

# Child Poverty and Parental Employment Inquiry

## Committee Visit to Benbecula and South Uist

19 and 20 January 2023

**19 January: setting the scene with local strategic and delivery organisations at Caladh Trust, Benbecula**

Presentation from Dolina Smith, Employability Services Manager, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar

**Young people need to be able to earn, live and learn locally**, but population aged under 40 is dropping. The biggest challenge is encouraging young people to live here. School leavers do want to the opportunity to live and work locally.

There are jobs available and “nobody needs to be unemployed”, but there are barriers to taking jobs, particularly **childcare, transport and housing**.

**Partnership working is key.** Close partnership working is central to the Western Isles approach.

There is a strong **focus on apprenticeships** which range from SVQ2 to Masters level. There needs to be graduate level opportunities to encourage young people to come back after college or university. There has been an increase in the proportion of school leavers going straight into employment rather than higher education. 90% of local employers are small businesses – so apprentices are shared across a number of employers. This also allows very small craft businesses to pass on skills.

**No-one left behind** focuses on the long term unemployed, providing wrap-around support such as childcare, caring support, health support, help with travel.

The Council has used their ‘warm spaces’ project to provide information on employability. It’s helpful to provide that employability information in an informal setting, particularly for people who haven’t thought about taking employment.

**Digital connectivity** and broadband provision on the islands are excellent – which enables more people to live here while working remotely in well paid jobs.

### Group Discussions

Theme 1: Local Context

**Local economy**

Economic activity rates are very high, but that masks the fact that if people can't find work, they move away. There is also under-employment.

Although there is now more opportunity to work at a well-paid job via remote working, that doesn't necessarily contribute to the local economy in the same way that working in hospitality or social care would. Hospitality and social care are low paid and living costs here are high.

Three big barriers are:

- **Transport** issues are exacerbated because homes are sparsely set – due to thecrofting tenure pattern, “you can drive 100s of miles” between work, home and childcare. People who don't drive rely on family, neighbours and employers. Employers try to be flexible around start and finish times, but that can impact on business productivity. There is community transport, but it's limited. There was a pilot a few years ago to provide a minibus – but it wasn't financially viable. There was also some resistance from local taxi firms who said it took business away from them.
- **Housing** is a huge issue. People from off Island have the money to buy, pushing up house prices
- **Childcare:** lack of flexible, affordable childcare is a big barrier, particularly for children under three.

The Council doesn't always have all the **data** it needs – either data on individuals in order to identify need, or economic and demographic data needed to design services and policy.

## Theme 2: Joined up policies

Discussions focused on the local employment situation.

“Uist is a **social enterprise** sort of place” – for example, social enterprise providing childcare, shops, skills development, refurbishing and making furniture.

Many people have **multiple jobs**.

**Modern apprenticeships** are delivered by the school. There are now 124 foundation apprentices at the local school. After school, 50% go on to employment and 50% to college. Because ‘everyone knows everyone’ it's easy to get employers involved in apprenticeships. There are childcare apprentices in council run nurseries, engineering apprentices with [QinetiQ \(MOD Hebrides Range\)](#) and business administration apprentices with the council.

Again, there was discussion of limited **childcare** availability and poor **transport** links. Unreliable ferries are now making people reluctant to settle on the islands. People need to have confidence on reliable transport links to the mainland, and they don't have that now.

## Theme 3: Scottish Government support

The discussion focused on funding. For example, 'Covid' funding was provided on a very flexible basis which worked well.

**Long term funding** would make projects sustainable and make people feel confident in a service or project. Short term funding led to "re-inventing the wheel all the time." It would also make people more likely to re-locate if jobs could be offered as permanent positions rather than fixed-term contracts.

**Funding arrangements don't always work well for the islands.** Funding should be provided directly to communities rather than to 'outside bodies'. Funding should be devolved to the lowest level.

There is a need to empower local authorities to be able to do more. The funding formula for local authorities disadvantages rural areas.

**Childcare:** the funded hours are great, but there are parents who can't access the funded hours. There is only one childminder on Uist and the council provision is over capacity.

There is high demand for **social care** for the elderly – but it needs to be better paid, and better mileage/wear and tear rates for staff cars.

The main issue with social care is lack of staff. In contrast, in childcare it's more a lack of funding.

While expanding funded childcare hours was good, it can have consequences for the viability of private providers.

The **warm spaces** projects worked well and provided an opportunity to deliver a variety of services and support.

Need more support for **community transport**.

The council did not get any replacement for **European social fund** money – that was a big blow. ([Did not get UK levelling up funding](#)).

## **20 January - Cothrom: discussion with parents**

Participants discussed their employment situation – what had helped and what had made things difficult.

### **Shared parental leave**

- Shared parental leave made a huge difference to being able to sustain employment but it still has to be shared between the parents – they don't get a full allowance each.
- Employers aren't used to getting shared leave requests from men

### **Childcare**

Where parents could access childcare, it supported their employment. However, lack of childcare or lack of affordable childcare that fitted around work was a problem for many.

- **Flexible childcare** is available at Cothrom from 8am to 6pm. Parents can request the hours they need.

- Cothrom offer after school care but **transporting children** from school to after school childcare is an issue. The project was considering providing transport, but that would mean their after-school care would not make money. Parents have asked the council for a bigger school bus so children could be bused to childcare. That was refused “as it might set a precedent” and discussions are at an impasse. It felt this was a lack of joined up thinking – employability department are asking the project to provide childcare, but transport department can’t extend transport provision to allow parents to access that childcare.
- **Council nurseries aren’t flexible enough** – they offer set hours, which may not be what the parent needs to fit round employment. One parent said: “I got offered 3 hours nursery care an hour’s drive away.”
- **Lack of provision:** There is no after school care available in Benbecula and no after school care on the school campus.
- Long **waiting lists** for nursery places.
- Really difficult to get funding to provide childcare for 1 and 2 year olds. There’s maternity leave, then a gap until 3 years (or 2 for those that are eligible).
- **Childcare issues stopped parents going back to work:** eg. no holiday childcare, only one childminder on the island, two nurseries don’t take children under 3.
- Some people spend their whole salaries on childcare.
- One parent described provision in Sweden with its “iron-clad principle of affordable childcare, available 8 til 5pm,” although they also pay higher tax.
- **Recruiting nursery staff is an “extreme challenge”.** Childcare is a source of employment, but its difficult to pay a good wage, and staffing requirements can change – so its precarious.
- Recruiting for Gaelic medium adds an extra layer of difficulty.

### **Childcare and housing situation puts young families off settling here.**

People described their struggle to continue to work after having children:

- “People want to come home but that only works if there’s childcare and housing.”
- (on childcare) “If I’d known what was available I’d never have moved”
- “If you can’t address childcare you’ll never attract young families”

### **Developing local job opportunities**

- Need more recognition of Gaelic within the apprenticeship frameworks – to allow for Gaelic medium childcare and nurseries
- There is still stigma attached to staying on the island. There are opportunities here – need to encourage young people, parents and schools to see those as good options.

### **Flexible working**

- Requests for flexible working had been turned down – both for large public sector employers and private sector.
- ‘Return to the office’ culture from some managers is unhelpful – Covid proved that home working is effective.
- There is less flexibility than previously because employer is short-staffed – so not getting the quality of life hoped for in moving here.
- There is a small bit of flexibility – but it isn’t enough. Where flexibility/home working is informal and not in the contract then there is the risk that employers could insist on office-based working on the mainland.

- Good broadband meant remote working was a good opportunity for the islands – but there is also a need to solve housing and childcare problems. “If we had housing and childcare as well we could reverse depopulation”.

### Transport

- Most people drive, as public transport is so limited, but that means there’s not enough demand for better public transport. The Council’s transport strategy is out of date.
- Those that don’t drive rely on lifts or expensive taxis.
- There is community transport but it doesn’t meet the demand – and is focused more on social work services than an alternative to car ownership.
- Feels like transport needs “aren’t taken seriously”

### Cost of Living

- Cost of living is much higher on the islands, which makes problems around childcare, transport and housing much worse.

## 20 January - Cnoc Soilleir: discussion with employers

Local employers discussed how to develop good local jobs, and the issues around offering flexible working.

### Transport

- **Lack of public transport** makes it difficult for employees who don’t drive. It particularly affects young people who can be reliant on lifts.
- One employer described how they tried to be flexible with working times – to work around transport arrangements. Other employers needed staff at set hours e.g. local shop, which made it more difficult to offer flexible working times.
- Employers therefore can be **disinclined to employ people who don’t drive** – even though they realise being able to drive isn’t a requirement of the job itself.
- Council aren’t doing enough to support transport infrastructure.
- **Unreliable ferries and planes** make remote working less viable. “Physically getting here is so hard – the ferries are horrendous.”
- “The problems with the ferries and with housing are existential threats to the island”

### Broadband

In contrast to other sessions, there was a lot of criticism of the quality of broadband. There was an inequity to provision – it’s excellent in some places but very poor in others.

### Staff recruitment

- It’s very difficult to find staff. All businesses in the meeting were facing shortages.
- If recruiting from the mainland, it’s a real struggle to find housing.
- Remote/hybrid working can allow people to settle here – but it also allows some island jobs to be done from the mainland.

### Education

- The availability of local school education up to 18 has been a huge positive
- Some at the meeting said there wasn't much access to higher education so young people had to leave. Others pointed out the provision through UHI, which would allow them to stay.

### **Housing**

- A lot of housing is taken for holiday lets or retirees. (Some felt this was already the case, others thought it was a clear issue for the future). House prices are therefore very high, and price out young families.
- The housing association properties are generally poor quality and expensive.
- An '[island bond scheme](#)' had been discussed but didn't progress.
- Many croft homes were empty and not being made available for rent.
- Housing policy tended to focus on Lewis and Harris rather than Uist.
- Building costs are much higher here – difficulties getting contractors and materials.

### **Public services**

- There are fewer local public services on the Uists “Everything is getting centralised to Stornoway”. “We now need to travel 60 miles to the dentist.”
- One commented that worsening transport links, increasing house prices and lack of public services all “chipped away” at what made life here attractive. “We’re losing our USP (Unique Selling Proposition).”

## **20 January - Cnoc Soilleir: discussion with teachers**

There are four primaries and one secondary. They have 100% ‘positive destinations’, although they don't count how many people stay on the island. Although UHI was great, many leave for further or higher education.

**“People would love to come back but the jobs aren't here, nor are the houses.”**

Teacher recruitment is very difficult. When teachers and probationers come here, it's very difficult to find them accommodation – they are often in short lets. There is a need to encourage long term lets rather than short term holiday lets. One person suggested introducing “tied housing” for probationers.

The council should be building housing for people that bring something to the community – nurses, doctors, teachers.

Nursery staff recruitment is also difficult – the qualification requirements are now quite high.

The schools are under-capacity and “villages are being hollowed out.”

Funded hours for 3- to 5-year-olds and free school meals were “fantastic” but still, the high cost of childcare, fuel and the time taken to get round school and childcare makes some wonder if it's worth working – particularly for second earners.

**The cost of living** meant they expect to see ‘a different type of poverty’ affecting far more families. The school know their families and have noticed the impact of increased cost of living – including among teacher's families.

**Partnership working** in the islands is good, but it needs to be more than joint discussion, and move to combining different funding in order to really have an impact.