RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

ISLANDS (SCOTLAND) BILL

SUBMISSION FROM LGIU SCOTLAND

Introduction
LGIU Scotland is an independent organisation providing information to local authorities in Scotland and promoting local democracy. This submission is driven by an understanding that better outcomes are achieved when national policy recognises the importance of both participative and representative local democracy. This submission also recognises that a successful policy will be a good balance of local place based thinking and strategic cooperation across public sector organisations.

The Bill is in six parts:

- Definitions
- A National Islands Plan
- Duties of Authorities
- Representation of communities
- The Scottish Island Marine Area and licensing
- Legal provisions

This submission focuses on the National Islands Plan (NIP) and Duties of Authorities.

National Islands Plan
LGIU Scotland welcomes the introduction of a NIP and the recognition of the strategic importance of Islands. However, the Bill’s description of the plan and plan making process indicates that ownership and control of the plan will be at the national level. In effect the plan is developed by the Minister who chooses who to consult. Once written the island communities hold the minister to account for the NIP’s delivery.

LGIU Scotland would like to submit an alternative form of governance and accountability, which it believes would result in far greater buy-in to the NIP and therefore make its successful delivery more likely.

The NIP should be a document that is developed by, with and for island communities. Island local authorities could jointly be tasked with the duty of developing a plan in consultation with their communities and under guidance from the Minister. Once completed the plan would need to be scrutinised and approved at
the national level. Thereafter, island local authorities would be expected to deliver the plan. There would be a legal accountability to the Minister and a democratic accountability (both participative and representative) to the island communities.

This approach should overcome some of the more obvious risks of the proposed NIP development and delivery process:

Firstly, the potential for lack of ownership by island communities risks making the plan something that is being ‘done to them’. The effects of this are well known. The minister could end up defending the consequences of the plan to stakeholders who have more knowledge, interest and political capital invested in the outcomes. Community leaders could turn their frustration on to the minister rather than working constructively to develop solutions and the NIP might eventually become a totem for disillusionment with government.

Secondly, it’s inevitable that the NIP will be a political priority for a finite term and as politicians move on then civil servants have to take over and the plan becomes an administrative task rather than a dynamic process of improvement for Island communities.

**Duties of Authorities**

The part of the Bill which most closely aligns to the aim of Island proofing is the part on duties of authorities. There are 66 authorities named in the schedule of the bill. From transport through education, local government and all the way up to the minister. These authorities will ‘have regard to Island communities’, and an ‘Island communities impact assessment’ must be developed and reported on. It is to be hoped that each of these authorities take their duty seriously and actively build in the views of Island communities into their assessments.

Island proofing as described is a substantial bureaucratic task distributed across many disparate organisations. The one thing those tasks have in common is that they are focused on a type of place, an island. Place based governance is once again receiving attention by policy makers globally. At its heart is the understanding that a local community understands what is best for their place.

There are two consequences of place based thinking that affect island proofing. Firstly, that local communities should be able to inform the authorities what island proofing they require and secondly, that those authorities should demonstrate that their impact assessment was developed in conjunction with other authorities and island communities to ensure that the provision of services is joined up and reflects the needs of a place rather than the needs of the authority. Getting this right could mean that its less important for the authorities to produce annual reports but more important that they check how they’re delivering for places.
It is hard to believe that, if island communities were asked how they wish to be informed about the progress of island proofing, they would request 66 annual reports.

LGIU Scotland would like to propose that the 66 authorities coordinate their island proofing activity and jointly submit one less frequent report demonstrating how they are delivering for island communities. A joint approach will challenge the authorities to think beyond their professional remits and could address the concern that island proofing is a simple box ticking exercise.

Island local authorities would then have the responsibility of constructing a response to this report based on objective data and consultation with island communities. It would be hoped that any significant issues surfaced by this process could be addressed by dialogue between authorities and island local authorities but undoubtedly some will require ministerial intervention.

**Conclusion**

There is much to be welcomed in the Islands Bill and LGIU Scotland will be working to inform Scottish local authorities of the development of the legislation and stimulating debate about how it can be best delivered. LGIU Scotland also see this bill in the wider context of the local governance review and Local Democracy Bill published in the Programme for Government alongside the support offered to island local authorities wishing to adopt a single authority model.

LGIU Scotland