RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

ISLANDS (SCOTLAND) BILL

SUBMISSION FROM THE HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS TRANSPORT PARTNERSHIP

Question 1 - The Bill creates a duty to publish a national islands plan and lay it before the Scottish Parliament. What are your views on this provision?

The provision made within the Bill to create a duty to publish a national islands plan and lay it before the Scottish Parliament is very important.

The Bill itself does not provide a clear direction on how outcomes for our island communities are to be achieved and advanced. The national islands plan will allow Government to set out a range of objectives that can address concerns that island communities express and ways to realise the potential of our islands to allow them to develop and flourish.

We would expect the national islands plan to be developed through co-production with islands communities and key stakeholder representatives particularly local authorities and community planning partners. This will help align the plan best with local priorities and policies. Many of the areas that require focus and attention in our island communities are captured in local plans including the Local Outcome Improvement Plans and cognizance should be given to these at a higher level through the Islands Plan. This is not to say that existing policies and documents offer sufficient scope or coverage to be more than supporting evidence, indeed implementation of the islands Bill will mean a number of existing policies will be subject to Islands Impact Assessment / Island Proofing in the future. Co-production will bring useful resources that help shape the national islands plan and the outcomes and how these will be measured and processes that ensure island proofing is a feature of planning, policy and decision taking at the bodies covered by the Plan.

There would be value in developing a Mission Statement or set of high level objectives that are identified in the Islands (Scotland) Act that sit above the national islands plan and help shape it. Key challenges include sustainable economic development, sustainable population and connectivity.

HITRANS recognise the importance of transport and digital connectivity to the island communities in our area. The importance of these links and the cross-boundary nature of several regionally significant transport services was the main driver for the establishment of the Highlands and Islands Integrated Transport Forum on a voluntary partnership basis as a product developed from the Convention of the Highlands and Islands. This body developed into HITRANS as a voluntary transport partnership and developed further when the statutory regional transport partnership was established through the Transport (Scotland) Act 2005.

The outcomes set out in the national islands plan will be critically important to shaping action that Scottish Government and accountable bodies take to support our
island communities. The Plan should provide a clear road map that accountable bodies use to refine policy and practice. Outcomes should be measurable to understand the impact the national islands plan is having on our island communities and it will be useful to capture what measures accountable bodies take to support delivery of the Outcomes. If accountable bodies share actions they take a useful body of case study evidence should accumulate and can be shared with other accountable bodies to share good ideas and practice for others to follow.

The requirement outlined in the Bill that Scottish Ministers must lay the proposed national islands plan before the Scottish Parliament within one year is achievable but will require early action particularly in regard to establishing an engagement plan to enable meaningful engagement with communities and stakeholders. It is important that this engagement reaches the wider community as existing forums including community councils are not guaranteed to include representation from all demographics e.g. young people.

**Question 2** - The Bill will require Scottish Ministers and certain Scottish public authorities, to prepare island impact assessments. Do you agree with this provision? How do you think it should work in practice?

HITRANS officers have considered the proposal within the Bill that accountable bodies prepare island impact assessments and consider this a sensible provision. In practice we believe that similar approaches already exist for Equality Impact Assessment and Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA). A 2-stage process with an assessment completed by the accountable body against an agreed methodology could be subject to a gateway review process that identifies if there is an Islands Impact from a strategy, policy or programme and what action or actions that may be required to address that impact. A second stage could be the development of mitigation measures or a recognition that the proposed intervention is not island proof and if so whether it should progress on that basis. This does not guarantee all plans and policies are island proof but it will identify why they are not so that should circumstances change in the future it will be possible to return to it and achieve island proofing e.g. lack of financial resource in the short term should not prevent island proofing in the medium to long term.

**Question 3** - The Bill proposes to protect the Scottish Parliamentary constituency boundary of Na h-Eileanan an Iar (the Western Isles) from change. Do you agree with this?

As a community planning partner in the Western Isles HITRANS recognise the local support for the Scottish Parliamentary constituency boundary of Na h-Eileanan an Iar to be protected and regard this as a welcome and positive step.

**Question 4** - The Bill proposes to make an exception to the rules for local government electoral wards to allow areas with inhabited islands to return 1 or 2 members (instead of the usual 3 or 4). What are your views on this proposal?

This is a sensible proposal and would make it easier for local government ward boundaries to be redrawn to enable island communities to be represented separately from mainland areas. Even within the island local authorities the multi member ward system has meant groups of islands have had to be represented collectively when a
single or 2 member ward would enable representation in a way that is more clearly linked to an individual island community.

In Argyll and Bute the requirement for wards of 3 or 4 members means islands including Mull, Islay, Gigha, Lismore, Coll and Tiree have elected members who also serve the mainland areas of Oban South and Kintyre – the wards being Kintyre and the islands and Oban South and the Isles. There are some merits in having representation in this fashion not least in terms of having members who appreciate the importance of transport nodes on the mainland side to the island communities they serve. Any implementation of the exception to the rules of local government electoral wards to allow island areas to return 1 or 2 elected members should therefore be carefully considered by the local authority and affected communities.

**Question 5 - The Bill will provide a regulation-making power for the Scottish Ministers to create a marine licensing scheme for coastal waters. Do you agree with this power? Do you have any comments on how it should be used?**

HITRANS officers have considered the Marine Licensing Scheme for coastal waters but do not have any comments to make on this Section of the Bill.

**Question 6 - Does the Bill achieve its aims and are you in favour overall? Is there anything else that you feel should be included or excluded from the Bill?**

The Bill achieves its aims at a high level and while HITRANS recognise this will bring additional duties on us as an organisation we recognise the importance of the Bill and its provisions are important levers to achieve sustainable island communities which continue to offer much in social, cultural and economic terms to Scotland.

Consideration could be given to including a Mission Statement and some high level outcomes within the Bill that frames the national islands plan. There are a number of themes that are impacting on most if not all island communities including the need to secure a sustainable population base, fragile economic factors and under employment / below average wages (an issue for most but not all islands).

The Bill identifies those public bodies that should be accountable under the national islands plan. However, a number of services are delivered under contract to those organisations so there might be value in requiring services that are procured by accountable bodies to be subject to a sustainable islands pledge or the national islands plan outcomes as an extension of the coverage of the accountable body. This could be similar to actions on the national living wage pledge by Government contractors. For example, David MacBrayne Group Limited as owner of CalMac Ferries Limited and Argyll Ferries Limited are listed as accountable bodies while Serco Northlink Ferries who deliver the Northern Isles Ferry Service contract are not accountable under the Bill beyond the provision made for Transport Scotland as the contracting agency.

**Question 7 - Do you have any comments on the bill in relation to human rights or equalities?**

The bill certainly has no negative impact in terms of equalities or human rights. In similar fashion to the Community Empowerment Act this Bill offers real opportunity for increased subsidiarity and community empowerment. It is important that all
people within island communities are fairly represented and engaged and developing mechanisms that support this will be an important aspect of the national islands plan.

HITRANS
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