IGRP is a major sociolinguistic research project currently underway, under the auspices of the Soillse inter-university research network for the maintenance and revitalisation of Gaelic language and culture.

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?

This duty is welcomed. There should be special mention of Gaelic in the bill and Gaelic development should be an integral part of the National Islands Plan. Gaelic development is a recognised priority of the government, and the Western Isles in particular have a crucial, special relationship with the language. Recognising and acting on this would be a good example of joined up thinking. In particular at Part 2, 4(1) (b) the clause “have regard to the distinctive geographical and cultural characteristics” should be extended to “have regard to the distinctive geographical, linguistic, and cultural heritage characteristics of each of the areas inhabited by island communities”.

Given that the highest densities of Gaelic speakers are now found in the Western Isles it is essential that development plans for the islands are coordinated effectively with Gaelic development aims for speakers and their communities. The Islands Bill needs to include specific initiatives in support of the use of Gaelic as a community language. These initiatives will need to integrate schools policy, socio-economic supports and efforts aimed at community sustainability in an overall model of community renewal rooted in the islands’ unique cultural capital.

Despite the implementation of National Plans for Gaelic and the civic promotion of Gaelic as a constituent element of Scottish identity since the enactment of the Gaelic Language Act in 2005, language policy has failed to integrate Gaelic development efforts in the requisite community development model for the minority language group. The proposed Islands Bill offers official bodies a new opportunity to address this strategic weakness in current policies. It is equally important that Gaelic agencies and public bodies would seize this opportunity to realign their Gaelic promotion efforts to the social reality of Gaelic in island communities. The fragility of spoken Gaelic in these communities is now so perilous that the current efforts to enhance the civic symbolic appeal of Gaelic will soon be exposed as an unconvincing public relations effort. The enactment of the Island Bill has the legislative potential to address this strategic weakness in how the Scottish public bodies engage with the cultural capital of the island communities in a compelling manner.
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?
Yes, this is well motivated but at present it is unclear which particular criteria are to be utilised and assessed in either an impact assessment or in the island proofing of policies. A lack of clarity in relation to this important and fundamental provision will lead potentially to challenges at a later stage in respect of the introduction of new policies/legislation, and the opaqueness of the provision as currently stated could also be used as a mechanism to stall progress. Furthermore, with the exception of Orkney and Shetland, a distinct Gaelic impact assessment should be incorporated as part of the overall island impact assessments proposed. Local authorities and other public bodies with island responsibilities should also conduct Gaelic impact assessments in respect of economic development activity etc.

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?
Yes, Na h-Eileanan an Iar should be protected as a Scottish Parliamentary constituency, not least in light of its distinctive Gaelic heritage and communicative practice.

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 reasonable.

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?
No comment on this.

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?
It is a matter of grave concern that the linguistic crisis confronting the Western Isles, and already having impacted other Scottish islands of Gaelic heritage even more heavily, is not accorded much closer attention in a bill aimed at safeguarding islands’ social and economic standing in contemporary Scotland. This is an opportunity for national and local island priorities to be addressed in a co-ordinated manner. It should be seized and acted upon.
However, the Bill is more than just a set of provisions for economic development and at Paragraph 6 of the Bill’s Policy Objectives the sentence relating to economic growth should be clarified to recognise the whole systems approach that underpins
the Bill’s provisions as set out to incorporate the following text: “… increasing sustainable economic growth and encouraging the development of resilient communities, confidently rooted in their heritage and cultural resources”.

7. Do you have any comments on the bill in relation to human rights or equalities?
Equalities for Gaelic-speaking communities need to be safeguarded. Given the Gaelic language’s special relationship with the Hebrides in particular, these concerns should be front and centre in the Islands Bill.

Islands Gaelic Research Project (IGRP) team
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