

# Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

19th Meeting, 2023 (Session 6), Wednesday  
20 December 2023

## PE1862: Introduce community representation on boards of public organisations delivering lifeline services to island communities

<b>Lodged on</b>	24 March 2021
<b>Petitioner</b>	Rona MacKay, Angus Campbell & Naomi Bremner on behalf of Uist Economic Task Force
<b>Petition summary</b>	Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to introduce community representation on boards of public organisations delivering lifeline services to island communities, in keeping with the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018.
<b>Webpage</b>	<a href="https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1862">https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1862</a>

### Introduction

1. The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on [14 June 2023](#). At that meeting, the Committee agreed to invite the petitioners to give evidence at a future meeting.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the [petition's webpage](#).
4. Further background information about this petition can be found in the [SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.
5. The Scottish Government's initial position on this petition can be found on the [petition's webpage](#).

6. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 962 signatures have been received on this petition.

## **Action**

The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

**Clerk to the Committee**

## Annexe A

# PE1862: Introduce community representation on boards of public organisations delivering lifeline services to island communities

## Petitioner

Rona MacKay, Angus Campbell & Naomi Bremner on behalf of Uist Economic Task Force

## Date lodged

24 March 2021

## Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to introduce community representation on boards of public organisations delivering lifeline services to island communities, in keeping with the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018.

## Previous action

Raised issue with the MSPs Beatrice Wishart, Liam McArthur and Alasdair Allan.

## Background information

One of the strategic objectives of the National Islands Plan is designed to empower island communities and strong local partnerships.

We believe that public organisations delivering lifeline services to island communities, such as the Highlands and Islands Airport Ltd (HIAL), should have representation from those communities on their boards. We also believe that this is in line with the National Islands Plan.

We believe this change will empower our communities based on a cohesive, place-based and holistic approach to policy. It will build economic, social and environmental considerations in an integrated approach to strategy for the infrastructure and services that support our

lifeline services. We believe that local knowledge should be viewed as an essential skill for the Boards of organisations accountable to the Scottish Government. Such knowledge would bring an appreciation and understanding of local community needs relevant to the service which is being delivered. In particular, we believe that local knowledge will bring insight to boards into economic and infrastructure development, local investment and planning, employment, housing, education and health and social care and how these relate to the service the public organisation provides.

This petition comes in the spirit of delivering active change as the communities have overseen community ownership transfers such that much of our land ownership and decision-making is now made in the islands and Caithness by communities themselves. We make this petition in the same belief that our communities should have ownership, through our place on boards, appointed on merit, over assets which are there to serve us. We want to create more local resilience in our communities through the decentralisation of strategic planning and decision-making.

HIAL is one example where this change could be applied. Its board meets regularly to provide strategic direction for the Company and is responsible for the determination of the company's strategic plan and direction. In particular, the board reviews safety, security, risk management, corporate governance, operational matters, financial management, business and commercial strategy, route development, pay, pensions and human resources.

It is the role of the HIAL board to challenge the senior management team on its strategy for the business and to provide guidance and support on aviation and non-aviation issues. The board is entrusted to provide leadership, direction, support and guidance to ensure that HIAL delivers and is committed to delivering its functions effectively and efficiently and in accordance with the aims, policies and priorities of the Scottish Ministers. The board is also responsible for appointing, with the approval of the Scottish Ministers, the Managing Director.

Major policy decisions are made at board level, drawing on information provided by the management team, the Scottish Government and other appropriate sources. There is, however, currently no specific requirement to draw on information from the Councils or communities that the decisions potentially affect.

Using HIAL as an example, we have set out how our petition aims could be achieved to increase community participation—

1. Reserving a place on the selection panel for the Chair of HIAL, for either the chair (or substitute) of the HITRANS or ZetTrans boards, and include island local authorities in the selection process;
2. Assigning three of the seats on the HIAL board to people who live in the communities served by the HIAL airports (we suggest a preference for island residents, on the grounds of air services being lifeline to islands, but commercially desirable for mainland areas);
3. One of these seats should be retained for a co-opted member from the HITRANS/ZetTrans Board. It is noted that this member while sitting on the HIAL Board would act only in the best interests of the HIAL ‘company’; and/or
4. At least one Council allocated a place on the board, from either Western Isles Council, Orkney Islands Council or Shetlands Islands Council. Local authorities should not, however, be excluded from other appointments or limited to involvement just with these appointments, and again while sitting on the HIAL Board the member would act only in the best interests of HIAL, as is the case with members of NHS Boards drawn from local authorities.

We believe that this approach is in keeping with the principles of public appointments, namely appointed on merit, and committed to diversity and equality, with a board that is representative of the community that the organisation seeks to provide services for.

We believe that by having community and island representation on this, and other, boards will increase accountability and participation. This is consistent with principles of accountability, inclusion and community empowerment, and a more human rights-based approach. This would create ownership, monitoring and accountability, a fair and inclusive approach which is consistent with the Scottish Government’s Purpose and National Outcomes.

## Annexe B

### Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE1862 on 14 June 2023

**The Convener:** The next of our continued petitions is PE1862, which was lodged by Rona MacKay, Angus Campbell and Naomi Bremner on behalf of the Uist economic task force and calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to introduce community representation on the boards of public organisations delivering lifeline services to island communities, in keeping with the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018. Dr Alasdair Allan has joined us before in our consideration of the petition, and I warmly welcome him back for this discussion.

When we considered the petition at our meeting on 22 February, we agreed to write to the Minister for Transport, recommending that the Scottish Government explore all available options for formalising the role of community representation on boards of public organisations, including Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd, David MacBrayne Ltd and Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd.

We received a response from the now-former transport minister, Kevin Stewart, who agreed that more islanders should be involved in decisions on lifeline services. Similar to the response from the previous minister, Jenny Gilruth, Mr Stewart provided information on the efforts to encourage applications from island representatives in recent CMAL and DML recruitment processes. The minister also highlighted HIAL's location-neutral policy for head office roles, which enables staff undertaking head office functions to be based at any HIAL sites.

We have also received a further submission from the petitioners, which emphasises the unintended consequences that can result from not having islander knowledge on the boards of public bodies and includes a request to give oral evidence to the committee. That is one of the options open to members, although colleagues might think that, in inviting Dr Allan to address us, we have taken the issues in the petition as far as we can.

I invite Dr Allan to address us.

**Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP):** I thank the committee for its work on the petition. Since the committee last considered it, evidence of the need for more islander knowledge on public boards has only increased. The problems with ferry services—not least in South Uist in my constituency, which currently has no direct ferry service to the mainland—have been well rehearsed.

A constant theme throughout all of that and in the petition, and one that I have raised in a members' business debate and in this context, is the strikingly obvious need to

have islanders on the boards of organisations such as Caledonian MacBrayne and CMAL. To quote John Daniel Peteranna from South Uist:

“The goal has to be to make it as easy to live and work on an Island as it is anywhere else ... and without the influence of Islanders on these public bodies controlling Island services the current de-populations trends ... will accelerate.”

Those boards conspicuously lack people who have experience of living on an island that is served by CalMac and who as a result are lobbied daily about ferries. As I said in my previous contribution to the committee, if people were stopped and asked about ferries every time they went out to buy a pint of milk—as I am—they might take a different perspective back to their board meetings. It is also important that these people live in communities where they experience the consequences of things going wrong.

Everyone understands that boards do not and should not take day-to-day operational decisions in organisations such as CalMac but, as the petitioner has put it, they should set the policy, define the way of working and set the culture of the organisation. It is also their duty to hold management to account against the outcomes set by the board.

It is important to note that the call for more island board members should not be seen in isolation. There is, in my view, a wider need for more senior staff from organisations such as CalMac and Transport Scotland based in the Highlands and Islands and for jobs to be dispersed whenever feasible. Many islanders, as well as having lived experience of ferry services, have a wealth of other experience. These are seafaring communities, and their skills should feature prominently in whatever recruitment exercises those organisations run.

With all of that in mind, I am happy to answer the committee’s questions, and I would like to indicate again my support of the petition’s aims.

**The Convener:** In the responses that we have received, there is a general acceptance of the desire for more community representation and involvement on the boards, and the minister has talked about providing information on the efforts that have been made to solicit applications for such representation. Against the background of those assurances and that suggestion, what is your impression of the public perception of the lack of any momentum to realise such an ambition?

**Alasdair Allan:** I acknowledge that the Government has made moves in that direction, but I must also acknowledge that, if I remember rightly—someone will correct me if I am wrong—only one person on the CMAL board lives on an island that is served by the ferries. I do not think that, as yet, anyone on the CalMac board lives on any island that is served by CalMac.

Efforts have been made to look at, for example, the criteria by which people are appointed. Obviously, the Government is at the mercy of whether people actually

come forward or not, but the reality is still that those voices are not being heard on those boards.

**The Convener:** I do not think that we have got to the end of this issue yet—or have we? I am sorry, colleagues, for summing up on behalf of the committee. Do colleagues have any points to make?

**Fergus Ewing:** I have just been looking through the previous evidence and the points that Dr Allan has made about the desirability of having island residents on public bodies. I also looked at the specific recommendations of the three petitioners, who use HIAL as an example of a body where a place on the panel for selecting the chair could be reserved in this respect. The same could be done for every chair of every board such as CMAL and CalMac.

They also talk about assigning three seats on the HIAL board to people who live in island communities, one of which would be retained for a co-opted member, with at least one council—the Western Isles Council, Orkney Islands Council or Shetland Islands Council—allocated a place on the board.

The point that I am making is that the petitioners have made concrete and specific suggestions and they have not been responded to. I hope that I am not being unfair to the former minister, but my reading is that he replied with a lot of good will without responding to the petitioners' specific suggestions.

In as much as we are the voice of the petitioner, irrespective of party issues, it seems to me that we have not got an answer from the former minister and we need to get an answer from the current minister as to whether those specific suggestions can be pursued. There are arguments for and against each suggestion but not to have had an answer of any sort means that your premature summation was absolutely correct, convener.

**The Convener:** The petitioners have specifically requested that they be given an opportunity to speak to the committee, but it would have to be a prelude to our trying to bottom out with the new minister exactly how matters could be realised instead of our just getting a lot of good will without any outcome being achieved or the desirability or otherwise of the outcome being assessed and responded to.

As a result, I might be minded to keep the petition open and accede to that request from the petitioners, as a precursor to speaking further to the new minister, who I understand has been presented as having vast experience of parliamentary life and an ability to resolve even the most intractable of problems. We will be very happy to put that ambition to the test.

Do members agree to keep the petition open and to accede to the petitioners' request on that basis?

**Members** *indicated agreement.*