it was a good range geographically and in terms of the make-up of the people who were there.

We are conscious that we need to do more on the islands plan to reflect the feedback from the consultation. Gender issues are an area on which we need to do more work, and we may need to focus on those issues in the future. Although today we are talking about the national islands plan, a detailed report for each island consultation is available. For each area that has been visited, a report was prepared for each island so members will be able to get a flavour of the diversity of issues that were raised. Members of the communities that we consulted may look at the national islands plan and not see a specific

mention of the issue that they raised at their session, but we have captured all of that and it will be tremendously helpful. There will be some granularity in the feedback at a very local level from different groups in society that might not be reflected in the national islands plan.

Data is a very important issue. Even my briefing, which the team, as always, has produced assiduously, has data indicators for which we have data only from the three island authorities. It is more difficult to break out the island data in the other three authorities of North Ayrshire, Highland and Argyll and Bute—paradoxically, Argyll and Bute has more inhabited islands than any local authority—so there are challenges to make sure that we have the range of indicators that we need. The plan—

Stewart Stevenson: Minister, do you agree that that is an issue?

Paul Wheelhouse: I do.

Stewart Stevenson: What are we doing?

Paul Wheelhouse: I will be happy to come to that point, convener. The plan recognises that better local data will be key to understanding the challenges and how we can shape our responses to them. We need better local data about demographics, economic development, health and other areas that we need to focus on, such as housing. That will be important in addressing the effectiveness of the policy measures and identifying the indicators that we then use for the implementation plan. We obviously need to be able to measure progress.

There is a lack of robust disaggregated socioeconomic data at the island level, particularly publishable data. A key area of feedback throughout the consultation was that some areas have significant gaps in available data; we must now spend time to gather and analyse that data to ensure that any measurable outcomes in the plans support the implementation strategy and are informed from a reliable baseline. We lack baselines, so we need to establish them and monitor progress. Research is being undertaken by Scotland's Rural College—SRUC—to formally identify the gaps in islands data, across all levels, and it will continue to be a key component of the implementation strategy. We hope to improve the granularity and accessibility of data as it affects the islands, as a positive by-product of the process.

We will also review the availability and usefulness of wider barriers to island-level data, at the level of individual islands and groups of islands, and we will consider the creation of a Scottish islands data level in order to better understand the challenges that are faced by island communities. That will feed into the national

performance framework point that Stewart Stevenson raised, with regard to the UN sustainable development goals. The development of indicators to measure the extent to which outcomes for island communities that have been identified in the plan are improved will also build on outcomes and indicators that are provided for in the national performance framework and on good practice that has stemmed from the development of the indicators for the sustainable development goals at a global level. There are statutory provisions in the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 to provide for annual reports on progress by the Scottish ministers, to be reviewed every five years, and those will focus on assessing whether the plan has made positive progress in such areas.

Stewart Stevenson: I have a very short question—

The Convener: —that may have a quite short answer.

09:30

Stewart Stevenson: I think that one sentence can answer it.

Mr Wheelhouse, you referred in your opening remarks to interest in repopulating from people who do not live on the islands. What contact have you made, or plan to make, with that group of people, who are relevant to this issue?

Paul Wheelhouse: I will make this short and my colleague Erica Clarkson will answer more fully. We tried to capture in the consultation the group to which Mr Stevenson referred. We specifically modified the questionnaire to appeal to people who were no longer islanders and who perhaps left the islands for economic reasons, because we wanted to see whether there were any factors that would attract them back. I ask Erica to comment on how we will keep in touch with any individuals who fed back to us on that.

Erica Clarkson (Scottish Government): As Mr Wheelhouse said, we did our very best to reach out to people who have moved away from the islands or have an association with the islands but no longer live on them. We did that through the usual channels of social media and traditional media and had a number of responses to the online consultation from people who have an interest in the islands but no longer live there. We are doing our very best to reach out to them and maintain contact with them. I hope that, through our young islanders network, we might be able to encourage young people to consider returning to the islands.

Jamie Greene (West Scotland) (Con): My question is about the consideration of the plan.

Admittedly, we passed the bill that said that there would be 40 days for consideration of the plan from the date of its introduction to the Parliament. The committee issued a call for evidence, but we allowed only three weeks for it and received only 44 responses. In retrospect, do you think that we should have given a bit more time in the bill for stakeholders to consider the plan?

Paul Wheelhouse: I do not want to criticise anything that was done previously, but there has certainly been time pressure on us to get through the process. Clearly, having more time would be helpful. We are not rushing the process because we want to rush it; we obviously want to get it right. However, we are trying to use the current period to get as much information as we can, but I appreciate the difficulty that that creates for the committee as well as for my colleagues in the Government.

In retrospect, it would have been helpful to have had more time, so perhaps we can reflect on that for future iterations of the national islands plan. We are doing our best to honour the commitments in the 2018 act but, unfortunately, it restricts us to that 40-day period.

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Good morning, minister and panel.

We are still in the consultation and development stage for the final plan, but the proposed plan was not published in Gaelic. Misneachd, an organisation for which I have some regard, said that that was disappointing and shameful. Tha gu dearbh chan eil sin math—I agree that it is not good. Why was the proposal not published in Gaelic?

Paul Wheelhouse: I apologise if any impression was given that we are in any way disrespecting the Gaelic language. I very much believe that Gaelic has a strong role to play in Scottish society today and, I hope, a stronger one in future. I hope that, if we get our policies right, particularly on avoiding depopulation in areas such as the Western Isles and Skye, that will mean a bright future for the Gaelic language, although there is obviously strength in the language now.

However, the difficulty here was again the timescale, which I spoke about with Mr Greene. I am not criticising colleagues who proposed the measure, but the tight timescale that the 2018 act imposed unfortunately meant that we did not have time to prepare a Gaelic version of the proposal. Ministerial changes were taking place at that time as well and policy officials in different departments were editing their objectives and actions for the plan proposal to ensure that they had everything right. Given all that, it was not possible to complete a Gaelic version of the proposed

national islands plan in the timescale that we had and I apologise for that.

In an ideal world we would love to have had a Gaelic language version of the proposed plan in parallel with the English version. However, the final published version of the national islands plan will be available in both Gaelic and English and any other language, as requested. The proposed plan that was laid before Parliament on 3 October is in English, but we made the objectives and commitments available in Gaelic. I stress also that we will extend an invitation to Bòrd na Gàidhlig to join our new national islands plan governance group to ensure that the plan aligns as closely as possible to the national Gaelic plan. If we have lost any ground on this, we want to pick up as much of that as we can. We are glad that Bòrd na Gàidhlig will take part.

John Finnie: I do not wish to labour the negative point, but people look to the Government to provide leadership. Everyone can find a reason not to do something, but there is an equal respect agenda.

Paul Wheelhouse: I very much acknowledge that, Mr Finnie, and I apologise for the position that we are in. However, we will try to ensure that we have a fully accurate Gaelic version of the final plan.

John Finnie: I will make another couple of points on that, minister. We have received evidence that the plan is “soft and quite weak”, because of its use of terms such as “encourage” and “consider”, and

“particularly as there is a statutory system operating already”.

What will you do to strengthen the proposed plan in that regard, to ensure that it aligns more closely with the national Gaelic plan—which itself is written in a non-islands context—and the role of Bòrd na Gàidhlig?

Paul Wheelhouse: We recognise that respondents to the consultation stressed that investment in Gaelic language and culture has brought positive results to our islands, and we can hang on to that positive view. However, we are keen to address anything that stakeholders might believe to be weaknesses in the document. I hope that the participation of Bòrd na Gàidhlig will strengthen areas of the national islands plan that might require that. In the implementation of that plan, we will ensure that we align as closely as possible with the objectives of the national Gaelic plan.

We need to take a solid approach to include many aspects of the culture of different island communities, including Gaelic and other local languages. I recognise the diversity of our islands

and the fact that Gaelic is not the dominant language in all of them. However, we need to reflect the aspirations of those communities for their own use of language. I am conscious that there might be a different view in the northern isles, for example. We very much want to build links with Bòrd na Gàidhlig and to ensure that we take on board its feedback and that of other stakeholders with interests in other languages.

If the committee has recommendations on what the Government might do to strengthen the proposed plan, we would welcome its input.

John Finnie: Mòran taing.

The Convener: Mike, I think that you want to push the minister a bit more on that point.

Mike Rumbles (North East Scotland) (LD): When the committee considered the Islands (Scotland) Bill we raised a lot of issues about detail—for example, on health services, transport and the environment—and were told that we should not worry because the act was an enabling one and all the detail would be in the islands plan.

As far as I am aware, and as I think most people would agree, plans should be SMART—that is, specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time limited. In contrast, I will give just some examples of where confusion comes in when I look at the proposed plan, which says that the Government will “work with” Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the University of the Highlands and Islands and that it will “work with stakeholders”, “collaborate”, “work in partnership” and “showcase leadership”. The document also uses words such as “promote”, “create”, “ensure” and “build on”. I can go on. For example, the document also says that the Government will ensure that

“crofting continues to provide jobs and opportunities to island communities”

and that it will

“take forward the delivery of the Islands Passport initiative”.

The document also contains phrases such as “work together”, “seek to expand” and “review”.

Goodness me. None of that is SMART—there are no SMART objectives in the document. I could understand that if its purpose was to be a strategic look forward, after which the Government would make a plan that would contain specific measures. However, if I may say so, minister, I think that the document is confusing everybody. It contains what I consider to be a strategic approach rather than a plan. Do you have any comments on that view?

Paul Wheelhouse: I will go back to a couple of points that I made in my opening remarks. This is the first time the Government has produced such a plan, so we were not expecting to have got it bang on, much as we would love to have had a perfect

result first time round. Relatively few countries in the world have produced such a plan, so it is new territory for the Scottish Parliament, the Scottish Government and stakeholders.

The Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 requires us to prepare a national islands plan, the purpose of which is to set out our

“main objectives and strategy ... in relation to improving outcomes for island communities”.

I take the point that Mr Rumbles made about SMART objectives. I very much hope that we will get to that stage.

Mike Rumbles: Are there any such objectives in the proposed plan?

Paul Wheelhouse: As you know, we have set out a number of objectives and more than 100 actions that flow from them. Through our implementation strategy, we will develop those and produce indicators to measure progress. That will get us to a point at which we will have SMART objectives. As we have just discussed, in some cases data at islands level does not exist or has not been published, so we need to fill in those gaps. SRUC is helping us to identify those gaps and to build a good framework for the quality of data that we need in order to provide the right indicators so that we can then measure progress against our objectives.

We very much share Mike Rumbles’s aspiration to have SMART objectives and targets for implementing actions, so I respect the point that he is making. The plan provides us with a framework and a direction to take. We have already started work to shape the implementation strategy; it is being co-created with island communities and stakeholders, which I hope the committee welcomes. It will set out specific actions and timescales for each of the commitments in the plan—that addresses Mr Rumbles’s point. Of course, the success of the plan depends on implementation.

It is important for the implementation strategy to address in detail each of the 13 strategic objectives that are listed in the plan. It will look closely at every factor in relation to each objective and set out the steps that we will take to deliver on our commitments. Of course, there is a chapter in the proposed plan that sets out our commitment to supporting effective implementation. We hope that, by working closely with our local authority colleagues and other island partners, we will be able to address any confusion that might have arisen around the purpose of the implementation strategy.

I appreciate that Mr Rumbles feels that we have not done enough in that regard, but we are clearly committing to developing the framework that he

yearns for so that we can measure progress against the objectives. I hope that we will get to that point in short order.

Mike Rumbles: I understand what you are saying, minister—indeed, I am pleased with it. There is nothing wrong with what is in the plan, but it is not a plan; it is a strategy. My point is motivated by a desire not to confuse our constituents and the inhabitants of our islands. If I were an islander, I would have this basic question: What are you going to do and when are you going to do it? An islander who picks up this document will think that it is a strategy. I think that we should call things what they are. This is a strategy.

I know that you are now talking about an “implementation strategy”, but that just adds to the confusion. What we should be talking about in that context is a plan, not an implementation strategy. Do you see what I am getting at?

Paul Wheelhouse: I do, and I have great sympathy with what you are saying—I hope that I am not giving an alternative impression. However, we also have a challenge that we must address; I hope that I can explain a bit in that regard, which might deal with some of the confusion.

Obviously, we want to set up a partnership approach with local authorities and other stakeholders in the islands, and to work with young people and the young islanders network. We need to identify not only the metrics of progress, but who will lead on particular themes. We want to do that very much in partnership and consultation with local authorities and other partners. I hope that we will get there through having reached consensus among all parties about the importance of identifying all of the objectives and the actions with them. We need to get to a point at which we can identify who is leading on this. Some of the actions might involve United Kingdom agencies, and we might want to talk to the UK Government to ensure that we take on board its potential to contribute to delivery of the islands plan.

However, clearly, a lot of the areas of action will be at a level at which they can be influenced by our own decisions. Therefore, we will want to ensure that local authorities, the Scottish Government and other agencies work together to identify how we can take those actions forward.

At some point, Parliament might decide to switch things around and have a national islands strategy as well as a plan, but at the moment, the legislation is framed such that we have to deliver a plan. I appreciate that the plan might look a lot like a strategy, and I very much take Mike Rumbles’s point in that regard. The work is quite high-level at this point, but we want to get down to a more granular level. Hopefully, that will get us to a better

place, where we will have indicators and data that can inform future iterations of the plan.

The Convener: Emma—do you want to press the minister on targets and times?

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): No. The minister has clarified the difference between strategies and plans. Whatever we do, we need to get on with it and people need to understand what is happening. I take the point that Mr Rumbles made about plans versus strategies. I think that it is obvious that there will be a wee bit of confusion, so what is needed is some clarity.

Paul Wheelhouse: We will do what we can to clarify the situation and not add to confusion. It is not my aim this morning to confuse people.

Richard Lyle (Uddingston and Bellshill) (SNP): Good morning, minister. One council has stated:

“There are over 100 ‘commitments’ in the Plan and a lot of work will be required to turn these into tangible, measurable actions.”

The Orkney partnership stated:

“With regard to practicality of delivery, the Plan has far too many proposed actions in it to be able to achieve even a small proportion.”

We know that local authorities and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities have expressed concerns about the plan’s feasibility, the volume of commitments and the lack of targets and outcomes. How do you intend to address those concerns?

09:45

Paul Wheelhouse: I recognise the danger that Mr Lyle alludes to as regards deliverability when there is a huge number of objectives. We have also touched on the potential for confusion.

One action from the islands strategic group meeting in August that is being taken forward by Erica Clarkson and the team is the establishment of a new partnership group of Scottish Government and local authority officials. We hope that that group—which should also help on the point that Mr Rumbles made—will be fully involved in development of the implementation strategy and the associated measurable outcomes.

A key aspect of the implementation strategy will be the development of the indicators, which Mr Stevenson touched on. Having fully considered suitable options for those indicators that we can use to measure progress, we feel that it would be appropriate to use indicators that are developed on the basis of the national performance framework and the sustainable development goals as a means to demonstrate progress on each of the 13 objectives. Indicators are being developed

for each outcome and objective, in collaboration with key delivery partners. I hope that that will provide a bit more clarity about the nature of the outcomes that are being sought.

If local authority partners have any concerns about the feasibility of the plan, the volume of commitments or—to pick up on Mr Rumbles’s point—the lack of targets and outcomes in the plan, I hope that that will begin to clear away a bit of the fog and provide clarity.

We will obviously bear down on the areas in which we feel most urgent action is required. We will have to prioritise based on the 80:20 principle, to some degree, but there will be issues that we will want to pick up across all the objectives. Through the partnership group that is being established, I hope that we can get to the point at which local authorities are comfortable with what is in the plan and the implementation strategy, and have the clarity that they feel that they need.

Richard Lyle: I was previously the Scottish National Party group leader on COSLA, so I know how COSLA works. Councils continually say to Government, “We need more money.”

Have you costed the proposals in the plan? What other assessments of the plan have been carried out? How will the Scottish Government structure civil service support to ensure that the plan is delivered? How will you deliver on the aspiration to align different Scottish Government plans and strategies? How will you help councils to deliver the plan?

The Convener: Thank you for combining those questions, Mr Lyle.

I am conscious that members have a lot of questions that they want to ask, so I ask for brevity, minister, so that every member gets a chance to ask their questions.

Paul Wheelhouse: Absolutely. If shortening my answers means that there are areas on which the committee would like more detail subsequently, we will try to provide that.

Mr Lyle has raised important points. We are feeding into the spending review process what we believe is required to ensure implementation of the plan. That is why we need to develop a prioritised and fully costed implementation strategy, which will enable us to identify leadership for each of the objectives and actions in it. My officials are working to ensure that the final version of the plan is equality assessed. In the meantime, we are seeking to ensure that we feed those issues into the budget process and that we have done the appropriate checks—I am referring to island proofing and equalities aspects that might be scrutinised as part of the budget process.

I would make a similar point in relation to Mr Lyle's question about the civil service. I am very proud of the fact that we have a dedicated islands team that is led by islanders: Erica Clarkson and Don Morrison are islanders, which is important. The plan is aligned with on-going policy developments and was created with input from across Government. We want to ensure that we continue that cross-portfolio working. We have made some asks to make sure that we beef up the team in the areas in which we believe that is necessary.

However, we will also draw on colleagues, including Heather Cowan, who have a strong interest in specific areas of policy such as transport, which have an impact on the plan's implementation. We will continue to work across portfolios, but we want to build the core islands team to ensure that we have sufficient resource to deliver on the implementation of the strategy.

The Convener: I want to push you a wee bit on that. The plan has a list of objectives that you want to achieve, so you must have an idea of what it is going to cost. Do you have in mind a figure for implementation of the islands plan that you will ask for in the budget? I would have one.

Paul Wheelhouse: We have more clarity on some areas than others. To go back to an earlier point, I am not evading the question; there are areas on which we do not have sufficient baseline information to know how far we have to travel on particular indicators. It is easier to gauge where we are going for the three islands authorities. A discussion is also going on about the islands deal, and the asks that are being framed around that.

We have some clarity in some areas and we are happy to write to the committee on those, but more work needs to be done, through the partnership group that I referred to, on identifying the scale of investment in other areas.

The Convener: To clarify, you do not have a definitive cost for the plan, and you have not asked for that money to be set aside in the budget, when it finally comes out.

Paul Wheelhouse: We do not have costs in the format that you are looking for, because they sit across all Government portfolios. There is a huge range of actions—more than 100—so we do not have a precise figure. However, through the approach that we have outlined, we will work with the lead officials from local authorities and the Scottish Government in the partnership group, which has been established to bear down on identification of the scale of investment that is needed to tackle some of the indicators.

The Convener: The costings will come later.

Paul Wheelhouse: They should come later, through the implementation strategy process.

Jamie Greene: I want to follow that theme. When we first started to look at the Islands (Scotland) Bill, one of the biggest fears was the notion that it would involve lots of warm words, but would not be followed up with meaningful resources, including financial support. The financial memorandum was very light on that. I have gone through the plan and there are only a couple of mentions of money, and those are sums of which we were already aware—for house building, digital, the 4G infill programme, and so on. Those numbers are Scotland-wide—they are not specific to islands and are already out there in the ether. When we get to the final iteration of the plan, can islanders expect to see something tangible and meaty in the financial resource behind it? Otherwise, we just have a long wish list of things that the Government wants, with nothing behind them to make them happen.

Paul Wheelhouse: That is an important question to raise. To give the committee and the wider Parliament confidence, I will say that we have committed through the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 to giving annual updates to Parliament, once the national islands plan is developed and finalised—which we hope will happen relatively quickly. We are required to do that.

I, and the Government, will then be held to account on progress against the plan. Therefore, it is in our interests, through the implementation process and the partnership group, to start to identify the indicators that will allow us to measure and show progress, and to have funding flow from that, so that where there is weakness in delivery against the national islands plan, we can make sure that resource goes where it is most needed.

Parliament can also take confidence from its own capability to scrutinise the Government: we have seen pressure from across Parliament for progress in areas such as climate change and the national Gaelic plan. That will mean that funds will flow through to address vulnerabilities. We also have the islands deal, which involves the UK Government and the Scottish Government discussing progress across the three islands councils. The Argyll and Bute deal is under way, and the Inverness and Highlands city region deal has already gone through.

You are right to identify areas in which there are specific islands funds—housing, the reaching 100 per cent programme and the 4G infill programme are good examples of taking an outside-in approach.

It is possible to get to a place from where we will be able to see what kind of resource is being delivered in our islands. We are not at that point

yet. I think that that is what the convener was probing on. We hope to get to that point so that we have more clarity on the investment that is going in to support the islands.

The Convener: I must keep pushing people to ask short questions and give short answers.

Angus MacDonald (Falkirk East) (SNP): While we are discussing resources, do you know where the negotiations stand regarding UK Government funding for the islands deal?

Paul Wheelhouse: Mr MacDonald raises a very important issue. We are in purdah now because of the general election, so it is probably understandable that little progress on the negotiations is likely to be made at this point. We are working to support the island authorities in getting to a position where they have clarity on funding.

I will keep it brief, convener. The UK Government support for an islands deal was announced on 28 July, with a £300 million investment of gross deal funding in the remaining deals—one in Northern Ireland, one in Wales and three in Scotland. The UK Government has now committed £243 million of that £300 million to the deals in Northern Ireland, Wales and Argyll and Bute: £163 million to Northern Ireland, £55 million to Wales and £25 million to Argyll and Bute. That leaves £57 million for the remaining deals in Falkirk and the islands. At this point, it is unclear how that money will be split and whether the money will meet the ambitions of the islands.

My colleague Michael Matheson, who leads on the issue, has written to the Secretary of State for Scotland, pressing for clarity from the UK Government. We may not get that clarity until after the UK election.

The islands councils are finessing their proposals and are expected to provide finalised proposals to both Governments at some point in November. I have some idea of the proposed areas that they are considering—I appreciate that we will not be able to go through those today. We are getting to a point where we have clarity on what the islands' asks are, but we have to wait for the outcome of the UK general election to see what progress can be made on funding. Although it looks like the envelope has shrunk to something quite small, Mr Matheson is keen to work with the UK Government to get an envelope to work with in order to see what the Scottish Government will need to provide.

Emma Harper: I will put my questions together in order to keep them succinct. I am interested in the decentralisation of power and island-specific planning.

Highland Council has stated:

“Local authorities are singled out as being critical to implementation, whilst being almost invisible as partners in most of the Strategic Objectives.”

It is interesting that the council used the word “invisible”. Local authorities are mentioned 37 times in the plan’s 70 pages. Community planning is also key to local development.

How will you ensure that local authorities and community planning partnerships will be engaged with in order to implement the plan? It is critical that everyone is involved and that the stakeholders are engaged with, especially if they use words such as “invisible”, rather than “engagement” in their comments.

How do we ensure that best practice is shared easily between the islands? We know that some islands are doing well in relation to population improvements, for example.

Paul Wheelhouse: Those are pertinent points. I am sorry to hear that any local authority partner feels that partners are invisible in the plan. Local authority partners have been very important in the development of the plan and will be even more important in developing an implementation strategy through the partnership group. We want to identify actions that we can work on together and we are keen that local authorities have full input.

When we come to the finalised plan, I hope that our local authority colleagues, who are really important partners—I cannot stress that enough—will feel valued and that they are very much at the heart of what we are doing. The plan is about local authorities and their communities, so we want them to feel that they are at the heart of it.

10:00

Ms Harper’s point about best practice is a constructive one. She is absolutely right. There are some really good examples of communities in the various archipelagos that have made real progress, but those examples can be juxtaposed with examples of islands next door that are having real challenges. I have alluded to the fact that we need to learn the lessons from successful cases of population building. That can happen naturally on the back of investment in infrastructure, or it can happen where specific efforts are made to target groups such as young people, or to target education opportunities or health improvements. Where we have seen positive turnarounds in communities, we need to understand the critical factors in that success.

That is an aspect of the migration work that is being taken forward, on which Ms Hyslop is leading as the Cabinet Secretary for Culture, Tourism and External Affairs. A cross-portfolio team of ministers is trying to understand how we

can turn things around for communities that have seen depopulation—not just island communities, but communities on the mainland. Some really good lessons can be learned from some of our island communities, which have perhaps had to be more innovative than some of their neighbouring communities on the mainland and which have managed to come up with real success stories and rebuild their futures.

As I said in my opening remarks, there have been great successes in areas such as energy. Community energy projects have provided funds to be reinvested in community infrastructure and have attracted people back to the islands. Through the cultural industries, there has been a real rebirth of culture in some communities, which has led to tourism growth.

We very much need to do what Ms Harper mentioned. I am grateful to her for her question, and we will make sure that we try to focus on doing exactly that.

Emma Harper: Thank you.

Jamie Greene: My question follows on from that. There are two distinct groups of islands—those that sit in unitary island authorities and those that sit in local authorities that have a mainland presence as well. However, living on an island is living on an island, whether it is 15 minutes or 15 hours from the mainland. How is the Government taking cognisance of that and ensuring that the local authorities that have been tasked with delivering many of the 100-plus objectives will be able to deliver them within the confines of budgets that have to provide for substantial mainland populations as well?

Paul Wheelhouse: The member makes his point clearly and cogently. We have to take account of the diversity of our island communities, and he is quite right to identify that the contexts differ. Some of our islands feel that they have, perhaps, a stronger voice in how their local authority is run, because the entire local authority is geared around island communities and there is access to funding on a different basis as it is weighted for the proportion of the population who are islanders. Others—this is not a criticism of local authorities—perhaps feel that, for historical reasons, they have to fight a bit harder to be heard.

We also have some very small island communities, and I am sure that members know that, even in the context of some of our archipelagos, there are sometimes criticisms that decisions are taken on one island with less cognisance of the problems in other islands in the area. It is important that we focus on that, too.

On funding, as I said, we are keen to identify where things are going well—that picks up on

Emma Harper's point. However, we are also keen to identify where things are not working so well. If there are challenges in some communities that are not doing as well in attracting resources or investment because of the governance structures and the context in which they live, we need to learn lessons from that, which may well then govern how the Government and our local authority partners support them.

I appreciate that the financial climate is very difficult for all local authorities. The Scottish Government and the public sector across the UK are challenged at present—we are no different in that respect—but we need to help identify with our partners at the local government level how to prioritise investment and determine how, if there are limited funds, we can make the biggest impact. Where can we really start to make an impact and gather momentum? I hope that that will then feed through into more resource that we can recycle back into further investment.

As with any form of public expenditure, we need to ensure that we are using every pound as effectively as possible, but we will want to use the partnership group to help to extract the intellectual power of our local authorities and tell us where we can make the most impact.

The Convener: Angus MacDonald has some questions.

Angus MacDonald: Thank you, convener. In its submission, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar expressed concern about the lack of reference to Brexit planning, saying:

“The Plan makes no reference to future regional policy post-Brexit. Islands have benefited significantly from EU funding in the past. It is critical that future regional policy reflects and impacts on island challenges and priorities, and is adequately resourced to do so.”

How does the plan align with wider planning for European Union exit, if it happens? Does the plan make sufficient reference to expected post-Brexit issues?

Paul Wheelhouse: I restricted my opening remarks, but that was one of the things that I was going to refer to. Brexit has a huge bearing on the future of the islands. I am thinking principally, but not exclusively, about population retention and, if possible, growth, and economic development. It is clear that islands have a strong presence in some sectors that have an impact on Scotland's overall economic health, such as aquaculture, tourism and food and drink. Those sectors will potentially be affected by Brexit, depending on the severity of the Brexit deal's impact on the economy.

We want to make sure that we reflect on that issue. If local authorities such as Comhairle nan Eilean Siar say that the plan does not sufficiently reflect the issue, we will be able to reflect on that

for the plan's final version. Strategic objective 1 in the proposed plan includes the need to

"Understand the impact of Brexit on the islands and island communities".

That will be a priority as we move into the implementation phase.

The plan is being developed in the context of the uncertainty around Brexit. I suspect that none of us in this room knows exactly how it will pan out; indeed, I still hope, as I think Mr MacDonald does, that it will not happen at all. We will see what happens. There is a growing body of evidence that suggests that Brexit could have damaging impacts on rural and island communities, so we know that it poses a particular risk to our rural areas, such as in relation to the ability to retain the very valued EU citizens who have made their home in Scotland. They have paid us the ultimate compliment of choosing Scotland to be their home, and Brexit casts a shadow of uncertainty on the application of EU cohesion policy to Scotland.

EU funding, which has been particularly important to the development of the islands' economies and of key facilities and infrastructure for communities, is also an area of uncertainty. We await details of how the shared prosperity fund, as it is known, will be delivered in Scotland and what implications it will have for the replacement of the European social fund, the European regional development fund and other targeted funds.

Angus MacDonald: I think that we are all waiting for details on the shared prosperity fund.

I will move on to the next issue. You have acknowledged the need to address gender equality. COSLA stated in its submission:

"we believe that the document could benefit from more consideration of gender equality concerns and recognition of the distinct challenges faced by women and girls living on the islands."

You have also mentioned the young islanders network. You may be aware that North Ayrshire Council said that it wants

"to see a specific reference to young people in island communities and their human rights".

How do you respond to COSLA's view that gender equality should have a higher profile in the plan and the other views that there should be more specific reference to young people in island communities?

Paul Wheelhouse: On your second point, we have the young islanders network and our efforts for young people from primary to young working people. We are trying to pick up a wide range of young people, not just those who are in the education system but those who have moved through education into work. We believe that

young people feature strongly throughout the plan, but of course we will try to reflect in the final plan the view that the role of young people should have a stronger presence. We believe that young people are central to several strategic objectives, but we accept and recognise that gender equality could have more representation in the plan. We are keen to address that area when we prepare the final plan.

I stress that what we are discussing is the proposed plan—members can take heart from that. The feedback is very welcome and we are grateful to those who have raised these points. This is an important part of the process of strengthening the plan to make sure that there is buy-in from everybody when it is ultimately adopted.

The Convener: Thank you. We will now start looking at specific strategic objectives, which will allow us all to focus on particular areas and answers. First up is the deputy convener, Maureen Watt.

Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Strategic objective 1 is:

"To address population decline and ensure a healthy, balanced population profile".

Saying that we need to retain our young people always seems to me to present a conundrum, because our young people should have the opportunity to get up and go and travel, if they so wish. We need to make their home as attractive as possible for them to come back to when they want to do so. We also need to make islands attractive places so that we encourage inward migration, and the example of Ulva was quite interesting in that regard.

What do the Government, local authorities and other organisations need to do to make our islands attractive places in which to live and work? Is it about digital connectivity? Is it about housing of all tenures, such as low-cost rented housing or plots of land on which people can build their own houses? You also talked about the importance of culture and tourism.

Do land tenure and ownership play a part in all this? What sort of connected community do we need to provide in the plan to make sure that we achieve the objectives, including that of reversing population decline?

Paul Wheelhouse: Your last question is the most important, because the most important objective is the one on the risk of depopulation. I accept your point that we do not want to stifle people's ability to travel the world, learn from their travel and then come back home. We want them to be able to come back home, and that means providing housing, transport infrastructure, digital

connectivity and all the other things that you raised, which are important to those communities.

We also need to develop a bit of system thinking and understand that there is no single measure that will have an impact. All these different things interact, so investment has to be done in a way that understands the combination of interventions that will make the islands more attractive.

The Ulva example is interesting, as you said, but, as Ms Harper said, we also want to learn from other examples of success. They might have been modest successes, but important progress has been made elsewhere.

The strategic objective identifies specific actions, such as that of identifying

“islands where depopulation is becoming a critical issue in order to ensure that these islands have their needs addressed”.

That effectively means triaging for particular challenges.

During the consultation process, some islands approached us and said that they were worried that they were going to be the next St Kilda. That is pretty dramatic language, but they face a real threat because they have no young people or have lost them to the mainland. How do we help the islands that are at the most critical point in their history and believe that they have reached the tipping point at which they will start to lose essential services and other things because they cannot staff them any more?

Another action is to understand the impact of Brexit, as I have just discussed with Mr MacDonald. I am not being party-political about this, but Brexit will have an impact on the population and the implications of Brexit for our ability to attract migrants to our islands are unknown. We have proposals to work with our partners to test approaches using small-scale pilots, which we announced in the programme for government. That could be done across a number of the policy areas that you mentioned to see whether they can help to triage some of the problems that we see at the local level. We want some of the more significant areas of investment, such as investment in transport and digital connectivity, to target help at remote, rural and island communities.

Maureen Watt: In your opening remarks, you said that Finland and Croatia have islands plans. Finland is probably more akin to Scotland, so is there anything that we can learn from its islands that have had similar problems? What have they done?

The Convener: I am going to have to start pushing you to be as brief as possible, minister. There are 13 objectives and members want to ask

questions on all of them, and I know that we will not get all the answers. I apologise—it is not my choice—but I will have to push you as much as I can.

10:15

Paul Wheelhouse: Erica Clarkson and Don Morrison have looked extensively at the experience in Finland. If it would be helpful, we could write to the committee with some lessons that have been learned from the approach there, which I agree is relevant.

The Convener: If you want to give the committee a short example now, by all means go ahead.

Paul Wheelhouse: Certainly, convener. I was fortunate enough to attend the recent Arctic Circle assembly, where I heard from a colleague from Finland with knowledge of Sweden, Finland and, in particular, the Åland Islands, which sit between the two countries. I found it especially interesting to hear about the specific approach that is being taken to encourage population growth in certain communities on those islands. The approach is similar in some respects to the work that we are doing with regard to the charter that has recently been signed between the Western Isles and Skills Development Scotland to provide a targeted approach to attract and retain young people who want to do apprenticeships on the islands. That is a focused effort to broker an arrangement in which people come into the community, so the Finnish approach was of particular interest to me.

I am conscious that Erica Clarkson and Don Morrison are much more knowledgeable about the subject, and I will ensure that they supply some better examples so that members can see where there are learning points from experiences elsewhere in Europe.

The Convener: Thank you, minister. Peter Chapman has a question.

Peter Chapman (North East Scotland) (Con): In the plan, strategic objective 2 is:

“To improve and promote sustainable economic development”.

There is no doubt that that is an appropriate priority. The concept that policy delivery should be as close to home as possible came through in many contributions to the consultation. With that in mind, what powers do you have to ensure that Government and local authority jobs cannot be removed from the islands? Is there an argument that some categories of job should be protected to allow for long-term planning?

Paul Wheelhouse: That is a very interesting question. The challenge that we face in that respect is that local authorities are autonomous

bodies and are responsible for managing their own day-to-day business, including all employment matters. The Scottish Government has no direct locus or influence in that regard.

During my discussions at the most recent meeting of the convention of the Highlands and Islands—the details will be online for members to peruse—the issue of civil service relocation came up. The principle is being established that, when new civil service functions are developed for whatever reason—for instance, if powers are devolved to the Scottish Parliament or we create new agencies and so on—we should look at how we can relocate those positions not just to the islands but to the Highlands and Islands more widely. We support that idea in principle. If anything, the local authorities are keen to get more functions and jobs to the islands, and I do not see any immediate threat in that regard. Nonetheless, the issue is that, unfortunately, we do not have a direct say, because local authorities are autonomous and make their own decisions.

Peter Chapman: That is fine. One of the big issues that we had with the bill that became the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 was that there was no money attached to it. You have a lot of aspirations, minister, but we need money to allow things to happen. South Harris community council has suggested the formulation of an islands fund that could be accessed directly by local communities. Would that be viable? Is it likely to happen?

Paul Wheelhouse: I am not sure; it is perhaps too early to say. I am aware via other means of South Harris community council's suggestion, and we will certainly commit to scoping the proposal. It is too early to say where we can take it, but we will consider whether it is a viable approach, and we will work with our partners to develop an implementation strategy. We can take forward the idea and consider whether such a fund would be a potential route to deliver on some of the actions in the plan. We cannot give a commitment now, as we have to establish whether such a mechanism would work, but I can certainly commit to having a look at the suggestion.

Colin Smyth (South Scotland) (Lab): I turn to the issue of transport. Ferries obviously have a high profile in the proposed plan; I will come to that in a minute. The vast majority of journeys take place within the islands. In its submission, the Uist locality partnership states:

“There is nothing in the commitments on connectivity within islands”.

The evidence that we have received highlights that the plan says little about sustainable or active travel, and there is very little mention of buses in particular. How would you respond to that?

Paul Wheelhouse: As I have said, that is a key issue. Transport, digital connectivity and housing are the three key areas that we know have an impact on islanders' quality of life and our ability to address the depopulation issue, which is objective 1.

The plan recognises that transport, whether by air, road, ferry, bus, active travel or mainland—when people get to the mainland—is hugely important for island communities. I want to acknowledge that that is a key factor in the ability of islanders to access services, particularly in areas such as health, which Mr Mountain and members who represent the islands have raised once or twice at First Minister's question time.

Respondents to the consultation told us that they face many different challenges, not least with buses, which Mr Smyth raised. Objective 3 of the plan sets out to improve transport services, and it repeatedly refers to the transport links within an island being essential to allow its community to be mobile on it. That includes the current bus services and timetables, which we have focused on more thoroughly in the implementation strategy. I give a commitment to Mr Smyth that we are conscious that we need to reflect on this area.

I do not know whether my colleague Heather Cowan wants to add anything to that; we might be short of time. Perhaps we could write to the committee with further detail on how we will tackle the interisland transport issues that Mr Smyth raised.

Colin Smyth: That would certainly be helpful, because there is a gap on implementation with regard to how connectivity within the islands will be improved. There is an overall objective, but there is no detail on how the improvement will be achieved. We have just passed the Transport (Scotland) Bill, but there are no proposals on how that legislation can benefit the island communities. It would be very helpful to know that.

Paul Wheelhouse: Of course, we are talking about issues that the national transport strategy will also address. I hope that some of the issues that Mr Smyth is rightly raising will be picked up through that process.

Colin Smyth: It is interesting that the islands plan does not refer to the national transport strategy. It says that the islands plan should be aligned with a number of plans, but it does not list the NTS. However, I take on board what the minister said.

I turn to the subject of ferries, which has come up in a lot of submissions and evidence. The majority of the points that have been made relate to two issues: cost and capacity. Notwithstanding the more immediate issues with procurement and the impact on one particular ferry, which we have

heard about in the news in the past few days, how can you reassure the committee that the plan and those with which it is meant to align will acknowledge the concerns that people have about ferry services to and from, and between, the islands?

Paul Wheelhouse: Strategic objective 3 makes specific reference to feedback from the NTS consultation and outlines specific measures relating to ferry services. In the interests of time, I will not go through them all, but they are listed under that objective.

I recognise the point that Mr Smyth raised. Reliability and ferry capacity—car deck capacity and the ability to carry freight, in particular—are important. I recognise that the lack of such capacity is potentially a restraint on economic development in our islands. We need to get that right, and that will be at the heart of the development of the new ferries plan and the vessel replacement and deployment plan, so that we ensure that we have the right mix of the right types of vessels to meet the future needs of our island communities.

In some cases, we are working in partnership with the private sector and companies such as Western Ferries and Pentland Ferries to deliver services to our island communities; the issue does not concern only the supported ferries. We want to make sure that we get this right, and I give an assurance to Mr Smyth and the whole committee that, as ferries minister, I very much recognise the importance of ferries to the delivery of the islands plan.

The Convener: I have a quick follow-up before we move on to the next question. When can the committee expect to see the ferries plan?

Paul Wheelhouse: I will get back to you on that. The work is well under way. I have not yet seen the draft. A lot will depend on what is in that and whether further work needs to be done, but it is well under way.

The Convener: Can you give us an indication of whether it will be before or after Christmas?

Paul Wheelhouse: Obviously, it has to go through a consultation process, so it depends on what you mean, convener. If you mean the finalised plan, which we need to take on from 2022 onwards, we are not yet at that point in the process, but we are going through the consultation stage, which involves working with the stakeholders to develop the plan. There are drafts of the plan.

The Convener: Maybe you can write to the committee to let us know when we can expect to see it.

Paul Wheelhouse: We will give you a timetable for the process, because it has a number of stages that you might want to be aware of.

Richard Lyle: A resident from Mull submitted the following example to the committee:

“I live in a settlement of eight houses. Two are lived in, three are short term holiday lets and two are second homes. One of these is used three or four weeks a year maximum”.

Is the minister confident that the proposals in the plan can remedy the kind of example that the committee has heard about? Should islands be housing pressure zones, which would mean that houses could be sold only to residents to live in and could not be used as holiday homes? Does he agree that people who want to live on an island should buy a caravan?

Paul Wheelhouse: Mr Lyle might get me into really hot water answering some of those questions.

The Convener: I am wondering how you are going to do that. If I talk for 30 seconds, that might allow you to come up with an idea.

Richard Lyle: Those who want to have a holiday home on an island should buy a caravan.

Paul Wheelhouse: I recognise that that solution would give people the ability to stay on our wonderful islands.

Mr Lyle raises a number of important issues on behalf of communities such as the community on Mull. We are aware that, Scotland-wide, the development of the short-term letting market is having implications. The Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 enables local authorities to designate control areas for short-term lets where planning permission will always be required if owners want to change the use of their property to a short-term let. That has been identified as a measure through which some control can be exerted on the growth in second homes and the short-term letting market, which might be having an impact on some communities by damaging their ability to retain young people.

Richard Lyle: Do we not have a housing crisis on our islands? There is a shortage of houses that young people want to live in. Young people are leaving the islands because they cannot buy a home on their own island, because all the island houses are being let out or sold to people who go there for a couple of weeks a year. I say that with the greatest respect; I do not disagree with people going to an island, but if they want to have a wee holiday on an island, they should take a caravan with them. I accept that that might cause problems, too, but there is a housing problem on the islands, and we will solve that problem only by looking at it.

Paul Wheelhouse: I do not disagree with Mr Lyle. There is a serious problem in some of our communities. I used to live in a small village on the mainland where more than half the houses were second homes, so I know exactly what implications that can have—the community had 45 homes and fewer than 40 residents. At one point, we had the only child under the age of 5.

Second homes can be part of the problem. We need to address the issue. There is some disagreement in Parliament about the approach that should be taken, but the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 provides a tool for local authorities that identify that their communities are affected by the issue to take steps to exert some control over it. I hope that that intervention will help.

If it would be helpful to the Parliament's scrutiny of the islands plan, we could outline in a letter to the committee some of the areas in which we are investing in housing in an effort to address the issue that Mr Lyle has raised.

Angus MacDonald: I turn to digital connectivity, which we discussed on the minister's most recent appearance before the committee. It is fair to say that the responses that the committee has received recognise that the roll-out of digital connectivity has been strong in the past few years, but there are still issues for certain communities and in relation to access to 4G networks.

How will the plan ensure that the remotest members of our island communities will have access to the same broadband facilities as is best practice elsewhere on the islands? How can the plan drive the spread of 4G access?

Paul Wheelhouse: I will keep my comments brief, convener. I agree with what has been said by Mr MacDonald and the respondents to the consultation on the plan. Strategic objective 6 sets out a number of commitments to help us to ensure that the plan is fair and inclusive. It includes a commitment to

"Deliver a step change in the quality of broadband services available across the islands".

That will have the consequence of providing the backhaul that will allow mobile connectivity to improve. As I saw yesterday, albeit not in an island context, the 4G infill programme is now beginning to deliver masts in some locations. The first three are under development, and I hope that there will be some in the islands shortly.

10:30

As part of the programme for government, it was announced that we will establish the Scotland 5G centre, which will pick up the mobile connectivity issue that Mr MacDonald raised. Although that is being led by the University of Glasgow and the

University of Strathclyde, I am keen that the University of the Highlands and Islands should also be engaged closely in that process, as I have previously told the committee. I hope that we can learn how to develop examples and case studies of how the technology can aid island and rural communities and build a demand for the services, which will follow through into commercial investment. I can perhaps expand on that theme when I come back to the committee to talk about the reaching 100 per cent programme and digital connectivity.

The Convener: You can perhaps also say a bit more about it when the preferred bidder for the north contract is announced.

Paul Wheelhouse: Of course, convener.

Emma Harper: My question is related to health and social care. As the deputy convener of the Health and Sport Committee, I know that we are always talking about rural healthcare delivery, and the islands are part of that.

I am interested in how, as part of the plan, we consider the issue of helping people to age well—we have an ageing population, and we want them to age well. As part of the plan, we must look at attracting and retaining staff, too. Can you give us a quick update on how the plan helps to address the issues of health and social care?

Paul Wheelhouse: It would be fair to say that that is a hugely significant issue, and it has been discussed in some of the discussions that I have had with COHI and the islands strategic group, which I chair. Historically, there have been difficulties with attracting and retaining staff in health provision in the islands. We recognise the changing nature of care and the increasing complexity of patients' needs. Those are just some of the challenges that must be met to ensure fair and accessible healthcare for people on the islands. That said, many respondents have told us—as they have told members of the committee—about the strengths of the healthcare provision on their islands, which include the building of new hospitals and some of the measures that have been taken on the provision of a personalised service by community general practitioners.

We know that, for some islanders, such services can be limited. In response to Jamie Greene, I talked about recognising the diversity of the islands and their particular contexts. The people on some islands face hugely different scenarios, as they have no localised healthcare and must go to other islands or the mainland to receive healthcare. Of course, Raigmore hospital in Inverness provides some specialised functions for all of the Highlands and Islands.

We know that the population demographic in many of Scotland's islands is shifting to include a much larger percentage of older residents. That is great, because it means that people are living healthy lives and, therefore, living longer, but it raises new challenges as regards the need to shape and remodel healthcare to provide for that slightly older age profile. That is why, in strategic objective 7, we have set out to improve and promote health and wellbeing by working with partners to ensure that there is fair and accessible health and social care for those who need it. We will also identify good practice, which I think that Emma Harper was alluding to, and work with others to develop a plan to support the ageing population in the islands. That is another area where the team approach that is being led by Fiona Hyslop will inform what we do to help particular islands and remote and rural communities.

John Finnie: I have a couple of questions on strategic objective 8, which involves improving environmental wellbeing and dealing with biosecurity. The Outer Hebrides community land trusts said that the plan seeks to be green as an underpinning principle and that that would seem to align with the Scottish Government's renewed focus on climate change issues. It said that shite—*[Laughter.]*

Paul Wheelhouse: It is not that bad.

The Convener: Thank you, minister, but I am sure that the *Official Report* has been corrected already.

John Finnie: I beg your pardon. I should have said "sight". The trusts said:

"Sight should not be lost of the place-based approach and the desire to move forward with renewables and sustainable land management."

I am sure that we could discuss the issue of a place-based approach at great length. I suggest that we do not do so, but will you comment on the issue that the land trusts raised?

Paul Wheelhouse: That is an important theme and I will be happy to expand on it at a future opportunity.

Place-based thinking now runs through all sorts of Government policy making, and the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 and the national islands plan are good manifestations of that. As Mr Finnie suggests, there are opportunities to learn from where a place-based approach has been taken—that touches on the point that Emma Harper made earlier. That might have happened less formally in the past, but we now have some good systems thinking that has fed through into good projects in the islands that we can learn from and replicate elsewhere, both in the islands and on the mainland. The islands are a fount of innovation in

many areas of life, particularly in the energy sector, and there are really good examples of environmental management on the islands that we can learn from.

John Finnie: I want to touch on biosecurity and the view that the proposed plan is light on content and detail compared with what exists elsewhere. The report "State of Nature 2019" says that invasive non-native species are one of the key drivers of decline in natural diversity, and the islands are particularly affected by that. Given their size, they hold a disproportionate amount of our wildlife—for instance, three quarters of seabirds in the United Kingdom are found on them. What measures will you take to deliver a more explicit definition of enhanced biosecurity?

Paul Wheelhouse: We can direct the partnership group to have a look at that final point in order to take on board local authorities' learning from managing environmental issues and working with stakeholders to manage invasive non-native species with the input of Scottish Natural Heritage and other agencies. I hope that we can use that partnership process to refine what we mean by the commitments and help to identify how we will measure progress against them.

There have been some amazing successes. The RSPB has done some fantastic work on the Shiant Islands through predator control to eliminate threats to seabirds, and there has been a remarkable rebound in the seabird population on those islands. We can learn from that.

Mr Finnie is quite right. We have some of the best natural capital in the world in our island communities, and if invasive non-native species threaten that, we need to tackle that head on. I hope that the partnership group will help to inform how we can best work together to achieve that.

Colin Smyth: I will follow on from John Finnie's line of questioning. Given that the Government has declared a climate emergency since we passed the Islands (Scotland) Bill, does the plan as it stands go far enough to recognise that? John Finnie touched on the fact that there is no real mention in it of the restoration and protection of island ecosystems, which is clearly crucial in mitigating the effects of climate change.

Paul Wheelhouse: If we are not making the point strongly enough, we can pick it up and reflect it in the final version of the plan. I certainly want to flag up that we are very aware that some island communities face a particular challenge in climate adaptation. There is the obvious point about rising sea levels and coastal erosion, but we are also seeing impacts from climate change on the migrations of species, fisheries and the islands' economies.

We need to consider how we can help communities to adapt to climate change, and our island communities have a potentially hugely significant role to play in helping to mitigate the effects of climate change through renewable energy, for example. In the consultation, communities showed strong interest in their opportunities to exploit renewables, not just in obvious areas such as wind, wave and tidal power, but in developing hydrogen, for example. We have seen good evidence of work that has been done on that in Orkney, but other islands are interested in it, too.

If the committee thinks that it is necessary to strengthen the plan, I will be more than happy to consider how we can do that now that we have certainty with the Climate Change (Emissions Reduction Targets) (Scotland) Act 2019—the bill has now received royal assent—and on-going work on the climate change plan has kicked in. We can see whether we can enhance the plan to take those points on board.

Jamie Greene: I have a question on education. I refer to strategic objective 12 in the proposed plan. For the benefit of those who have a copy of it in front of them, I note that that is on page 58. I point the minister to the third item in the list of seven objectives within that objective, which is:

“Ensure that young people are given the same opportunities to access education as young people on mainland Scotland”.

I am sure that we all share that ambition. Will you elaborate a little on how you will ensure that young people on islands will have parity of access to education with those on the mainland?

Paul Wheelhouse: That goes back to understanding the context. It is clear that some communities already have primary and secondary education and, in some cases, tertiary education on the islands. Good examples in that context are the Isle of Lewis and Skye, on which there are a range of opportunities. On other islands, there is no school presence at all, so young pupils need to access education at residences on the mainland or on other islands, which can be hugely significant to their development. That might be necessary in order to allow them social interaction and improve their educational outcomes.

I do not profess to have all the answers yet, and I appreciate that it will be challenging to meet that aspiration. The young islanders network will have an important role in engaging with students in primary, secondary and tertiary education in order to understand the nature of their experience. With that work, we will find out whether students are happy with their experience or whether they feel that firm action is needed. It will also seek to understand the impact of people having to travel and, in some cases, stay off an island while

undertaking their education. How does that affect students and their families? We need to ensure that we do everything that we can do to avoid any negative impacts on families and children in those situations.

I do not profess to have the answers but, as the implementation strategy develops, I am sure that we will start to have some clarity on where we can most likely expect to see progress. In a tough financial climate, it is not possible to address every need, but we want to deliver on that aspiration, if we can.

Jamie Greene: Mr Rumbles made the point that the plan is supposed to meet the objectives. You have made a commitment in the plan to ensure that young people on islands have the same access to education as those on the mainland. It is a draft plan, but that commitment could still be there in the final plan. That is the aspiration but, practically, is it possible to deliver on that commitment?

Paul Wheelhouse: There are options. We have talked about Finland, and we could look at how it has addressed the issue with its islanders. It has a well-developed learning platform that involves distributed learning. The closest example of that in Scotland is provided by UHI but, as I understand it, Finland provides such learning at primary and secondary levels, too.

There might be ways in which we can use technology to improve accessibility. However, there are aspects of education that cannot necessarily be replicated through digital means, such as social interaction—the need to socialise with other children—so there are limits. We do not want a pupil to have to dial in to every class, although the implications for that individual might not be as great as we would think. We need to have a balance.

The investment in digital connectivity may well enable some options to be progressed in a way that has not been possible previously. We need to explore those options with our local authority partners to see what further work they think we could do to help their communities to deliver education. We also need to engage with colleagues in the education portfolio to see what we can do to address that.

On the point that Mr Greene makes, I appreciate that the means of achieving the commitment are not included in the plan at present, but I do not propose that we take out the commitment. It is more a case of looking at how we can flesh things out and deliver on it.

Jamie Greene: I think that you have answered my question on digital and the use of technology, so I will not press that further.

The commitment relates to young people and there is little mention of adult education in the objectives. What work will be done to ensure that adults on islands have access to education, retraining and skills development throughout their lives?

The Convener: I implore the minister to be brief.

Paul Wheelhouse: I hope to be brief, convener. I reassure the committee that adult education will have more prominence in the final version of the plan. I take the point that Mr Greene has made on the chin. We recognise that education on islands does not stop at secondary school and that islanders should have access to further education, skills training, apprenticeships and so on. We will give more attention to lifelong learning opportunities in the final plan. Mr Greene makes a fair point, and I hope to strengthen that area.

Peter Chapman: Strategic objective 13 is:

“To support effective implementation of the National Islands Plan”.

Does it not seem strange to you—it certainly seems strange to me—that implementation is a specific strategic objective?

Paul Wheelhouse: I appreciate that that looks a bit unusual, but we want two things to happen. First, we wanted implementation to be given sufficient weight in the plan, and to emphasise its importance, because ensuring that the plan is implemented properly is strategically crucial, as we have discussed. There are over 100 actions in the plan and we want to ensure that they are delivered.

Secondly, the inclusion of implementation as a strategic objective says something about the culture and approach that are needed. It formalises and refers to the fact that we will need collaborative working. That recognises the criticism, which has been made today, that the plan does not recognise explicitly enough the role of local authorities. We are making a virtue of the fact that we will work with a range of partners—specifically local authorities and other island stakeholders—to develop the implementation strategy. They will have a voice in how we deliver, and all the funding issues that colleagues have raised and the metrics and indicators that we will use to measure progress flow from that.

Implementation has been given a place in the plan as a specific objective. Although I appreciate Peter Chapman’s point, I hope that that means that implementation will get the attention that it deserves, because it will be critical to delivery, and we need a partnership culture that will help to deliver on the actions.

10:45

The Convener: We have two things to do before we finish. First, Angus MacDonald wants to bring something to the committee’s attention.

Angus MacDonald: I failed earlier to refer members to my entry in the register of members’ interests. I have a non-domestic property in the Western Isles.

The Convener: Perfect. The other thing to say is that, during this brief session, a lot of questions have been thrown up and we have had answers to some of them. Where we have not received responses, that will be reflected in our response to you, minister. Thank you for doing what you could to answer the questions.

I would normally suspend the meeting at this point to allow the witnesses to depart, but as we are pushed for time today, I will not do so. I ask that you and your officials depart quietly. Thank you all for attending.

European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018

Harbour and Highways (Environmental Impact Assessment) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019

10:46

The Convener: Item 3 relates to a consent notification on a UK statutory instrument, as detailed on the agenda. The regulations will be laid in the UK Parliament under the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. Members may wish to note that the date for laying the regulations at Westminster has moved from 28 November, which is set out in the paper that is before us, to 17 February 2020. Does anyone have any comments?

Mike Rumbles: Considering that the date has moved to February 2020, I repeat the view that I expressed last week, in the hope that the Scottish Government will take my point on board. Why are we being sent such instruments when everything may change on 12 December? They might not be necessary.

Stewart Stevenson: Although I recognise Mike Rumbles's point, a general principle in time management is that we should do something when the opportunity first exists, because we will never get that time back, and the time that we might use for it in future might well be needed for something that we do not currently know about. I think that we should deal with such instruments as quickly as we reasonably can, without distorting other things that we need to do.

John Finnie: We had this discussion previously. It would certainly be wrong for anyone to seek to represent our participating in due process as our being supportive of the UK exiting the European Union. I certainly do not support that, but the work is part of our business process and we should proceed with it.

The Convener: The work is a procedural requirement for the Scottish Parliament.

It appears that the majority of the committee want to move forward. Does the committee agree that we should write to the Scottish Government and confirm that we are content for consent to be given to the UK SI that is referred to in the notification?

Members *indicated agreement.*

10:48

Meeting continued in private until 11:44.

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