

Alasdair Allan MSP submission of 25 January 2023

PE1862/E: Introduce community representation on boards of public organisations delivering lifeline services to island communities

I write to express my support for petition PE1862: Introduce community representation on boards of public organisations delivering lifeline services to island communities.

Unfortunately, I am not able to be at the upcoming Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee evidence session on this petition as I am a member of another committee which meets at the same time. I am, however, very grateful for the Committee's attention to the issue.

As the Committee will be aware from my previous contributions, this is an important and much-discussed topic in my constituency. Island communities are utterly reliant on organisations such as HIAL, David MacBrayne and CMAL. My constituents have the most to gain from seeing them governed as effectively as possible. Yet – paradoxically – people resident in islands are very rarely featured on the boards of these organisations.

I strongly believe that the governance of these organisations would be improved by having people who personally relied on their services represented on their boards. Accountability is also greatly improved when board members have the experience of meeting people in their local shop who are affected by their board's decisions.

I note the view that organisations like HIAL already have “good engagement” with island communities. However, a distinction needs to be made between consultation with communities and community voices being embedded in the decision-making process. Having at least some island-based board members would also make for a better flow of ideas from communities at an early stage, rather than consultation taking place after decisions have, essentially, already been made. Organisations would also have a better understanding early on of things that may be completely unpalatable to island communities and be much better equipped to nip any unworkable ideas in the bud.

There has been some progress since my member's debate on this issue in September 2021. While this was principally about ferry services, the same arguments can be made for HIAL or even organisations like NHS Western Isles. I welcome the focus on advertising board vacancies as widely as possible in island areas. A Lewis resident was appointed to the board of CMAL last year and a Shetland resident has recently been appointed to the board of HIAL.

While this is welcome progress, individual appointments do not necessarily mean that the issue is "solved." There needs to be an adequate response to the structural reasons that have hitherto prevented appointment recommendations for island-based individuals from appearing on Ministers' desks. In my view, this means ensuring that the job specifications of board members value lived experience of island life, as well as skills that abound in island communities (for example experience of working at sea and knowledge of the maritime world).