RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY

ISLANDS (SCOTLAND) BILL

SUBMISSION FROM RAASAY COMMUNITY COUNCIL

1. The Bill says that the Scottish Government should publish a national islands plan and then the Scottish Parliament should look at the plan. Do you agree with this?

Yes

What are your views on having a national islands plan?

- The duty to publish a National Plan is welcomed. However, to be effective, as opposed to a window-dressing exercise, people living and working on islands must be given the opportunity to contribute and their views must be respected and included throughout the plan preparation and implementation phases. This is particularly important where the local authority is not based within the islands – such as in Highland Council. For the Islands Bill to be worth its name, greater emphasis must be placed on the weaker and more fragile communities.
- Consideration should be given to defining the intended extent of island input to decision making. Centralisation of health services has proved disastrous for Raasay. Will this Bill lead to Island communities having a greater say in how policies affecting them are considered? Or will remote authorities merely have to say that they considered the effect of a change of policy before doing what they intended anyway?
- Health and Transport are key issues for any island community and if they are to be excluded the Islands Bill will be so much the poorer for it.
- The Scottish Government should consult about which services should be defined as Lifeline Services. Such services, for example healthcare and ferry services, must be protected and there should be a presumption of no reduction. It is essential that Island plans and impact statements specifically cover health because only by having adequate healthcare on islands will those who live there feel confident enough to remain on them. These lifeline services must form part of the plans for all islands and should be listed on the face of the Bill so that they can not be ignored in each island plan.
- It would be of considerable importance in terms of being able to quantify the effect of such legislation if a position statement of key information for each island were to be compiled in advance of the provisions of the Act coming into force. This would allow changes to be tracked over the coming years.

2. The Bill will require Scottish Ministers and certain Scottish public authorities to prepare islands impact assessments. Do you agree with this provision?

Yes
What are your views on this provision?

This provision is also seen to be a positive move. Given the damaging process experienced on Raasay, in the area of Health Services, such impact assessments must be carried out before changes are implemented and only following meaningful consultation with representatives of the local communities who must have some input into the evaluation of such assessment and the uses to which they are put. Only with sufficient backing and appropriate resources can Island-proofing be an effective way of raising awareness of issues faced by fragile communities before wide-ranging changes are implemented. Should not the Scottish Government’s representative on Islands be Island-based - as a way to facilitate easier communications between islands and Ministers and to ensure outcomes are island-orientated and made with full consultation? Representation by those without knowledge or experience of Island life is unlikely to be effective. It is essential that representatives of island communities are included in the process of drawing up and evaluating the results of the impact assessments. If the drawing up and monitoring of the Plan is something that is imposed on communities from above, it will lack all credibility at community level.

3. The Bill suggests that the Scottish Parliamentary constituency boundary of Na h-Eileanan an Iar (the Western Isles) should be protected from any future changes. Do you agree with this?

No Response

4. Each local government electoral ward usually elects 3 or 4 members. The Bill suggests that island areas may need fewer members (1 or 2). Do you agree?

No Response

5. The Bill will says that Scottish Ministers should be able to create a marine licensing scheme for coastal waters. Do you agree?

No Response

6. Are you in favour of the Bill overall?

Yes

Is there anything else that you feel should be included or excluded from the Bill?

- Health and Social Care, Transport and Education are key issues which should certainly be included in the Bill. The experience of the island of Raasay in its recent dealings with NHS Highland, for example, illustrates quite starkly the need for policy makers to have to undergo some form of island-proofing supporting major policy changes.
- Despite recognition from NHS Highland that Raasay needs an island-based, appropriately-qualified out of hours healthcare presence, we have been denied equity of access to urgent care during the out of hours period for over 2 years.
The narrow strip of water between Raasay and Skye means we cannot drive to seek help when the ferry is tied up. There is no substitute for a trained, qualified person on the island.

- Without any of the safeguards envisaged in the Bill, Raasay and other islands are currently at the mercy of a remote, uncaring and incompetent health authority which has removed out of hours care from Raasay as well as large swathes of Skye – this despite very large seasonal variations in population. The changes were brought about without consultation with the affected communities and little or no thought was given to the effect it would have on these remote and fragile areas. If the Islands Bill is to be of any use to those it seeks to help, it must address these very issues and prevent such a thing happening to other islands like Raasay in future.

- At weekends and sometimes in the afternoon when the nurse has left for the day, those seeking medical advice for themselves or their families have to travel to Broadford. This can easily result in an overnight stay on Skye. Facilities should be available at the hospital so that islanders are not forced to look for B&B accommodation in these circumstances - such accommodation is often completely unavailable at any time during Skye’s increasingly busy visitor season. Likewise, for those from the islands who need to stay in hospital, consideration should be given to making it easier for spouses/parents/children to visit. Additional travel costs, particularly ferry costs should also be considered.

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

Islanders can expect to forego many of the attractions of living an urban life, however basic rights – healthcare, education and such like should never be compromised by living off the main thoroughfares. Scotland’s communities come in a wide variety of guises – rural, urban, small, large, island, mainland. Legislation such as the Islands Bill ought to foster, facilitate and encourage communities of all types and it is of benefit to all Scotland’s citizens to have thriving communities in remote and island areas.

Please prove us wrong! Don’t allow this Bill to produce only an illusion of positive change. Create an Islands Bill which will help these communities and make a genuine difference in sustaining their very existence.

Raasay Community Council  
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