The Committee met with various communities, organisations, representatives of public bodies and individuals to discuss their views on the Islands (Scotland) Bill. These notes are an informal summary of the views expressed.

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?

People felt that...

- There is a general view that the Plan could be positive but it will depend on content.
- The Plan needs to recognise the very different situations and ambitions across the islands. There is a huge difference in need, not only between islands like Harris and Lewis, but also between areas within islands. A one size approach wouldn’t suit everyone.
- Views were mixed over whether each island should have a separate Plan, or whether there could be a high level Plan to cover all islands.
- The Plan must be created in close consultation with Islanders. Some expressed concerns that a year isn’t long enough for meaningful consultation.
- Within communities people haven’t yet heard about the plan, it may be that councils aren’t feeding this information to communities effectively.
- Communities should get a chance to see and review plan through drafting - it should be an iterative process.
  - A question should be raised around whether the Bill should specify who in islands communities should be consulted. Some asked whether community councils were genuinely representative, bearing in mind they don’t have many young people in them? Will communities at grassroots level be genuinely consulted?
- The Plan should be developed from a framework before consultation and drawing up of the plan begins. A start from base data might help as it gives a framework to monitor and report back on. It is a struggle to apply national data sets to islands because of the scale of islands, based on averages. For example, current data for islands is reflected disproportionately by bodies like Visit Scotland.
- The Plan should have two levels of consultation – island level, and community level. Existing community forums could be used to involve communities in the Plan, such as the Harris Forum or Calmac’s community board of islanders from different islands. Community associations have a wider reach than community councils, as they take in youth and senior citizen groups, schools, church, which gives a good age range.
• It’s important to involve the youth demographic in consultation because of depopulation.
• The Plan must take into account existing similar plans (such as the ferries plan currently being written). For example, the Outer Hebrides Community Planning Partnership as required under the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act is currently developing a Local Outcome Improvement Plan (LOIP) for the Outer Hebrides, and Locality Plans. Community planning partners need to be at the heart of this Plan at the national level in the Bill, and the national plan will reflect LOIPs.
• The creation of the Plan must have substantial funding to ensure it has robust data so that decisions are based on evidence. It should also be bold and ambitious.
• There were mixed views about how prescriptive the Plan as set out in the Bill should be.
  o One suggestion was that the Plan should have two levels – one to recognise high level challenges of islands in general, and then another to list things that were specific to each island.
  o Some thought the Bill should specify certain things that the Plan must include that would be of importance to all island communities, such as transport and ferries.
  o Some suggested that there should be some criteria and stipulations of what should be included in the Plan. Some kind of benchmark could be used as a starting point, but that would be hugely difficult. Local authorities do already have an idea of issues which could be used as a benchmark. Not all islands have the same starting point.
  o Another suggestion was to use protected criteria like “everyone who lives on an island should be able to get on and off”, or “everyone should be able to see the appropriate health care specialist”. Broadband should possibly be one to include.
  o People felt that individual statistics for each area should be considered to identify what the Plan’s priorities should be. Alcoholism, lack of social care and dementia were mentioned as Western Isles issues. Western Isles are financially challenged so anything which boosts economy or provides funding for support staff will help.
• The Plan must include priority issues such as:
  o transport and ferries (these being often seen as most important),
  o digital connectivity (also very important being fragmentary in certain areas currently),
  o public services such as education, health and social care (currently under provision in some areas)
  o depopulation and rising age of some populations,
  o important industries like fisheries.
• The Plan should encourage new multimedia markets (multimedia) which with a solid internet connection can be done anywhere.
• The Plan must address the ‘island costs/ impact’ which inhabitants must deal with:
  o increased cost of house building,
  o cost of land,
  o delivery of goods,
  o impact of tourists and
- Crofting on housing,
- Transport and ferries

- These issues are often interlinked – for example, you need housing and land to attract families to live and work in certain areas.
- The Plan should include the interwoven three strands of sustainable population, health and wellbeing and sustainable economy. If it has these principles it would then cover all islands, and it would be down to the islands to filter down to specifics.
- Some areas would be better run on a local level than a national level (like fishing). It must reflect opportunities strategically, such as in marine industries in a Brexit era.
- Tourism as a whole should be looked at. It’s currently made out to be very important to Scotland but there are issues. The government celebrates high tourist numbers, but there are a lot of people suffering as a result, with housing and ferries being a problem.
- Health focus of care is on the ageing population as opposed to younger people. The should be a provision in the Plan to make sure that all health boards cater for the health care needs of all age groups. There is currently a lack of access to mental health and family planning services. Young people leave islands because of a lack of investment and a lack of economic stimulation.
- A relatively small number of high quality jobs being in a Plan could make a huge difference to an island community. For example, it may mean a few more children in an area and consequently a school will stay open.
- Decisions made on the Plan could be challenging as people tend to challenge the organization implementing the decision, rather than the decision makers (for example, a transport provider rather than Transport Scotland).
- It will be more difficult when a council is not based on an island but on the mainland. It will depend on the people running it, and need strong vision.

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?

People felt that…

- There is a need to avoid it being a box ticking exercise. It needs to be robustly carried out. Island communities should be involved in impact assessments. It needs adequate funding.
- Islands proofing could go two ways – it should include how islands contribute to Scotland’s economy and services, such as via energy and whisky industries, as opposed to just being about impacts on islands.
- National agencies tend to be based in the central belt - could some of those jobs be spread into islands with better use of technology to keep people connected.
- Some community representatives questioned the use of the phrase “in their opinion” in Section 12(1) of the Bill, on the basis that Scottish Government
ministers would not be accountable for decisions made regarding island impact assessments.

- Needs and impacts are very different from island to island. Crofting for instance is very different on Harris than from Lewis.
- Impact assessment should include procurement – you could add to the assessment that a certain percentage of procurement should be subcontracted to local businesses.
- A committee should look at issues specifically to decide on use of impact assessments. It shouldn’t just be the choice of the Scottish Government minister, there should be a consultation period, and people from affected communities should be involved.
- Consideration should be given to whether Transport Scotland and the Boundary Commission for Scotland be in the schedule of relevant authorities in the Bill?

The Bill proposes to protect the Scottish Parliamentary constituency boundary of Nah Eileanan an Iar (the Western Isles) from change. Do you agree with this?

People felt that…

- Everyone in all the meetings agreed that this was a good proposal.
- Some Western Isles councillors are overstretched in terms of the geographic area and/or the smaller islands they have to cover, so any increase in representation for under-represented areas would be good. Smaller islands feel let down currently as representation is so low.
- There should be more flexibility on how wards are decided due to the massive areas on islands – it should be based on geography, and actual populations (currently it is overall population).

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?

People felt that…

- There was general agreement on this proposal in principle and that they are in favour of greater representation of the Islands.
- Practicalities need to be taken into account. Caution was expressed as travel between smaller islands can take longer than getting to the mainland. A councillor may need to spend days away from home in order to visit all areas of their ‘patch’.

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?

People felt that…

- There were some doubts expressed by some over the Local Authority being the licensee in certain circumstances.
Local communities or another organisation should have control over a local asset, and that decision making should be devolved down as far as possible.

The local authority should be obliged to consult with communities when considering the granting of licenses.

It would be good to have something in the bill that makes it clear to communities that if they desire to take ownership of assets that there is a mechanism for this to be done, linking to community empowerment.

Local control of local fisheries is a Comhairle nan Eilean Siar principle. More control of land and sea environment held locally is beneficial for all. Some elements might lie with Marine Scotland, some with council, and some with local communities and harbour bodies.

Control of foreshore and seas around a relevant area have to be devolved as locally as possible. Any money being paid to Crown Estate goes out of the community; it needs to come back into the local area. Land trusts and community trusts are ideally placed to have responsibility. If control is at a local level, there’s more chance of locally based initiatives taking over from large national companies. Local people should have more opportunities to invest locally.

Some people were not sure what is included in this part of the Bill.

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

**People felt that…**

- Social services and mental health care on the Western Isles is limited. The amount of travel involved for the relevant staff makes it difficult. Due to living on a small island, everyone knows if you have a home visit which could put people off asking for help. This could ultimately impact on someone’s right to dignity and quality of life.
- The islands have an increasingly diverse population in terms of the various nationalities who are present.
- The Bill should consider LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) communities. This is a specific Western Isles issue where there have been suicide cases.

**With all this in mind - 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?**

**People felt that…**

- Overall it is a positive thing that the Bill exists.
- Some people thought that the Plan and proofing proposals were not clear, and/ or that they did not fully understand what they meant, based on what the Bill contained.
- Some people questioned whether the Bill will address island problems currently being experienced (for example, would the Bill allow island based tourist organisations to challenge Visit Scotland decisions, or the bad quality
of roads, or national companies being chosen over local ones for big island projects like new schools).

- The Bill will be a success if it allows local people, who understand local issues, to work with national organisations to make better long-term decisions.
- It has to work and bring real benefits and not just be a tick box, tokenistic exercise.
- A lot of the issues faced by Island communities are also felt by remote, rural, mainland communities.
- There should be something in the plan to make sure people are encouraged to speak Gaelic. The language is still deteriorating despite the acts and plans that exist. Real consideration should be given to how legislation will impact on the Gaelic language as well as just the Gaelic community.