

# Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

1st Meeting, 2024 (Session 6), Wednesday 24  
January 2024

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

**Lodged on** 24 March 2021

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

**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.

**Webpage** <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1862>

### Introduction

1. The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on [20 December 2023](#). At that meeting, the Committee heard evidence from the petitioners, Naomi Bremner, Angus Campbell, and Rona MacKay.
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 20 December 2023

**The Convener:** Item 2 is consideration of continued petitions. The first is PE1862, which relates to introducing community representation on boards of public organisations that deliver lifeline services to island communities. The petition has been lodged by Rona MacKay, Angus Campbell and Naomi Bremner on behalf of the Uist economic task force. I am pleased to welcome the petitioners to today's meeting. Angus has joined us in person, and we are joined online by Rona and Naomi, who will be contributing remotely. Welcome, to you all.

The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to introduce community representation on boards of public organisations that deliver lifeline services to island communities, in keeping with the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018. We last considered the petition at our meeting on 14 June. At that point, we received an indication from the petitioners that they would very much like to give evidence in respect of the petition. We agreed to that, so we have the petitioners with us this morning.

The committee has a number of questions that we might wish to explore with you, but before we do that, have you agreed that one of you will be an introductory spokesman on behalf of the three of you?

**Angus Campbell:** We had not agreed that one of us would do all the talking, but I am quite happy to do so.

**The Convener:** The question is, therefore, whether you have anything that you want to say to us in advance, or whether you would be content for us to move to questions first. There will also be an opportunity to sum up at the end, if we do not cover ground that you would like to cover.

**Angus Campbell:** We would quite like to say a few words at the beginning.

**The Convener:** Carry on, please, whoever is going to do it.

Am I nominating you, then, Angus? Rona and Naomi, are you content for Angus to take the lead here? I see that they are nodding. That is fine—you are content. On you go, Angus.

**Angus Campbell:** Thank you very much. We appreciate that the committee is giving us the time and opportunity to speak to you.

All three of us come from island communities in different parts of our geography, and for quite a long time we have all been involved in trying to make life in island

communities better. One fact that stands out to us like a sore thumb is that decisions are often passed down to the islands without their communities' input. Having worked hard for many years on the bill that became the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, we had hoped that the act would have delivered the change that its fabric was designed to do. Unfortunately, we feel that on publicly appointed boards there is still a deficit in the skills that are needed to make the correct decisions from the perspectives of our islands and our public bodies.

There is a route to getting better decision making, use of resources and outcomes, which is to recognise the skills that are involved in living and working on islands, and the knowledge and experience of what island life is like, as part of the skills mix that we should have on boards that deal with lifeline services for islands. It is crucial to island people that those decisions are the best ones and that we get the best outcomes, and that they feel that they are part of the system and can influence the decisions that come to them.

That is the crux and the basis of what we do. I could go into the specifics below that, but I am aware that you will want to move on to questions, convener. That is an outline of where I think all three of us are coming from. We have all been involved in plenty of situations where a more informed decision could have got us all to a better place and better outcomes.

I am happy to proceed on that basis. I am not sure whether my companions will want to add anything.

**The Convener:** Rona and Naomi, would either of you like to say anything before we move to questions? If you would like to speak, will you please just raise a hand? If you indicate anything below that level I will not see it because the screens are so far away. Okay—we will move to questions.

I will ask a general question. What are the petitioners' views on the Scottish Government's approach of addressing representation on boards through their recruitment processes? If anyone would like to speak, please just let me know.

**Angus Campbell:** I will kick off. We all feel that things have not moved on as regards getting the island voice into the decision-making process. We had hoped that island proofing, which was one of the principles of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, might have brought that through in a much more proactive way, but in general we are not seeing that happening. There are examples of it, but we are not seeing enough of the skills that islanders bring, in walking the walk and living the life, coming to the decision-making table. We still see many decisions being made that, even from the outside, we know will not be successful because that extra information has not been brought to the table. Such decisions actually damage our communities and, beyond that, the best outcomes for the country and for the Government are not attained.

That affects so many parts of people's lives, because, for people who live on islands, everything is interdependent, including choices on population, whether people stay, and what young people do with their lives. For instance, if people feel that they cannot influence how their main services are delivered, they will make the obvious choice not to live there. That is continuing to happen. For example, the latest census showed the population change in the Outer Hebrides to be minus 5 per cent: it is one of the few places in Scotland where the population has gone down.

There are plenty of skills on the islands, and plenty of people who have board skills that we need in other ways, as well as island knowledge that could be brought to the table. However, they do not feel motivated to become involved because, historically, they have not been valued as contributors to boards. We are trying to change that.

**The Convener:** I call Naomi Bremner. Naomi, can you hear me? Would you like to speak?

**Naomi Bremner:** I apologise. My unmute button was not working.

To add to what has been said, I will go back to the question. We believe that the island voice is underrepresented across the boards that we have used as examples. I recognise the action that has been taken in boards over the past few years to address other underrepresented groups including women and younger people. We would like to see similar action when it comes to the island voice—people who live and experience island life.

I emphasise the fact that the narrative on, and reporting about, the islands plan applauds the creation of the plan and everything that sits around it as having been done with the input of islanders. However, we all appreciate that meaningful action is usually best achieved by the people who live and breathe the relevant circumstances, challenges and opportunities. Rather than having "input", islanders should be part of the mix. We will achieve a lot more that way.

As has been said, islanders are pragmatic—we have to be. Often, we experience the greatest complications of life—in access to services, access to healthcare and running businesses. Given such experience, we are best placed, as part of a wider mix, to consider pragmatically how delivery should happen—not only in the context of the challenges of living in that environment, but in the context of wider challenges, such as the fiscal environment. We do that every day, so we have a lot of skills to bring.

**The Convener:** Okay. Obviously, Rhoda Grant and Alasdair Allan have represented those points in evidence that they have given to the committee. In his evidence last time, Alasdair Allan reflected on appointments to CalMac Ferries. I would be interested to have your reflections on the appointment of David Beaton, a Skye resident, as a non-executive director on the board of David MacBrayne Ltd. Is that an exception rather than evidence of practice, or does it illustrate that the current



recruitment procedures can be a successful avenue for achieving the aims of the petition? What is your reflection on that appointment?

**Angus Campbell:** It is hard to talk about somebody on one board without knowing the individual and the ins and outs of the appointment. David Beaton is a Skye resident—in the process, we can discuss whether Skye is really still an island. We are asking for something more than individuals getting on to boards from time to time. The skills that are required on those boards for making good decisions should be reflected through board members knowing the area that they are dealing with. That is like a business knowing its customer base and it should be identified in the skills matrix that is behind any appointment for any board that deals with islands, particularly when it comes to lifeline services.

I feel a little inadequate in talking about that one example, which falls far short of recognition that extra value is to be gained on boards from the knowledge of islands residents, just as it is from knowledge about health and safety, audit and all the other skills that are needed to run an efficient board. That knowledge should be part of the matrix of skills behind boards' requirements.

**The Convener:** Rona, I am sorry—you were off screen, so I did not see that you were seeking to come in a moment ago. Would you like to contribute on this matter and on the other question that I asked?

**Rona MacKay:** It is a passive and competitive process at the moment, but we need much more than that. Instead of whether someone gets on to a board being dependent on how they perform in an interview and what they write in their application, there should be a far more considered process that involves islanders and the councils that represent the islands. That would ensure that we get the best people on boards and would be better than choosing people through interview processes and the like.

It is very much a matter of chance whether people bother to put their names forward or understand what the role is about. There was a lot more advertising the last time CalMac and Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd boards looked for members, but there is a need to get together with islanders and to be far more considered. At the moment, everything is done on the mainland; people on the mainland decide whether a person is fit to go on a board.

There should be a review of the required skills. We need the skills and knowledge of islanders and their understanding of islands' needs.

**Fergus Ewing (Inverness and Nairn) (SNP):** I am struck by the fact that the petition was lodged on 24 March 2021, which is two and a half years ago, and that, since then, we have had no less than four ministerial submissions, most of them fairly short.

I return to the arguments that the three petitioners advanced in their earlier submission. They made four specific suggestions. In brief, those were

“Reserving a place on the selection panel for the Chair of HIAL”,

“Assigning three of the seats on the HIAL board to people who live in the communities”,

retaining one of those seats

“for a co-opted member from the HITRANS/ZetTrans Board”

and allocating a place on the board to at least one council out of Western Isles Council, Orkney Islands Council and Shetland Islands Council.

I mention that in order to set out a thesis. I never wish to be unfair to any Government minister, but what surprises me is that, in the four responses that we have had from ministers, I cannot find a specific answer on any of those suggestions. I find that very disappointing and I would be inclined to pursue it. To enable us to pursue that in the best way, I would like to know whether the petitioners feel frustrated. They have put forward specific suggestions about how things could be improved, but here we are, two and a half years later, and we do not appear to have had an explicit, clear, direct answer on any of them. That seems to me to be, at the very best, somewhat unsatisfactory.

**Angus Campbell:** “Frustrated” is probably the word. We have kept in touch and stayed together during that period, but it is quite disappointing that we have not seen a process that could lead to something coming out at the other end. A lot of what you read out from our petition dealt specifically with issues in HIAL, but there have also been issues with CalMac.

I return to the point about individuals appearing on boards. The case is good, but the Government may want to fend off having principles set down in regulation. To be honest, it has been frustrating and disappointing. We believe that the proposal would be a win for everyone and would put us in a better place. If we turn it on its head and ask why we would not do that, there seems to be no obvious answer. Why would we not want to have the best skills on a board that looks after resources and manages island services?

**Fergus Ewing:** Would it help if the committee made a request to the current Scottish Government minister—I think that we are now on transport minister number 4 in the current parliamentary session—to see what specific ideas they can come up with? Excuse me, Angus. I may be teaching my granny how to suck eggs, but I am sure that the three of you must have pondered on many occasions how to advance the situation. The reply seems to be, “Well, we advertise posts but we don’t get the applications”. That seems a pretty pathetic approach.

I know from my work in the islands over many years as minister that there are a huge number of very able, knowledgeable and experienced people all over the islands. I feel that the current efforts to reach out to empower those people, to benefit from their local knowledge and direct experience of ferries, seamanship, Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd or HIAL and to get them involved not only on the board but in senior management positions are not enough. We need to disperse jobs to the islands. When I was the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy and Tourism, we managed to disperse a couple of Crofting Commission jobs to the Western Isles. My God, it was difficult—I can tell you that. The grand promises that you start off with get diluted as they go through the sausage machine.

This is a very long question, but it seems to me that so many other approaches could be taken. Could the councils play a structured role in coming up with specific recommendations of people who might be suitable to serve on the main bodies of CMAL, CalMac and HIAL? Elected councillors are often really plugged into their communities. Is that a way—it is not one that is currently used—in which we could reach out to empower people on the islands?

**Angus Campbell:** That is certainly a specific way in which you could do it. That is why we talked in the petition about council representation being important. There is a much more active dynamic in places such as the Western Isles when it comes to the relationship between councillors and communities. That is one way, but you have to recognise that, over the years, a lot of islanders have tried to get on to those bodies and it is very hard. I have tried so hard—I am sure that my two colleagues would tell you the same—to encourage people to do it, but they feel that it is not a welcoming place, or not a place where their skills will be taken to the table. They feel that they start at a disadvantage, and many of them just will not go forward. That applies to many communities, too. When there are consultations, we see a lot of community consultation fatigue, as we call it, because people have been through the process before and they have not been allowed to affect the outcomes, so they feel that there is no point in getting involved again.

We need a much more positive approach, with boards saying, “The skills matrix that we need includes your skills as an islander, and there is an open door for you to come and be part of this.” Of course islanders will still have to go through a selection procedure, but it should be made much more open and welcoming to islanders, and they should be encouraged.

**Fergus Ewing:** Have you had any feedback from people who have been keen to apply to play a part but have been rejected? Has there been any systematic review or consideration of that? Has any work been done to consider why that has happened? Many of us suspect that the selection process results in what we might call the usual suspects, with a pool of kenspeckle figures getting picked again and again, and that it discriminates against newcomers, outsiders, outliers and, basically, people who live on the islands. I am afraid that that is my view from having been

involved in quite a lot of selection work over the years. Perhaps I am at fault as much as anybody else.

If you are saying, as you did just now, that a cohort of people have been spurned—unfairly, in your view—and that that has created ill feeling, what can we do about that? Can anything be done? Has anything been done about it? I am sure that the committee would be willing to pursue that if there are concrete, specific things that we might be able to do about it.

**The Convener:** I am conscious that Rona MacKay and Naomi Bremner might also wish to comment.

**Fergus Ewing:** I am very sorry. It is so easy to be rude to people who are attending online. I apologise.

**The Convener:** Naomi, would you like to comment on the themes that Fergus Ewing has developed?

**Naomi Bremner:** I totally agree with Mr Ewing's point that the issue cuts across from boards to senior management and right down to the doers. That is an important point, because many opportunities are missed to expand on that and use the skills and knowledge of people across all skill levels in our islands.

Consultation fatigue is an issue. People fly in and reel out the same presentations about our statistics and the situation on islands, and the same conversations are repeated day in, day out on the national transport strategy and the review of the islands plan. The same things happen over and over again, but we do not see change. We see consultations being done to us and we do not see action on the back of them. I will give an example. The Scottish index of multiple deprivation continues to be used for the allocation of funding in various funding streams such as the community bus fund, but we know that that index is not a good tool or indicator for islands or remote parts of Scotland. It looks for pockets of deprivation, but deprivation in islands is not in pockets—it is dispersed and often hidden.

We keep seeing policy decisions being taken in the centre that do not reflect the situation in our islands, which is hugely frustrating, because we feed that point in at every opportunity but we never see the difference being made.

On the point about the recruitment process for boards, I have served on a national health service board for two terms and I currently sit on the board of a regional transport partnership. I have applied for other roles—I highlight that this was pre-Covid and before we did more online—but I feel that my complication means that it would probably have taken me three days, at best, to be able to attend an interview. I feel sure that that is why I was not shortlisted, because I met all the criteria. I have also applied for other Government-related non-executive posts. I was invited for interview, but my travel expenses would not have been covered. I decided that they

did not really want an islander, so I did not attend. Those are examples of how the system is a barrier to people such as Rona MacKay and me getting involved.

**Rona MacKay:** I do not think that any people are more capable than islanders to go on committees. When land reform came in, islanders took advantage of that, and 72 per cent of islands are now community owned. We have taken what was an awful problem with absentee landlords and turned it on its head. We have taken ownership and control of land. We run our land now, and we have done the same with energy. Twenty-one islands now generate their own energy. Islands have taken control of community energy far more than people on the mainland have. We have committees of volunteers who put up wind turbine projects that have been £20 million in the making. If we can do that in our voluntary time, being on a committee is easy for us—we do this all the time. The third sector is strongest in the islands, because we do so much in our voluntary time.

We are extremely capable and are probably far more experienced at being on a committee and understanding the different roles in committees than people from the mainland are—certainly people from the central belt, where everything is done for them by the market. We are used to trying to combat injustices and taking control of our resources. Transport is the next thing, after energy and land. We need to sort that out, because the problem is becoming so bad. Our ferries and plane services are worse than they have ever been. The service on the ferries in the 1980s and 1990s was much better than what we have today.

**Foyso Choudhury (Lothian) (Lab):** I have a question that follows from what Fergus Ewing asked earlier. Do you think that there could be a barrier for board members, if they have to have specific technical skills and knowledge about the islands to be on a board? Is that one reason why people are not coming forward to become board members?

**Angus Campbell:** Are you asking whether people do not have the skills?

**Foyso Choudhury:** Yes.

**Angus Campbell:** Absolutely not. The skills are abundant, but we need to get the mechanism in place and we need encouragement. We are trying to build a framework for that to come to the fore, so that people feel encouraged to use the skills and abilities that they already have to help the process. With respect, I sometimes get asked whether there is that skills base on the islands. However, as Rona MacKay said, you can look at many of the things that have happened and at many of the jobs that are held by island people, even on a personal basis. There are many examples that demonstrate that the skills and abilities are definitely there. We are asking to open the door to that and to allow those skills to be used for the benefit of the islands and the organisations. I can give an emphatic yes to skills being there.

**Foyso Choudhury:** Apart from that, in what other areas could island communities be better represented to increase accountability?

**Angus Campbell:** There are many examples of that. Board representation is definitely a big issue, because of the role that boards play in setting the direction for some services, but also because they have policy control over the management of a lot of those services that come the islands.

If you filter down from that, as Fergus Ewing mentioned, management teams being located on the islands would be a huge help. If a manager was not sitting from nine to five in an office remote from the service, but had to go back to their home in the community, I suggest that they would, at times, make very different and better-informed decisions.

I also think that there is a big place for communities to have a permanent say on how services are delivered. My closest example of that is the CalMac situation, where there is no permanent tie-in to the local communities. There is no understanding of what they are doing and what the effect of that is. There seems to be a disrespect for the fact that there can be positive input from communities into those sorts of things. There is very much an attitude of, "We know best. We are professional people who run ships." However, it is not about delivering bits of metal from A to B, but about how the communities live and thrive with the service that you are providing. I think that there are many aspects to getting communities better plugged into those functions in order to deliver a better service.

**The Convener:** I was struck, because it is something that is very easily said, that the skill sets in some technical areas might be deficient. To paraphrase Mr Campbell, I think that that was the mainlander speaking to the islander. The islander speaking to the mainlander would say, "You lot cannot walk and chew gum at the same time, whereas we are used to doing that on a regular basis." In other words, the skill sets of people on the islands are very often underestimated. I will not ask you to comment, but that was the conclusion that I drew.

**Maurice Golden (North East Scotland) (Con):** The Scottish Government has suggested that there are other ways for community interests to be represented on public boards. From your experience, is that assertion correct?

**Angus Campbell:** I agree that there are ways for community interests to be represented, but why would you not also include participation on boards? It is a crucial part of the process of decision making for island life. You should not be choosing to treat islanders differently from other people in their ability to get involved in things if they so choose. If that is restricted to saying, "Oh we'll find a space for you here or a space for you there" that is a bit disrespectful and it misses the point that we are trying to make, which is that, in all the crucial areas of decision making, we have something to add to the mix and we should have an entitlement to participate. As someone else said about the mix, we look at where there is under-

representation in other parts of society and we try to address that, so, equally, we should try to find a mechanism to make it better for islanders in such situations. That is what we are trying to do.

**Maurice Golden:** So, to paraphrase, you feel that community interests would be best represented by having a community board member in the room, rather than feeding into some process after which others then decide on the community interest. Is that correct?

**Angus Campbell:** That is an important part of it because to have that knowledge of island life sitting at that level will in itself make the design of how communities feed into decisions better directed and better managed. That is crucial. To try to do it through various one-off initiatives—we have seen a few of those over the years—is both not fully effective but also sometimes not the best use of people’s time or resources. If you do not have somebody in at the strategic level representing the island voice then you are not going to design a system that is best suited for islanders—or there is less chance of it, let us put it that way.

**Maurice Golden:** Thanks for that. Finally, could the size and turnover of relevant public boards hamper island representation? Are there opportunities arising or is it the case that even when they do come up, islanders are overlooked for those positions?

**Angus Campbell:** We certainly feel that islanders are overlooked because their skills are not recognised in the matrix that people are looking for. There is the other side of that coin, too. As I think both Rona MacKay and Naomi Bremner mentioned, there are good examples out there of community land and so on. If we pick South Uist for instance, a £13 million harbour was funded, built and operated by a community in a lot shorter period than any public body would have done it. That is a perfect example of the skills that are necessary. I hope that answers your question.

**Maurice Golden:** Thanks. That was very helpful.

**The Convener:** Naomi Bremner, I saw you nodding along. Do you want to add anything?

**Naomi Bremner:** I agree with everything that has just been said. My experience of being on a board is that having a matrix of skills makes a good board perform well—that is not down to an individual with one particular responsibility. We are not suggesting having somebody on a board who is the “community representative”; we are suggesting having somebody or some people on boards that have that as part of their mix. You have heard from around the table that people in island communities have massive skill sets—there is a lot of experience in finance, audit and all those other attributes that are required for that skills matrix. Bringing that island element into that comprehensive mix—not in isolation, but as part of the mix—is what is required to make a board perform well.

**The Convener:** Rona MacKay, would you like to add anything on that?

**Rona MacKay:** I just want to say that community engagement does not work at all. That level of representation has not worked for us. When HIAL put forward its remote towers project, it made the decision to proceed with the project at board level and then went out to the community to do the community consultation. HIAL chose who it consulted with. Highlands and Islands Enterprise and councillors were invited to come and see it. Certain representatives and some community councils were involved, but HIAL decided who it would talk to, when it would talk to them and how the engagement would be done.

At the engagement, it was said very strongly that the community did not want the remote towers project, but HIAL had made the decision to go ahead with it a few months before it started to properly engage. It feels awful to members of a community when decisions that will really affect them are made off island without them. All that they can do is go to the engagement sessions and say what they think, but then they are completely ignored.

Community engagement does not work for us at all. What we need is a seat at the table and some powers to talk and give our opinions when decisions are forming and when ideas come forward, not after the fact.

**The Convener:** We are running a few minutes over, but Fergus Ewing would like to come back in.

**Fergus Ewing:** A point that was made in the very first submission from the Scottish Government, on 8 June 2021, was that, in some public bodies—the boards of the national park authorities were cited as an example—there is a requirement that some members be local residents. Therefore, that is not a wild or radical idea. It is a concept that is already present in the law, which is why I mention it.

Should there be a requirement that a certain number of board members should be resident in the islands and/or should extra weighting be given to residency in the decision about selection, for which a number of criteria to do with competencies will routinely be fixed? It seems to me that there should be a residency weighting so that the discrimination against people from the islands that exists in the way in which the system works at the moment, which we heard about from Naomi Bremner, in particular, although Rona MacKay also spoke about it, can be counteracted. There could be a 20 or 30 per cent weighting in favour of people from the islands for any board or other significant appointment, or a senior managerial appointment.

Are those ideas that the petitioners feel that it would be sensible for us to pursue? I was with the Ethical Standards Commissioner, who, I think, is responsible for public appointments. That is referred to in more detail in the submission of 8 June 2021, so I will park that.



Naomi Bremner mentioned her absurd experience of not being able to attend for interview, as that would have taken up three days of her life and would have involved her incurring expenses that she would not have got back. It is no wonder that she did not want to go.

Naomi, if you had the ability to participate by video call, in the way that you are doing at the moment, and there was a weighting in favour of you, as an island resident, would that help to counteract the problem that we have been kicking around to no effect for two and a half years?

**The Convener:** Just before I bring in Naomi, I point out that we will have to draw this evidence session to a close. I invite Naomi to respond and then I will come to each of our other two witnesses. If there are any final comments that you would like to add, that would be very helpful.

**Naomi Bremner:** I will keep it very short. I totally concur with both parts of Fergus Ewing's and/or suggestion. I think that those are both useful avenues for formal consideration.

**The Convener:** Rona, is there anything that you would like to add that we might not have covered? Do you have final points to make?

**Rona MacKay:** Yes, it is completely in line with the democracy matters approach; it is a great example of trying to devolve decision making down to the communities where it matters. It is good timing for this to go through.

**The Convener:** Angus, would you like to add any final thoughts?

**Angus Campbell:** We agree that it would be a step forward to have that in there, and also—maybe above that—to have a duty for board members to show that they tie into their communities, so that they can truly say that they have a place in their communities.

This is not about me, but at the beginning of the year I did a consultation on the ferries for the transport minister. I went across the islands, including up to Orkney and Shetland. Nearly 1,000 people came out for that, and a number of them said that the fact that they had someone with island knowledge coming to speak to them made a huge difference to the conversation. In the middle of that consultation exercise, a senior civil servant stood up and asked whether it really matters if people cannot get off the island today, tomorrow or the next day. It is an issue if someone does not have awareness of what not being able to do that means to islanders. One chap in the front stood up—well, he did not stand up, because he had a walking stick—and he said, "I'm getting cancer treatment in Glasgow and I've missed the last three of my five appointments because of that, and you're asking me whether it really matters if I get on and off the island." That is the sort of awareness and knowledge that we are trying to get into the system, so that when decisions are made, they are made in the best interests of the people that we are supposed to be serving.

**The Convener:** Thank you for that, and thank you to you all for your evidence. The petition was lodged at the start of the session and it has maintained the interest of the committee since 2021—as Fergus Ewing said. We are very grateful for the evidence that all three of you gave this morning.

Colleagues, can I get your agreement that we will consider the evidence further in private at a later date?

**Members:** *Indicated agreement.*

**Fergus Ewing:** I hope that we hear from the minister and from the Commissioner for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland.

**The Convener:** We will consider that later. I thank you all, again. I will now suspend briefly to allow us to move to the next item.