RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

PROPOSED NATIONAL ISLANDS PLAN

SUBMISSION FROM COSLA

1. COSLA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Committee’s call for views on the National Islands Plan (NIP), to help set the overarching strategy of Scottish Ministers for improving the outcomes of island communities across Scotland.

2. The broad direction proposed in the Plan captures the wide ranging and distinctive needs of our island communities. We welcome the collaborative and place-based approach proposed in the Plan for its implementation with all six island authorities, their community planning partners and communities.

3. Overall the draft Plan reads as a high-level mapping exercise which captures well the issues faced by island communities and sets out an extensive framework of high-level commitments. However crucially, these commitments are not linked to actions and indicators to measure progress, which will only be set out in the Implementation Strategy to be published in Spring 2020. As a result:

   - The Plan sets out very ambitious commitments without adequate detail around the actions, investment and resources available to implement them at a local level (both for local authorities and their partners);
   - It is premature to comment on the feasibility of the commitments in the draft NIP at this stage due to the lack of clear targets and indicators by which to measure its performance;
   - There is a potential for confusion and mismatch once both documents are published

4. Ideally, future iterations of the Plan should include details about its implementation, indicators to assess progress, and the associated actions linked to its commitments. We believe this would strengthen the document and sharpen its focus. Alternatively, the Plan could be more appropriately designated as Strategy to reflect its high-level, strategic nature and its function to drive and inform its Implementation Plan (not Strategy, as it is currently called).

5. The NIP is underpinned by four key values (fairness, integration, environmental protection and inclusiveness) with an overarching commitment to equality and human rights, in line with the National Performance Framework. While this is a positive premise, we will only be able to gauge whether the principles will be respected during the implementation period. We believe therefore that the indicators measuring progress in the Plan’s delivery as well as the remit of the Governance Group should include monitoring of adherence to the principles.

6. Given the human rights focus of the Plan, we believe that the document could benefit from more consideration of gender equality concerns and recognition of the distinct challenges faced by women and girls living on the islands. The document offers an opportunity to explore these barriers in more depth than it
currently does and provide a clear assessment of how its objectives will contribute to tackling discrimination and promoting gender equality in our island communities.

7. The Plan also presents an opportunity to further embed the Place Principle in policy-making and delivery, and as a tool to harness available resources and deliver on priorities in a way which is responsive to the unique needs of our island communities. On this basis, we believe that a degree of flexibility should be retained in the local prioritisation of the objectives to reflect the circumstances of our islands.

8. This is also in recognition of the different socio-economic profiles of island authorities, and the financial constraints they face to continue delivering their essential services with ever-decreasing budgets. Whilst we welcome the ambitious nature of the Plan, it is critical that its commitments are deliverable within the current financial context. As acknowledged by the Plan, the six island Local Authorities will have a key role in driving forward progress and as such should be closely involved in the development of the implementation and delivery programme to ensure a holistic, collaborative and pragmatic approach.

9. In terms of the objectives and actions currently in the Plan, we have set out the following high-level views reflecting conversations and early sight of a limited number of responses from local authorities where that has been possible –

- As noted above, overall lack of clarity around resources required to deliver on actions;
- Adult education, training and skills should feature more prominently as important elements of retaining talent on the islands and tackling depopulation;
- The importance of influencing the UK Shared Prosperity Fund following Brexit given the substantial impact that European Structural and Investment Funds have had on the socio-economic development of our island communities;
- While the critical importance of transport for island communities is acknowledged within the Plan, a stronger recognition of the challenges in delivering the active travel agenda on the islands due to their rural nature, geography, population and associated difficulty of securing funding;
- Stronger links to the Public Health Reform agenda as part of the health, care and wellbeing dimension of the plan;
- The economic development function delivered by local authorities should be better recognised in the Plan’s objectives to improve and promote sustainable economic development, which currently refer mostly to HIE and SDS;
- On housing and fuel poverty, high energy costs should also be addressed alongside energy efficiency, given their impact on island communities and businesses;
- The Plan could take better cognisance of Regional Economic Partnerships and the potential for Single Island Partnerships/Single Island
Authority models, within the context of the Local Governance Review and the broader local empowerment and subsidiarity agenda.

10. We welcome the Plan’s emphasis on climate change and its recognition of the unique challenges faced by island authorities not only in relation to carbon emissions, but also in terms of biodiversity and likelihood of increasingly extreme weather going forward. We recognise that both Scottish and Local Government have a key role to play in achieving the net-zero target by 2045 and that especially Island authorities will need a strong set of tools and powers to develop effective local action. Adequate resources will also be required for islands communities to make the most effective contribution to climate action, transitioning to a low carbon economy and make full use of their assets. This is especially the case for the island’s unique renewable energy resources and the export of these to the UK mainland grid, which would greatly contribute to driving forward economic development and tackling depopulation in the islands.

11. Finally, we would like to point an inaccuracy at page 49. COSLA and Scottish Government have agreed a framework to work together to have at least 1% of Council budgets subject to Participatory Budgeting (PB) by 2021, and not 2020 as stated in the Plan. We trust this response will be helpful to the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee to inform their scrutiny of the National Islands Plan.