



**OFFICIAL REPORT**  
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

# Rural Affairs and Islands Committee

**Wednesday 24 May 2023**

**Session 6**



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**Wednesday 24 May 2023**

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**RURAL AFFAIRS AND ISLANDS COMMITTEE**  
**16<sup>th</sup> Meeting 2023, Session 6**

**CONVENER**

\*Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)

**DEPUTY CONVENER**

\*Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD)

**COMMITTEE MEMBERS**

- \*Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)
- \*Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)
- \*Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green)
- \*Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)
- \*Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP)
- \*Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab)
- \*Rachael Hamilton (Etrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)

\*attended

**THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:**

- Erica Clarkson (Scottish Government)
- Nicola Crook (Scottish Government)
- Mairi Gougeon (Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands)
- Professor Francesco Sindico (Scottish Government)

**CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE**

Emma Johnston

**LOCATION**

The Adam Smith Room (CR5)



**Scottish Parliament**  
**Rural Affairs and Islands**  
**Committee**

*Wednesday 24 May 2023*

*[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:02]*

**Decision on Taking Business in**  
**Private**

**The Convener (Finlay Carson):** Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the 16th meeting in 2023 of the Rural Affairs and Islands Committee. Before we begin, I remind members who are using electronic devices to switch them to silent, please. Our first item of business is a decision on whether to take items 4 and 5 in private. Are we agreed?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

**National Islands Plan Annual**  
**Report 2022**

**The Convener:** Our next item of business is an evidence session with the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands on the national islands plan annual report 2022. We have 90 minutes scheduled for the session. I welcome to the meeting Mairi Gougeon, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands, and Francesco Sindico, who is the Scottish Government's carbon neutral islands project lead. Erica Clarkson, the joint head of division, rural and island futures; Cameron Anson, repopulation and island communities policy manager; and Nicola Crook, national islands plan team leader, will be joining us online. I invite the cabinet secretary to make an opening statement.

**The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands (Mairi Gougeon):** I thank the convener for inviting me to discuss the Scottish Government's third annual report on our delivery of the national islands plan. As in previous years, the report summarises the progress that has been made on each of the commitments in the national islands plan and it provides the details of projects and any relevant resource spend. It also provides me with the opportunity to put on record my thanks to local authorities, our island stakeholders, community groups, individuals and businesses for the support that they have given during the past year. Their continued input and collaboration is key to our delivery of the national islands plan.

I will take a moment to acknowledge the work commitment of the Government's islands team over the past year. Some of the team are islanders or live on islands, so their involvement gives the Government a great source of real-life experience, knowledge and expertise on the issues that islanders face.

Our island communities still face many challenges across the board, which have only been amplified by the likes of Covid-19 and the current cost crisis. Sadly, all that we warned would happen with Brexit is happening, and the long-term harm to the wellbeing of our islands cannot be overestimated.

The national islands plan continues to provide the Scottish Government with a framework for improving the lives of the people on our islands, and I am really pleased to see continued progress on the plan's 13 strategic objectives as outlined in the annual report. I will provide a couple of quick examples to demonstrate the breadth of the work that has been undertaken. First, we have delivered the £4.45 million islands programme across all six island local authorities, to enable us to work

together to support critical projects and to help to make our islands even better places to live, study, work and raise a family. Additionally, the £1.4 million islands cost crisis emergency fund was provided directly to island local authorities to support them in taking the urgent action needed to help households through the cost crisis.

Housing continued to be a key focus for our island communities in 2022. Our national islands plan commits us to improving access to homes for people looking to settle in or return to island communities, and, to deliver against that commitment, we have been developing a remote, rural and islands housing action plan, to ensure that we meet the housing needs in those areas and to help to retain people and attract others into communities.

Finally, our innovative carbon neutral islands project continues to support our mission to maximise the opportunities of the green economy for Scotland's islands. We have been working really closely with communities on Cumbrae, Islay, Barra, Raasay, Hoy and Yell to support them in carrying out in-depth carbon audits, which, in turn, are providing input into the six community climate change action plans.

Drawing my remarks to a close, I note that we continue to progress delivery of the national islands plan. As is required by the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, the plan will be fully reviewed in the current year to ensure that it remains fit for purpose, and I look forward to the committee's input into the review process.

**The Convener:** Thank you very much, cabinet secretary. I will kick off with a couple of questions. First, what have been the key areas of progress in meeting the national islands plan objectives? Can you give us some examples? Looking down the strategic objectives and commitments, I note that there are 133 commitments but we are, as of now, halfway through this five-year plan and only 26 have been fulfilled. Can you tell us what the main achievements of the past two or three years have been?

**Mairi Gougeon:** I am happy to outline that, but it is important to remember that all the commitments have either been fulfilled or are on-going. With some of the commitments, it will not simply be a case of ticking them off, because they will be on-going. Some of the strategic objectives and projects that are under way—for example, those under objective 11, which relates to arts, heritage and culture—will be things that we will continue to do. Some of the commitments in relation to that area and to others will be on-going instead of being completely fulfilled.

As for progress from last year, we have fulfilled an additional five commitments. Some key areas

of progress can be found, for example, under strategic objective 12 and the commitments that we have set out on the young islanders network. I was happy to be able to launch that network last summer, in Orkney, and we have seen its development. It has been great to see the young islanders joining and featuring in our national islands plan delivery group. As part of that, they also feature on the islands programme investment panel. It has been really great to see the development of that network and how it has continued to grow and increase its engagement.

Another commitment that we have fulfilled is on the islands passport, which has been launched and which the Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership is continuing to monitor. There are also a few commitments in relation to national planning framework 4, which is now being implemented. The commitments that we have made in the national islands plan in recognition of our island communities have been recognised in that framework, too.

We should also not forget the islands programme itself. I was proud to announce the 13 projects that had been successful in the programme funding round that was launched earlier this year. I think that you can see from the commitments that we have set out and the implementation route map that goes alongside them that an awful lot of work is going on, but we have fulfilled some commitments, based on where we were last year.

**The Convener:** You can understand why we are raising concerns. We are halfway through the five-year plan and it appears that only a fraction of the commitments have been fulfilled. Can you give us some examples or expand on the reasons why progress is not being made on some of the strategic objectives—for example, population decline, economic development, transport and digital connectivity?

Digital connectivity jumps out at me. There were eight commitments under that part of the plan, but none were fulfilled by the end of 2022. Digital connectivity is absolutely critical, so why have we not seen any improvement on that?

**Mairi Gougeon:** I do not think that it is fair to say that there has been no improvement. An awful lot of work has been going on in relation to digital connectivity, which can be seen in the strategic objectives and the commitments. Project gigabit is an example. There has been £20 million of Scottish Government funding and £16 million from the United Kingdom Government to expand on the reaching 100 per cent—R100—programme. When I appeared before the committee last year, I talked about the sub-sea cables that were to be laid. That work has been completed, and we are continuing with the roll-out,

It is also important to remember that we first set out this plan in 2019, three months before the pandemic. There is no denying the absolutely massive impact that that had not only in relation to the implementation of our objectives and the commitments, but right across the country and all parts of Government, because we had to pivot our resource to deal with the immediate challenges that we faced. There has been some delay because of those challenges, but having resilient communities was really important, so that is where we pivoted the funds. It is important to bear in mind that the previous rounds of funding for the islands programmes that we had—the islands infrastructure fund, the healthy islands fund and the island communities fund—were to help us to deal with some of those challenges and to react to the pandemic.

**The Convener:** We have two and a half years until the end of the current plan. In relation to digital connectivity, are you confident that we will get superfast broadband to everybody in island communities, along with the R100 programme and project gigabit?

**Mairi Gougeon:** I am confident that we will continue to make progress. As I said, the progress that we have made during the past year can be seen, and the work is continuing.

**Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con):** Convener, my question is very similar to yours; it is about the R100 programme being completed by 2028. Can I have some reassurance from the cabinet secretary that there will be progress before five years of the plan has expired?

**Mairi Gougeon:** Yes. You can see that the work is on-going. I mentioned project gigabit and the specific areas that will be targeted in that. There will continue to be progress.

**Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP):** Good morning, cabinet secretary. The Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 states that annual reports must contain information

“about the extent to which the outcomes identified in the national islands plan have improved in the reporting year”.

How would you say that the outcomes for island communities have improved since 2019?

**Mairi Gougeon:** We can see that from some of the commitments in the plan. A lot of the outcomes will be on-going, because we want to see continued improvement. I do not think that you would like it if I came to the committee and outlined that we have ticked a box, so we can move on and focus on something else. The review of the national islands plan—which I spoke about—is also important, because we have to ensure that the objectives in the plan still meet the

needs of our island communities and that they reflect the priorities that island communities want us to focus on.

If you look across the board at the full suite of objectives, you will see that we are continuing to work on them. For example, a number of threads of work are on-going on strategic objective 1, which is on population. We are working on the talent attraction and migration service, and we are continuing to work on the addressing depopulation action plan, which is a key commitment. We are continuing to work, and we are trying—where we can, and wherever possible—to improve outcomes for our island communities.

**Jim Fairlie:** You talked about the £4.1 million in the latest round of funding, and I think that I am right in saying that an additional £2 million of funding will go to the South Uist community centre. How has the funding that has been awarded been received locally, and what does the Government hope that it will achieve? I presume that island communities are pleased to have that extra funding.

**Mairi Gougeon:** Yes. The projects that are funded through the islands programme have been developed with communities and try to identify and address their needs. The funding for the projects that I announced last week was welcome. I was in Shetland, announcing three projects there that were awarded funding.

I thank the committee for the scrutiny and work that it undertook on the islands programme, because that fed into the process and how we worked the funding allocation and models that we used this year. That feedback was really helpful, and we made improvements to the programme as a result of that work.

09:15

**Jim Fairlie:** There is a requirement for indicators for the strategic objectives—sorry, I cannot get my tongue around that. Have those indicators actually been developed?

**Mairi Gougeon:** Yes. Strategic objective 13, on the overall implementation, identifies a number of pieces of work that need to be done to enable us to gather the data that we need. We know that, if we want the plan to be implemented effectively, we need the data to inform that, and we need to ensure that we can monitor that. We know that there is quite a lot of work to be done to enable us to gather that data and take it forward from there.

You can see from strategic objective 13 that we have undertaken five projects to improve the data. There is the islands data dashboard, and the national islands plan survey was undertaken in 2020 by the James Hutton Institute. Around 4,500

completed surveys were returned. We sent out just over 20,000—I am sure that officials will correct me if I am wrong on that—so we had around a 22 per cent return rate.

In addition, we recently commissioned another survey, because, now that we have the baseline data, we can build on that for the future. Work has also been undertaken on geography data zones, the island region populations dashboard and the existing data indicators framework. We have commissioned EKOS to do some work on that and to look at what existing indicators we can use to analyse the issue and monitor progress.

**Jim Fairlie:** There is on-going monitoring to make sure that those things—

**Mairi Gougeon:** There will be. All those different strands of work have been important in getting the baseline data, which, as I said, the survey helped to provide us with, and in disaggregating the data for the islands from the data for the mainland. That has been a challenge in itself.

I do not know whether Professor Sindico or any other official wants to discuss why that has been such a challenge so far and why all those different strands of work are important in building an accurate picture for each of our islands.

**Professor Francesco Sindico (Scottish Government):** I am happy to jump in very briefly. My colleagues who are joining remotely may want to add something.

Even in my experience—my work is more linked to the carbon neutral islands project—the amount of interest from island communities in better understanding the disaggregated data at a granular level is huge. However, the challenge of getting that data is also huge. The four or five projects that the cabinet secretary mentioned are a very important start, but, as she said, getting that data and understanding it is an on-going effort in the national islands plan and in the review that we will start very soon.

One key challenge is that, although one would want to know absolutely everything about the data from a very small island with a very small population, we must consider the privacy aspects. If there are only 80 or 90 people on an island and you start disaggregating data and producing statistics, you will clearly know who is who. That is something to be very mindful of. One would want to know everything about the data, but, at the same time, we have to be very careful that we do not intrude too much into the privacy of those who live on the islands.

**Jim Fairlie:** Yes. That makes sense.

**The Convener:** I will continue in that vein. Indicators for each strategic objective are very

important. We are two and a half years into the plan. The indicators were supposed to be formed with Government agencies, local authorities and island communities, and they were going to be SMART—specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time bound. We knew certain things before we started. We knew that some of the islands had only 60 or 70 residents and that privacy would be important, but surely we should be far further down the road on fulfilling the obligation to have SMART indicators when we are more than halfway through the plan. Why are those indicators not in place?

**Mairi Gougeon:** That is why what Francesco Sindico highlighted is so important. The challenges must be identified and a baseline picture must be built so that we have something to monitor against. I hope that you can understand that from what is set out in the work on that strategic objective, where you can see the five different projects that have been undertaken. None of them is quick or necessarily easy to do, but they ensure that we are continuing to progress that objective. The project on the existing data indicators framework is trying to see what existing indicators we can use to monitor the framework. All those projects are about ensuring that we are getting the baseline data that will help us to do this effectively.

**The Convener:** We have the 2023 plan. Will the indicators that enable us to look at progress against the strategic objectives be available to us?

**Mairi Gougeon:** As I said, we have commissioned another national islands plan survey, which will help us build on that. We hope that it will be launched this summer, but I cannot say that it necessarily will be completed unless officials can give me that confirmation now. Because of the nature of some of the projects, the work is on-going, but I think that we have been making progress when we look from last year to this year. We will continue to make progress and build on that data as we move forward.

**Nicola Crook (Scottish Government):** As the cabinet secretary has outlined, we have previously focused on gathering the baseline data. That has been the focus in the last couple of years. Unfortunately, that has been very difficult. As you obviously appreciate, a lot of the data out there is not accurately split between the mainland and the islands.

However, as the cabinet secretary said, in the coming year we will run the islands survey, and that will allow us to get more comparable data. We will also update the islands dashboard, which will give us further comparable data to use. It will be the first year that we have two separate batches of comparable data, which will enable us to compare



and contrast to see what the trends and changes have been.

**The Convener:** Thank you very much.

**Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP):** Can you say a bit more about how island communities play a role in assessing the impact of what the islands plan is achieving? By that, I am referring not just to the important quantitative data that you have just talked about, but to qualitative opinion. How do you measure that?

**Mairi Gougeon:** That is really important. We want to make sure that that voice is featured strongly as we move through the implementation of the plan and in the actions that we have set out. That is where the work is.

A couple of different bodies help us with the implementation of the plan and its monitoring. We have the islands strategic group, which the local authorities sit on; its next meeting is coming up shortly. We also have the national islands plan delivery group, and that is where you really see that engagement. A number of bodies are represented in that group, including Highlands and Island Enterprise, the Federation of Small Businesses, the Scottish Islands Federation and the CalMac community board. As I mentioned earlier, representatives from the young islanders network are in it as well. The group has been convened in part to help us look at issues as they emerge; for example, it has had meetings to discuss the cost of living crisis. The group has been really helpful in getting that feedback, having those conversations, and, as you say, making sure that we have that voice feeding into the process. Officials might want to give more information on the islands plan delivery group in particular.

**Professor Sindico:** I am happy to say a few more words. The national islands plan delivery group is a key instrument but not the only one. Another thing to highlight is that we, as an islands team, are connected to the region through liaison officers for each local authority. I am the liaison officer for the Shetland Islands. That means that the connection goes way beyond the local authority. Obviously, we develop strong relationships with the officials, such as my counterpart in the local authority, and that allows us to build a close connection to the communities—in my case, in Shetland. I think that it is very important for the islands team to develop those relationships so that we can assess, sometimes almost unofficially, how the communities respond to the work that we are doing, how we can improve on that work and how we can take it forward. That is another important aspect of the way that we engage with the communities.

**Alasdair Allan:** You are liaising with local authorities, but are you also liaising with individual island communities? You know what I am going to say. For people in certain islands—I will not name the islands—the local authority is not only distant but does not have much sympathy with them. How do you ensure that you are liaising with specific islands and not just with local authorities that are distant beasts?

**Professor Sindico:** I know which island you are referring to. *[Laughter.]* Again, every island is different. Every local authority is different as well, so it is difficult to paint a picture for everybody. However, I think that, throughout the years, we have engaged with many organisations through the projects that have been awarded and the processes that have been set up.

I can expand more on the carbon neutral island project but that is just one of the many projects and the local authority is just one of the stakeholders in the local authority territory.

Also, there will be cases in which local authorities can open doors to communities. Whether they all love each other and are happy is another issue, but local authorities are on the ground. They know who the people are, much better than I do, sitting here in Glasgow. A level of trust in local authorities needs to be developed, and then we have to work very efficiently through them to arrive at the smallest of the islands in whatever local authority.

**Alasdair Allan:** I do not say any of that to take away from the importance of the local authorities, but you know what I am referring to. Thank you.

**Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD):** Good morning. I will turn to island proofing, or island communities impact assessments. Does the annual report show that those assessments have led to a change in mindset and culture in public bodies?

**Mairi Gougeon:** The island communities impact assessments have been a really important tool for doing exactly that, because they put the onus on policy teams to consider island communities. I am sure that the team that is here with me can go into more detail about their engagement, but they engage extensively across the Scottish Government and with other policy teams to ensure that we are considering island communities and feeding that information in. As you can see from the national islands plan, our communities do not operate in silos. The plan affects every single part of Government, as well as the relevant authorities.

I highlight that we have updated the guidance on how the impact assessments should be undertaken and we have provided more materials and information, including videos, based on the feedback that we received from the process of

engaging with policy teams. The islands team stands ready to work with any public authorities that are undertaking the impact assessments, to ensure that they are taking the right things into consideration and using the assessments as they should be used.

**Beatrice Wishart:** I think that there is a concern that the assessments might just be seen as a tick-box exercise. For example, Shetland's view of the assessment on the national care service is that it was just a tick-box exercise.

**Mairi Gougeon:** An impact assessment certainly should not be a tick-box exercise, and the guidance specifically says that the assessments should not be seen as a tick-box exercise. We have examples of where island communities impact assessments have been used and policies have been adjusted to reflect that. The definition of fuel poverty was changed on the back of an island communities impact assessment, in order to recognise the significant impact that there can be for island communities.

I certainly do not see the assessments as a tick-box exercise. As I say, the guidance specifically states that they should not be. However, the team engages extensively to ensure that the relevant authorities that should be undertaking the assessments are doing them well and are considering the findings from them.

If there is disagreement in relation to that or about how the assessment has been undertaken, the process for addressing that is also set out in the Island Communities Impact Assessments (Publication and Review of Decisions) (Scotland) Regulations 2020.

**Beatrice Wishart:** In giving that example, I was meaning more that the Government had treated it as a tick-box exercise and was perhaps not listening to what the islands were saying.

**Mairi Gougeon:** No, I have given the example of how we have changed an area on the back of an island communities impact assessment. We have to publish those impact assessments as well. As I say, there is a process in place if there is disagreement as to the information that is there or how the assessment has been undertaken, but we take the impact assessments seriously.

Also, if we or another public authority determine that an assessment should not be undertaken, that information has to be published, so we are aiming to be as transparent as possible in outlining how our island communities have been taken into consideration as we are developing various policies or strategies.

09:30

**Professor Sindico:** I want to add two quick points on ICIA's.

Beatrice Wishart started her question by saying that it was about island proofing. I want to go back to that, because ICIA's are a specific instrument to make island proofing a reality. One strong example of that was the development of the islands cost crisis emergency fund. To the team, together with the cabinet secretary, it was apparent that there were likely to be significant additional negative effects on island communities. That is exactly what ICIA's are all about, and what island proofing is all about. The Government was able to move quickly to deliver the islands cost crisis emergency fund. Obviously, we knew that that was not a magic bullet that would solve the cost of living crisis, but it was very well received by the communities and local authorities. That is a tangible example of our moving fast in island proofing and delivering on the promises of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018.

My second point is that ICIA's might not be perfect—that is obvious—but, in my interaction with island communities and island governments from other regions and countries, they always ask about ICIA's. They might not be perfect, but we are working in the islands team and with the communities and all the stakeholders to fine tune the process and make it work even better. I just wanted to highlight that ICIA's are one of several areas of islands policy that are recognised internationally.

**Erica Clarkson (Scottish Government):** I will reinforce some of what you heard from Professor Sindico. ICIA's are a very busy area of work for my team. We have team members dedicated to working on that policy area. They engage on a daily basis with colleagues across the Scottish Government and beyond that, in the 71 relevant authorities that are referred to in the 2018 act. Those team members offer guidance and support and work hard to ensure that islands are represented in the work that the authorities are developing. We take the issue very seriously indeed. As Professor Sindico said, internationally, many of our island partners are curious about our ICIA work and look at it as a best practice model.

We recently consulted on the guidance that we published originally alongside the regulations, and we realised that it could be better and more user friendly. Therefore, we have simplified the guidance and made it much more accessible to people.

With regard to the national care service work, a full range of impact assessments, including an island communities impact assessment, were done on the National Care Service (Scotland) Bill,

in line with statutory duties and commitments. The impact assessments that were published were on specific provisions in the bill. We are working with our colleagues to do more impact assessment work alongside the development of the policy, the secondary legislation and so on. I just want to reassure Ms Wishart that we are committed to engaging with our colleagues across Government and in island communities to ensure that impact assessments are done correctly.

**The Convener:** I want to follow up on that thought, cabinet secretary. We have heard from Alasdair Allan that there might be differences between local authorities and what is actually happening on the ground. So far, the guidance on ICIA appears to be directed towards public bodies, but there is a lack of guidance on how communities engage with impact assessments. Are you trying to address that?

**Mairi Gougeon:** As Erica Clarkson just outlined, on the basis of the feedback that we had, we worked on the guidance and refreshed it last year. Obviously, the onus is on the 71 relevant authorities that are in the schedule and that must undertake island communities impact assessments. Therefore, the focus has been on how they undertake that work and on ensuring that they meaningfully engage with people who will be impacted by the policies.

**The Convener:** That is about public bodies, but are there any efforts to ensure that individuals and communities can engage with assessments, or any guidance on how they do that?

**Mairi Gougeon:** I am sure that the team could give more information in relation to the consultation that they have to undertake. We provide that guidance to public bodies, because they are the ones who are legally obligated to undertake those assessments. I do not know whether you want any more information on that.

**The Convener:** We hear that local authorities have a role to play but that it is important to make sure that it is community voices that are feeding in and that those community voices know how to feed in. The guidance on that is lacking. Are you looking to address that in the future?

**Professor Sindico:** There are two or three aspects to highlight. In the context of an ICIA itself, island communities will be consulted through the measures that we have at our disposal, those being the national islands plan delivery group and the more informal channels that we mentioned earlier.

The second point is that, when the whole process began, there was some confusion about whether an ICIA could be triggered by an island community. If you look at the regulations and the 2018 act, that is not the case. Island communities

impact assessments are for the 71 relevant authorities, so it is a public sector duty to carry one out. However, island communities can review a decision not to carry out an ICIA or they can review ICIA that have been carried out. Island communities have that capacity, and we need to continue working with them in the ways that I mentioned earlier to further that capacity and provide further clarity on how to engage.

**Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green):** I want to explore a bit more about the ICIA, following the questions asked by Beatrice Wishart and the convener. I need a bit more explanation so that we can perhaps understand. Island communities are saying to me that the assessments need to be reviewed and that the bodies and directorates that are charged with undertaking them are the same as those that assess whether the impacts have been mitigated sufficiently, so they feel as though the process is somewhat flawed. From the conversation that we have had already, I get a sense that you are listening and taking on the learning, but what would you say in response to the idea that the same bodies that do the assessments are monitoring them? Where is the opportunity for communities to get real consideration?

**Mairi Gougeon:** I am happy to take any feedback on that. As you say, and as we have also highlighted today, we have already reviewed the guidance on the basis of feedback about how we undertake the assessments. We are constantly trying to make improvements wherever we can.

**Professor Sindico:** I do not want to reiterate what I said earlier, but the national islands plan delivery group provides us with a forum that is representative across island communities, and it can filter accountability down to them. However, I acknowledge that, as much as we try to—and do—engage with island communities, we would do even more of that in an ideal world and island communities would have even more access to that accountability through reviewing and so on. In the structures that we have at our disposal—the delivery group, liaison with local authorities and going beyond local authorities—we are providing island communities with the voice that the act promised them.

**Ariane Burgess:** Another thing that I understand from conversation with people is that ICIA are retrospective rather than proactive. I would like to hear a bit more about why people might think that that is the case. You talked earlier about there being some confusion around how ICIA are used or triggered.

**Mairi Gougeon:** I am speaking from the example that I highlighted earlier, although the team might want to come in with more examples. We very much use them in the development of

policies and strategies. I have highlighted one particular example where an assessment was made and we made a change.

That is very much how I view them. In the same way, we have to undertake business and regulatory impact assessments when we are looking at other policies. In both cases, we have to consider all the information and show how it has been factored in to the decision making.

I do not know whether Francesco Sindico or anyone else from the team wants to add any information to what I have said.

**Ariane Burgess:** Do we understand why people think that they are retrospective rather than proactive? Perhaps there is a communication issue there.

**Erica Clarkson:** Again, I will not reiterate everything that Francesco Sindico and the cabinet secretary have said, but the legislation is the legislation and we need to deliver on it as it is written. The translation of the legislation into practice is restricted to a degree in the way that is set out in the regulations.

I am sorry if communities are coming away with the impression that ICIAAs are retrospective or reactive. They are most definitely intended to be done at the beginning of the process, as the guidance sets out. I will make a commitment to the committee on behalf of Ms Gougeon. As we have said, there is always more that we can do, and we will take the matter away and think about how we can make sure that the messaging around ICIAAs is clearer and more easily understood for communities—for the people that the regulations are meant to benefit the most.

**Ariane Burgess:** Thanks for that, Erica. That is really helpful and reassuring. I hear that this is something of an iterative process and that you are listening.

I want to come back to the piece around communities and public bodies and really ensuring that communities get their voices heard. How can we make sure that ICIAAs are a mechanism that islanders can use? Examples that have been given to me include ICIAAs being used to stop the air traffic control centralisation by Highlands and Islands Airports Limited and address the situation with Mull and Iona ferry capacity.

How can we make sure that ICIAAs work for communities? In those two examples, the communities have been trying to raise the issues for quite a long time, and you would think that the assessments would flag them up and help us to be more proactive.

**Mairi Gougeon:** If there are particular issues there, I am more than happy to follow them up with

you after the meeting, or directly with the committee.

ICIAAs are a mechanism that we must use in developing policies, but they are not the only mechanism by which we engage with communities. We have highlighted some of the other examples. We have the national islands plan delivery group and we have the strategic group, where we engage with councils. There is also the engagement that Francesco Sindico talked about with various island stakeholders.

I would not want anybody to think that ICIAAs are the only mechanism by which they can make their views on a policy known. Obviously, we want to consult and engage with communities as much as we can in the course of policy development. While some of the bodies have a particular role, we also have informal engagement with our stakeholders and with communities. ICIAAs are by no means the only mechanism by which they can have a say or have influence.

**The Convener:** Three members want to ask supplementary questions. I ask them to be brief. I will then bring Erica Clarkson back in.

**Jim Fairlie:** My question is maybe aimed at Francesco Sindico, because it is possibly more granular. Am I right in thinking that each island has a local steering group that employs a community development officer directly in the local anchor organisation, and that some of the community development officers are young islanders who have been able to return home to work on specific projects? Is that the case?

**Professor Sindico:** That is correct. Six islands have been included in the carbon neutral islands project, and on each island there is a bottom-up governance structure that allows a very strong island voice to direct the journey of carbon neutrality. The key players are very much the island steering groups. They are composed in different ways depending on the island, but they comprise people who represent all the different socioeconomic sectors and parts of society on the specific islands. The steering groups have identified local anchor organisations, and in the previous year and this year they have received funding from the carbon neutral islands project to hire a community development officer.

You are absolutely right—there are at least three islands on which the community development officer who has been recruited is a young islander who was doing their studies on the mainland and, thanks to the CNI project, was able to go back to their own island and drive carbon neutrality there, following their passion, by deploying the skills that they have developed.

09:45

**Jim Fairlie:** There is good, strong local engagement. Local steering groups are helping to develop things.

**Professor Sindico:** Absolutely. One thing that I need to make very clear is that we, from the carbon neutral islands team, have not in any way steered the steering group. It is up to it to understand what works better in the context of Islay, Barra or Hoy. To repeat the point: we do not know as well as the group members do the reality on the ground. For the CNI project, the steering group decides how it is structured and how it operates and so forth.

**Jim Fairlie:** Thank you.

**Alasdair Allan:** Clearly, the ICIAAs have made a big impact—no pun intended—and they have raised expectations in a way about the decisions that would be subject to that assessment. A question that I am sometimes asked is about which organisations, agencies or bodies are required to consider going down that route. Will you say a bit about which are and which are not? We are sometimes asked that question locally.

**Mairi Gougeon:** There is a list of bodies that are expected to undertake island communities impact assessments—they are set out in the schedule. There are 71 bodies listed there. I would be happy to send that information to the committee, if you would find that helpful.

**Alasdair Allan:** That is very helpful. What I am driving at is whether you are satisfied that the list is complete enough, given the variety of agencies that are involved in delivering policy in an island setting, or whether it is something that you keep under review.

**Professor Sindico:** We have the list of 71 bodies. When I say “constantly under review”, I do not want to raise any expectations, but, when you are working with island communities, you need to be aware that things might change, so we will need to look at that.

However, I want to highlight a further aspect of island communities impact assessments and of the wider work that we do. When an ICIA is required, it is often another team in Government or another area of Government that will carry it out. That is similar to many of the areas of competence—whether that be transport, digital connectivity or another area—that one might think would fall under the islands team. We have a huge role in working closely with other areas of Government to encourage, strengthen, push and promote the interests of islands and island communities in policy areas and so forth.

With ICIAAs, our role is very much with the island communities, but actually there is also a big role

within these buildings. A lot of the work that we do, which we put a lot of effort into, is about—I do not know whether this is the right word—educating our own colleagues about ICIAAs, how to make them better, and how to island-proof our own policies. That is the power of an ICIA. There is a power externally because, at the end of the day, done well, it will benefit island communities. However, there is also a power internally because, if we speak more about it and people are more aware of it within our own buildings and our own Government, the island communities will benefit from that.

**Beatrice Wishart:** On the point about ICIAAs being done well, what if communities disagree with the conclusions? Is there any recourse for those communities?

**Mairi Gougeon:** There is a process for that, which is set out in the regulations.

**Beatrice Wishart:** Thank you.

**Erica Clarkson:** I feel that I am spending most of the morning just reiterating what has already been said—apologies to the committee for that.

As I said, there is always more that we can do to engage communities, and we will take that away as a strong message from today’s session.

I reinforce the point that island communities impact assessments are meant to be not a tool to block things from happening, but an aid to support better policy development. That is very much the position from which we come.

It is perhaps also worth mentioning that all the Scottish Government’s island communities impact assessments are published on our website, so anybody is able to take a look at them.

Another point concerns the schedule of 71 relevant authorities, which was mentioned. As far as I understand it—I hope that I am right; we can write to the committee to confirm this—that list can be amended at ministers’ discretion. Island communities have already indicated a desire to expand the list, so we will engage with them on that.

**Mairi Gougeon:** Yes, that is correct. The 2018 act sets out that we can add to or amend that list by regulations.

**The Convener:** Thank you. That is helpful.

We will move on to the carbon neutral islands project. Rhoda Grant has questions about that.

**Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab):** What progress has there been on the carbon neutral islands project, and what lessons have been learned that can be rolled out to other islands?

**Mairi Gougeon:** I will give a brief outline. I know that Francesco Sindico will be desperate to come in, as he is the project lead on carbon neutral islands.

The committee will be aware that, in January this year, we published a progress update report on where we are in relation to that. Francesco has already touched on the community development officers that we have working in each of the communities. The in-depth carbon audits have been undertaken, and I believe that the climate change action plans for each of those areas have now been completed but are still to be published. That is where we are at the moment, but I will hand over to Francesco, who can provide some more detail.

**Professor Sindico:** Thank you for the question. I will try to keep my answer brief, but I could say a lot about the project.

The first part of your question was on progress and the second part was on the lessons learned.

On progress so far, as the cabinet secretary anticipated, the CNI project supported—it strengthened support; it did not carry out—in-depth carbon audits on each of the six islands. Those audits have been complex and difficult to undertake, but they have provided a granular level of data—exactly what we were discussing earlier—that was not there previously. I can expand on that in just a moment.

The whole purpose of the carbon audits was not so much to dictate which actions the community should take, but quite the opposite—I reiterate that it is a community-led project. The goal was to provide data, evidence and information to the structure that I mentioned earlier—the steering group, the community development officers and the local anchor organisations—to inform its conversation. As anticipated, that conversation and engagement has led to the six community climate change action plans that will soon be published.

I offer a word on the action plans, just to ensure that, once you see them, you will understand what you have in front of you. They are not plans like the ones that we are used to seeing, which are full of references to previous plans, policy documents and so forth. They are written by the island communities, and they will highlight the priorities, interests, aspirations and sometimes the dreams of the island communities, as represented by the steering group, the CDOs and the local anchor organisations through the engagement that has happened throughout the year.

There will be a summary of the audits in the different sectors and specific information about key actions and areas. I am happy to expand on that briefly for each island, if you want.

What happens now is very important. In a few weeks, you will have before you six glossy, nicely laid out—I hope—documents that you will all enjoy, and you can put them in your library or in your computer. However, let us be honest: the island communities in particular have seen way too many of those kinds of documents. Action needs to happen.

Two things will happen this year. First, we have £1 million of capital spending allocated to the CNI project. That £1 million cannot do anything when it comes to carbon neutrality, but it can provide funding for some quick wins that will provide visibility to the CNI project on the islands and a boost of confidence to the CDOs, the steering groups and so forth.

The second thing that will happen is thinking a bit more long term. With key delivery partners, we will be supporting the development of climate change investment strategies. By that, we mean two things. We will have the plan, the aspirations and the interests of the island communities, but we need to cost those. We need to see how much the projects that the island communities would like to do would actually cost and whether they are feasible.

More important, how can we promote and drive finance towards net zero not just beyond this financial year, but between now and 2040 and even further, so that carbon neutrality becomes a reality, not just for the sake of carbon neutrality but, in the spirit of the CNI project, to promote islands that are more resilient, more sustainable and attractive places to stay in and move to? That is a very important strand of work that we are going to start this year, to really focus on the investment strategy that will happen.

On the lessons that we have learned so far, the audits were mostly about energy, transport, waste and land-related emissions—the main sectors that Scotland as a whole looks at. Some of those audits were done with very strong input from the community—I will not repeat what “the community” means in that sense. From the analysis that has been done by the delivery partners, particularly Community Energy Scotland, that was a success. The community, through household surveys, for example, provided the input that allowed the audit to tell the real story of Yell and the real story of Islay, rather than the picture coming from national databases, which can be a bit skewed.

That was really good practice. However, that is time consuming and it requires a level of confidence, trust and support on the specific island.

The challenges in the audit related to two things: more technical areas, such as land-related emissions, and an initial attempt to better

understand the marine ecosystems and how they impact on climate change, for good or bad. Those are very technical matters that have been given to external consultants.

The two problems in that regard were that blue carbon, in particular, is a very novel area—even in science—and it was difficult to get clear messages and data. Therefore, that is an area in which—you will hear this often over the next year of the carbon neutral islands project—ground truthing is needed. We do not need to go back to redo the whole thing—clearly not—but we need to get a much better picture and sounder science. That should not be seen as a negative or a downside of the CNI project. Actually, that is good for Scotland as a whole, because blue carbon is very much a baby. It is incipient for all of Scotland. We can use the CNI project ground truthing to fine tune the methodologies and information that will then be used for all our coastal waters.

The other issue is the engagement between external consultants and the communities. Sometimes that works well and sometimes not so well. There needs to be a level of trust, confidence and support when it is not just the CNI team that is involved but people who are brought in from outside.

I apologise, convener. I am happy to expand on any of those points, if you want.

**The Convener:** No apologies are needed. That is very interesting.

**Rhoda Grant:** You talked about funding and how we are going to get it. Is the islands programme providing any funding for this? Can the national islands plan play a role?

I am concerned because we need to reach net zero as a country and these are small islands. You seemed to indicate that we can get to grips with how much carbon there is, but I was not so confident when you talked about the plans that are coming from the islands—you talked about dreams, funding and cost. If we cannot do this on a tiny scale in the islands, what hope do we have of reaching the greater goal of Scotland becoming carbon neutral?

10:00

**Professor Sindico:** I am happy to expand on that briefly. This year, we will examine the dreams and aspirations of islands more closely. If all those are complied with and met, we will consider what difference it would make from a carbon neutrality and a net zero perspective—I will not go into the difference between those, but we will have that discussion this year.

Once we get the numbers right, there will be a big challenge for land-related emissions—the

cabinet secretary and I were in Shetland, where we heard about that at first hand. Even if the whole of Yell or Raasay achieved net zero or, even better, became carbon neutral, that would not have a huge impact on climate change in the context of Scotland or the bigger global picture. However, you are right that the CNI project will show that we can do it and that we can provide the expertise, jobs and skills, which can, potentially, be replicated elsewhere.

If the only way to get to net zero is by focusing on one of those aspects, such as land-related emissions, but that goes against the will of the community on that island or it makes the islands even more costly or it becomes more difficult to provide housing as a result, then, in my opinion, it is not the way forward. We need to find a balanced approach whereby all aspects of the audit, whether energy or transport, are looked at together.

Although the CNI project has dedicated support that is separate to the islands programme, in order to deliver it, even on a small island such as Raasay that has a small population, you will need more finance. That is where my work and the work of the team that leads on the CNI project comes in. It is a bit like what I said about ICIAs; it is about working within these corridors, with other colleagues in Government. Last year, there were some good examples of our working with our adaptation colleagues who have provided some financial support. We want to do more in that direction. It is not just the CNI project or the islands programme; there is a bigger Scottish Government effort.

**Mairi Gougeon:** Although £1 million has been allocated to the CNI project, as Francesco Sindico has said, it is by no means the only investment that is being made. We have the islands programme, but, when you look at other areas, there is spend across all other parts of Government that will have an impact, not to mention how the islands growth deal can contribute.

**Rhoda Grant:** I will drill down to one small aspect. Fuel poverty is a huge problem for our islands. The small islands will be a good test bed for Government policy on fuel poverty. I am talking specifically about boiler replacement and insulation. Has work been done on that that we can roll out quickly? To me, that speaks of changes to national Government policy rather than being something that is specific to those wee islands. However, if we could test the policy there, it would be a win-win if we could then roll it out to other islands.

**Mairi Gougeon:** We know that fuel poverty is a massive issue. Finding innovative ways to address some of the issues that we are facing was the

subject of conversations that I had in Shetland last week. Our islands are at the forefront of innovation. Look at the energy that is produced and the fact that the islands are responsible for contributing it—yet our islands suffer the greatest rates of fuel poverty. Those issues are complex, because we do not have all the levers to fix them. However, the project allows us to look at how we can best tackle fuel poverty in communities. Although the committee’s discussion is focused on carbon neutrality, you will, no doubt, be aware of some of the other schemes on fuel poverty and the particular focus on islands in that regard.

**Professor Sindico:** If I could just—

**The Convener:** Unfortunately, we still have about 12 questions to ask, which gives us about two minutes per question and answer, so we will keep going. I apologise for that.

**Ariane Burgess:** Rhoda Grant’s line of questioning was really helpful. How will the £1 million for catalysing and confidence building be divided between the six islands? Will they have to apply for it, or will the money be split evenly? What approach is being taken?

**Professor Sindico:** We have decided to split the money evenly for the first year. We will see what happens next year.

There is a level of trust, confidence and support within the communities. We had an important in-person get-together on Raasay at the end of March, and everyone who was there really gelled.

In principle, the same amount will be given to each island. Obviously, we will need to ask them to make applications for some projects, but, having learned from the past, we do not want the process to be too time consuming. We will scrutinise the applications and give timelines. If an island did not have any projects—although that would never happen—we would obviously not just lose the money; we would pass it to other islands in the best way that we could think of.

The idea is to spread the money evenly this time.

**Ariane Burgess:** You have talked a lot about the CDOs, who seem to be crucial in ensuring that the plans are taken forward. The ambition is that the project will go up to 2040. Is there a commitment that the CDOs will be resourced throughout the whole time covered by the project?

**Mairi Gougeon:** We will need to see how the project develops, but you are right that CDOs have been playing a critical role so far. I return to a point that Francesco Sindico made earlier. What has been brilliant about the project has been young people being able to return to their communities on the islands after studying on the mainland. They are embedded in those communities, so they

are in the best position to try to build community engagement and involvement with the plan.

**Nicola Crook:** I will directly address Ms Grant’s point about the relationship between the islands programme, the national islands plan and the carbon-neutral islands project. I highlight that an intrinsic pillar of the national islands plan is that it is to be green, so it very much supports the carbon-neutral islands project, which is key to making progress in that regard. I also highlight that one project that has been announced—the Garrison house regeneration scheme on Cumbrae—will be funded jointly by the islands programme and the carbon-neutral islands project. That is a good example of collaborative working and of how projects in the islands programme will form a pipeline that will support the likes of the CNI project.

**The Convener:** We know that we do not suddenly get a toolbox of policies; policies are built up and come along at different stages. When you develop a policy that works on an island, will that knowledge be transferred to islands that are not involved in the CNI project? Will there be quick hits, with the policies that have been proven to work being rolled out across all our islands? Will funding be provided to support that roll-out?

**Mairi Gougeon:** A key part of the project is ensuring replicability across other islands. Although only six islands are part of the project, we want to ensure that we roll out learning from across Scotland, as well as international learning.

**The Convener:** We move to questions on addressing depopulation.

**Christine Grahame (Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale) (SNP):** The evidence has been very interesting. We talk about “the islands”, but my understanding is that there are 93 populated islands in Scotland. There is huge diversity—some populations might be in single figures, but there are also large populations. There are big differences in demographics, the distance from the mainland and so on. I am interested in the actions of steering groups on islands and in the input from the grass roots, given all that diversity.

Can you give me an example of an island with a very small population—I do not know if you will be able to name it; it might be wrong to do so—that put forward proposals that were not feasible? What was your response? I imagine that diplomacy would be involved here, too. Can you also give me an example of an island with a large population that came forward with proposals not just for sustaining its population but for increasing it—which, after all, is what this is really about? What came from that?



**Mairi Gougeon:** One of our key consultations in recent times has been for the islands bond, on which there was extensive engagement and consultation with island communities. During that consultation, feelings about the bond were made quite clear, but what also came through were some really helpful and positive suggestions for trying to tackle depopulation or retain populations in different island communities. That was a really positive part of the process, and we have used those ideas and suggestions to develop practical policy tests to see whether they might be effective.

As for an example of proposals that were not taken on board, I would have to turn to officials for that information. I do not know what examples there are in that respect, but I can say that, on the back of the consultation that I mentioned, we definitely had some good and positive suggestions that we have listened to and tried to implement.

**Christine Grahame:** I am trying to understand this. I do not envy the task that you face, given such diversity, but the target, I imagine, is to sustain our islands and increase population as best we can, so it would be really handy if you could give me an example of an island whose population is, say, under threat and needs to be sustained and increased. What proposals came from that kind of community, and what was your response to it? Similarly, what proposals came from an island such as Skye, let us say, which does not need so much help and—I do not know—is buzzing along happily, and what was the response? That would give me an idea of how effective and realistic the grass roots are. I think that you said that one of the important things was building confidence in some of the islands that they could do something, but that would have to be tempered with realism and finance.

**Mairi Gougeon:** I am sure that officials will correct me if I am wrong about this or will come in with more information, but there is an example in the Western Isles of an island skills and employment repopulation pilot that is being taken forward with £250,000 of funding as a result of some of that engagement. I do not know whether Nicola Crook or Cameron Anson would like to come in on that.

**The Convener:** I think that Cameron wanted to come in—by which I mean, the other Cameron. *[Interruption.]*

**Christine Grahame:** I have silenced them all.

**The Convener:** Unfortunately, Cameron, you are so far away that I cannot even see whether your lips are moving.

**Mairi Gougeon:** I should just say that Cameron engaged extensively in that work and undertook the consultation.

**Christine Grahame:** Has he got his microphone on?

**Professor Sindico:** It might be the connection.

**Christine Grahame:** Oh well.

**The Convener:** We are not getting anything.

**Professor Sindico:** This is from an energy perspective, but what we experienced in our community engagement on the CNI project was that on some islands—the larger islands, I would say—there was a lot of interest in what I would call reaping benefits with regard to attracting population and increasing resilience through our offshore wind developments. You referred to diplomacy, and it is on that sort of issue that we need to be very open and up front with communities in saying, “This is not just in our hands—this is a wider UK Government matter.” That is one example that I can share with you of where such a conversation is on-going.

On the smaller islands, there have been some much more—if you like—granular projects that can be supported, even solely, by the islands team through the islands programme. In some cases, they can bring back what might be relatively small numbers of people, but they can have a trickle effect. Sometimes, all you need on the smallest islands is a family, and that allows the school to remain open. That, too, has a trickle effect.

**Christine Grahame:** Is that as far down as you go? I think that there is an island with one person on it—I take it that they are not involved in that project, or are they? Is there a cut-off point where you say, “This is the population number below which we will not be engaging”?

10:15

**Professor Sindico:** No.

**Christine Grahame:** Even if it is for an island with one person?

**Professor Sindico:** Rona has two; they were looking for two other people—

**Christine Grahame:** Good—

**Professor Sindico:** They are an island; they are part of Scotland—

**Christine Grahame:** That is good to hear—I need to know this stuff.

**Professor Sindico:** I might be speaking out of turn here, but, being the islands team, we are the team for all the islands.

**Christine Grahame:** If Cameron still cannot speak, convener, could we perhaps get a reply from him at some point?

**Mairi Gougeon:** If it is okay, we would be happy to send you more information about the policy test on some of the other projects.

**Christine Grahame:** I just want tangible examples.

**Mairi Gougeon:** I mentioned the project in the Western Isles. Other projects were undertaken where we know that childcare can be an issue—we are taking forward a childcare pilot project on Mull—and I can write to the committee with more information on them.

**Christine Grahame:** That is good. That is what I wanted.

**Rachael Hamilton:** The highly protected marine area policy has been likened to a second Highland clearances. How does that work with the national islands plan for combating and halting population decline?

**Mairi Gougeon:** Members of the committee will, no doubt, be aware that we have undertaken a consultation in relation to the HPMA process and that we will analyse its results. We talked earlier about island communities impact assessments, and a partial one was undertaken for that process. We have to ensure that we are taking into account those other impacts, and we will do so through the processes that we have specified, as well as undertaking our own engagements throughout.

I was in Shetland last week to meet with people in the industries concerned to hear their views on that process and its potential impacts, and to listen to people's concerns, which is essentially what we have to do. We also have to ensure that we are listening through the consultation exercise and that we give the full analysis of the responses that we have received before we set out the next steps.

**Rachael Hamilton:** I had a response from Shetlanders to HPMA's shared with me. Can you share with the committee some of the issues that they were raising with you around the increase by 10 per cent of protected marine areas?

**Mairi Gougeon:** The committee members will be well aware of the concerns. We have had a number of debates in relation to that subject recently—Beatrice Wishart had a members' business debate in which she outlined her constituents' concerns about the HPMA process. We are listening to those concerns because we have to consider the national islands plan's objectives around the importance of populations as well as all the other strategic objectives that I have set out.

**Rachael Hamilton:** Okay. Can you clarify whether any port development projects have been affected, cancelled or delayed because of the

increasing costs of the two Ferguson Marine ferries?

**Mairi Gougeon:** I do not have that information to hand, and I do not know whether that is the case, but I am more than happy to follow up on that.

**Rachael Hamilton:** I am also interested in whether there are any conflicting policies in your portfolio that are likely to have an effect on the delivery of the national islands plan.

**Mairi Gougeon:** We aim for there not to be conflicting policies in the portfolio. Obviously, with agriculture, fisheries, land reform and forestry sitting in the one portfolio—you will no doubt be aware of the various pieces of legislation that will be introduced relating to those areas—we have to ensure that those policies are aligned and working for our island communities.

**Rachael Hamilton:** Do you want me to skip to my last question, convener?

**The Convener:** On that point, have any projects been identified through the islands plan that should be paused while we wait for the outcome of the blanket proposals for HPMA's to cover 10 per cent of Scotland's seas? The proposals would mean that some harbour improvements or investment in fishing boats and so on might come to nothing because those island communities would not be able to fish the areas around the islands in two years. Has there been consideration of projects being paused while we wait for the outcome of the consultation?

**Mairi Gougeon:** We have had the consultation; we need to go through the process of analysis before setting out our next steps. You can see from the commitments that we have set out in the national islands plan, which cover 13 strategic objectives, that work is on-going.

**Rhoda Grant:** I have a couple of quick questions about depopulation. Kevin Stewart was told that the impact of what is happening with ferries just now is worse for the economy of the islands than the impact of Covid, which is pretty horrendous. What can you do in your role? The Scottish Government has policies for stopping depopulation, so what can be done in that regard?

I am also interested in the impact of depopulation on Gaelic. At the moment, young native Gaelic speakers and Gaelic-speaking families are leaving the islands. Although we can try to bring new people in, they will not speak Gaelic, which means that, within a generation, we could lose the whole language. I am not saying that we should not increase the number of people coming in or that we should not encourage people to do so, but we need to keep our own.

**Mairi Gougeon:** Absolutely. That is critical, and we are committed to that. You will notice throughout the plan and the implementation route map that actions are set out and are under way to ensure that we enable that to happen. We want to strengthen Gaelic—which is part of our cultural heritage—and ensure that there continues to be a place for it.

There have been various ministerial groups in relation to that issue, as well as a task force focusing on Gaelic and the economy. We recognise that Gaelic needs to feature in all our policies, including those on housing, infrastructure and so on. You can see that throughout the plan.

On ferries and housing, when I visit island communities, basic infrastructure is always raised as a critical issue. That is where my work across Government is important. You will be aware that the Minister for Transport has re-established the islands transport forum, which now features as part of our islands strategic group, which brings key bodies around the table to ensure that we get that cross-cutting engagement in relation to housing. Again, that is a really important issue. Further, of course, I work closely with the Minister for Housing in relation to the development of the remote, rural and islands housing action plan, which will be critical in trying to address some of those challenges.

**Beatrice Wishart:** I have a question on the back of Rhoda Grant's question on transport and housing—you cannot speak about depopulation in the islands without speaking about those issues. In last night's meeting of the cross-party group on space, the issue of housing in rural areas was mentioned—the discussion was not just about island areas, but it is an issue in Shetland.

On transport, as you are probably aware, people cannot make bookings to get on the external ferry to the mainland. That is having a long-term impact on islanders' confidence, and I have heard people say that they can no longer live on the islands because they cannot get away. Does the Scottish Government understand how serious the issue is, with people being unable to get a booking to get to the mainland to carry out their normal family business and other duties? With the booking system being open only until 30 September, people cannot make onward plans. I can demonstrate how severe the issue is. I launched an online survey on Monday and, within 24 hours, I got 200 responses—it is a big issue at the moment. Does the Government understand how critical it is to get transport right?

**Mairi Gougeon:** Absolutely, and I heard that message loud and clear when I visited Shetland last week. Again, I follow up and highlight such concerns with my colleagues—in this case, the Minister for Transport. You are absolutely right to

say that the issue of transport is important, as is the availability of housing. That is why the cross-Government work that is going on is vital in trying to resolve some of those issues.

**The Convener:** Beatrice Wishart will now ask questions on how the Scottish Government works with local authorities and the UK Government.

**Beatrice Wishart:** The annual report demonstrates the importance of local authorities to the delivery of the islands plan. Is the Scottish Government confident that island councils have enough money to meet the aspirations of the national islands plan, bearing in mind that some budgets have been cut quite significantly in real terms?

**Mairi Gougeon:** Ideally, we would all want to have more resources at our disposal. I have been at this committee a number of times in relation to my budget and, of course, we can always do more if we have more funding available to us. However, in the most recent settlement, there was an increase of about £800 million to local authorities, which was a 3 per cent real-terms increase. As part of that, there is also a special islands needs assessment, which gives our island authorities an extra uplift in recognition of their particular situation.

**Jim Fairlie:** We have the islands growth deal, the Argyll and Bute rural growth deal and the Ayrshire growth deal, which probably all intersect with the national islands plan.

What recent communications have you had with the United Kingdom Government regarding its proposed rural visa pilot?

**Mairi Gougeon:** That has been a really positive piece of work—we have developed it and taken it forward, and we have engaged closely with various stakeholders and local authorities on it. That was done on the back of the then Home Secretary, Sajid Javid, saying that he was willing to consider such a policy proposal. Both I and Neil Gray, who was the minister leading on migration at that point, wrote to the UK Government in September last year, but, as yet, we have not had any response.

However, we have had extensive engagement with both the UK Parliament and the Welsh Parliament, and with their committees. We have also engaged with other committees in the Scottish Parliament. The Migration Advisory Committee welcomed the proposal and said that it seemed like a very sensible way forward. It is frustrating, therefore, that we have not had direct feedback and engagement from the UK Government on the proposal. However, all other engagement has been really positive, and the pilot has been widely welcomed.

**Jim Fairlie:** When did you write to the UK Government?

**Mairi Gougeon:** That was in September last year.

**Jim Fairlie:** And you have not had any response.

**Mairi Gougeon:** No.

**Jim Fairlie:** Right—okay.

**Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP):** Do we have any update on the UK Government minister coming to the committee? Did we get a response on that?

**The Convener:** I do not think that that is a question for just now.

**Karen Adam:** Sorry—it was just on the back of Jim Fairlie's question, because the UK Government minister was mentioned.

**The Convener:** Okay. Would you like to ask your question?

**Karen Adam:** Well, that was a question.

**The Convener:** We have very little time.

**Karen Adam:** Sorry—that was a supplementary question before my question 13.

I have just been told that we have run out of time for me to ask question 13, so I will ask for a written answer instead.

**The Convener:** Sorry—that is my mistake. Can you keep your question brief? If we need to expand the discussion, we will make sure that we write to the cabinet secretary. I ask you to be very aware of the time, but you can ask your question. If we need more time, we will ask for a written response.

**Karen Adam:** Okay. Thank you.

Good morning, minister. How does the annual report show that the national islands plan and the islands team are influencing decisions that are made by Scottish Government directorates?

**Mairi Gougeon:** One thing that has been great throughout the process has been having the islands team. In my opening remarks, I thanked them for the work that they do, because having an islands team, with the officials that we have, has been critical in ensuring that we have islands representation across all parts of Government. We talked a bit about that and about the extensive engagement in relation to the island communities impact assessments.

The team is also heavily involved in the population work that we are undertaking. The ministerial population task force draws in other

parts of Government, so, in that sense, the work is extensive.

**Karen Adam:** That is great.

**The Convener:** I call Rachael Hamilton.

I beg your pardon—Alasdair Allan has a supplementary question.

**Alasdair Allan:** I was just going to say that, if it had not been inappropriate for Karen Adam to ask it, I would have asked the same question. That was the point that I was making.

**The Convener:** I thought that you had a supplementary question on question 13.

**Alasdair Allan:** I think that we are running out of time, to be honest.

Well, I tell a lie—I will ask a question, if we have time. It is about not just the annual report but, more generally, the ability—as the cabinet secretary has touched on—to influence other Government directorates when it comes to islands policy.

Cabinet secretary, you have indicated that your directorate cannot change everything in islands yourselves, and you have mentioned that the island communities impact assessments might be able to change the culture in Government. What progress has been made on changing the culture more broadly across Government?

**Mairi Gougeon:** The officials in the islands team have been involved in the process for longer than I have, so they will probably be able to give a better indication of how the process has been. Having that team is critical. You can see from the objectives that we have set out in the report that they cover every part of Government, which, of course, includes aspects for which I am not responsible. I see my role as one of making sure that our island communities' voices and concerns are represented in each area when other policy decisions are being taken across Government.

I will hand over to Francesco Sindico.

10:30

**Professor Sindico:** Progress is being made, because people often come to us rather than us going to them. I have been in post as a secondee for two years, and I have seen that increase over that period. I see that as progress.

**The Convener:** Before we move on to the last question, will you briefly set out how the Argyll and Bute rural growth deal and the Ayrshire growth deal interact with the national islands plan?

**Mairi Gougeon:** The growth deals—I would include the islands growth deal in that—dovetail quite well with the objectives that we have set out.

The deals have a low-carbon focus and are about having sustainable, thriving communities.

There is good cross-over in relation to our objectives and what the growth deals are seeking to achieve.

**Rachael Hamilton:** Cabinet secretary, what is the total spend on the administration of the national islands plan and on the salaries of those involved, including external consultants, in it? How many staff does that fund? On the basis that few milestones have been met on significant policy aims, such as on connectivity and depopulation, are you able to demonstrate that that is value for money?

**Mairi Gougeon:** We are demonstrating that. I categorically refute the suggestion that little progress has been made. We have 13 strategic objectives and more than 100 commitments. I do not think that what has been said is fair to all the teams that are doing work in those different areas.

On total spend and the number of staff, I do not have those figures to hand, but I am happy to supply them.

**Rachael Hamilton:** I think that it is also unfair to state that. Our committee papers say, for example, that three out of nine milestones for meeting depopulation issues have been met. On digital connectivity, according to what I have in front of me, none of the milestones have been met. Can you understand, therefore, why I am asking you that question?

**Mairi Gougeon:** If you have read the plan and the implementation route map, I cannot see how you could come to that view, because it is also recognising, as I was staying at the start of the committee—

**Rachael Hamilton:** Persuade me differently.

**Mairi Gougeon:** At the start of the meeting, I spoke about it not being a case of ticking off commitments, saying that we have solved one issue and then moving on to the next one. A lot of the programmes are on-going and deal with problems that we cannot solve overnight.

We must also bear in mind the significant period of challenges that we have faced. We have had Brexit and a pandemic, which, as I said, meant that we tended to pivot our focus—quite rightly—towards our response to those issues. To frame it in that way does a disservice to all the people who have been involved in developing the projects and driving them forward.

**Rachael Hamilton:** The national islands plan was put in place to address things that were happening before Brexit, such as depopulation, so that comment is also unfair.

Within the budget for the national islands plan, I cannot determine the detail of the split between the fiscal resource of £1.5 million and the capital budget of £4 million. It would be really helpful if you could get back to the committee on that.

**Mairi Gougeon:** Yes, I am happy to do that.

**The Convener:** Last of all, I call Christine Grahame, who should be very brief.

**Christine Grahame:** The cabinet secretary has touched on this issue. Do you have an estimate of how much Covid knocked back all those plans? For two years, everything was practically on hold. I am not talking just about the finances; I am talking about the practicalities of delivery at a time when no one could move anywhere.

**Mairi Gougeon:** I do not know whether you are asking for definitive figures. In relation to resource, we were on an emergency footing and—quite rightly—trying to deal with the immediate crises that we faced. It was really important that we did that work. As I said, we pivoted some resource to ensure that we could deal with that as best we could.

**The Convener:** That concludes our questions. Although 90 minutes seems long for a session, as always, we probably could have gone on for another 90 minutes.

**Alasdair Allan:** I want to pick up briefly on a point that was made. In doing so, I realise that a lot was going on today. In her evidence, the cabinet secretary mentioned that the UK Government has an impact on some of the issues that we are talking about with regard to wider islands policy. Have we had any update on when a UK minister might come to the committee to talk about anything at any point?

**The Convener:** I did not want to go back to that point because the agreement was that we would discuss that after our meeting with the cabinet secretary on the general issues within the rural affairs and islands remit.

**Alasdair Allan:** Okay.

**The Convener:** I thank the cabinet secretary and her officials for their time this morning.

## Subordinate Legislation

### Bee Diseases and Pests Control (Scotland) (Amendment) Order 2023 (SSI 2023/114)

10:34

**The Convener:** Under item 3, we will consider a Scottish statutory instrument. Members will recall that we deferred our consideration of this negative instrument in order to seek further clarification and information on a number of points.

Does any member wish to make a recommendation on the instrument?

**Beatrice Wishart:** We have received clarification, and I am satisfied with what has been provided.

**The Convener:** Okay. I am happy to note that.

Are we agreed that we do not want to make any recommendations in relation to the instrument?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*

**The Convener:** That concludes the public part of our meeting.

10:35

*Meeting continued in private until 11:32.*

This is the final edition of the *Official Report* of this meeting. It is part of the Scottish Parliament *Official Report* archive and has been sent for legal deposit.

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Published in Edinburgh by the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body, the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

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