RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

PROPOSED NATIONAL ISLANDS PLAN

SUBMISSION FROM COMMUNITY LAND TRUSTS – OUTER HEBRIDES (CLSOH)

The Community Land Trusts network in the Outer Hebrides welcomes the opportunity to respond to the government’s proposed National Islands Plan. It recognises the global importance of the place-based legislation that underpins the plan and the part this plays in promoting community empowerment.

The Community Land Trusts network in the Outer Hebrides consists of sixteen community landowning groups who are members of Community Land Scotland. Twelve of these groups are post-purchase and four are pre-purchase. The network was formed to allow trusts in the Outer Hebrides to address local issues and work collaboratively, ensuring representation from the community land sector on various fora such as the Outer Hebrides Community Planning Partnership, relevant Joint Consultative Committees etc.

This response draws on practical experience and insights from the community land sector in the Outer Hebrides and whilst it is recognized that every objective impacts the sector, each one has not been individually addressed in the response.

CLSOH fully supports the development of the National Islands Plan and the recognition of the contribution from island communities to Scotland, agreeing the overarching objective of “improving life on our islands.” Community landowners in the Outer Hebrides have demonstrated strong leadership potential and as such are critical stakeholders in the commitment to protect and promote our islands for future generations.

CLSOH recognizes and agrees that the thirteen Strategic Objectives outlined in the plan are applicable and the correct ones to support and meet the needs of island communities. Many of the objectives mirror the aims and objects of the individual land-owning trusts and this alignment demonstrates a thorough consultation as part of the development of the plan. It is particularly pleasing to see “Climate Change and Energy” as a strategic objective and “Health, Social Care and Wellbeing”. These two objectives are of obvious importance to communities but given the government’s recent declaration of a climate emergency it is imperative that communities and land-owning trusts are kept involved in discussions and actions around this critical agenda. Recent social care reforms and the redesign of health and social care services must invite involvement of communities to ensure services meet the needs of communities and in turn don’t have a detrimental affect on other strategic objectives identified i.e. depopulation. It should be noted these two objectives have been raised, but only due to current circumstances and not due to increased importance over other objectives.

It recognizes the need for a holistic approach and it clear this has been adopted and recognition given that the objectives are interdependent. It is agreed this is an appropriate approach as different communities will place importance on different issues and not giving priority to one over another is a positive, fair and inclusive way to progress.
The actions outlined to support effective implementation of the plan are practical and sensible. It is particularly encouraging to have young islanders identified under Objective 1 as depopulation is without a doubt one of the single biggest causes/consequences for island communities. Some excellent work has been undertaken to celebrate and recognize the opportunities within islands by the community land sector and this work should be built upon and enhanced to support a balancing of the demographic profile.

Rural planning is captured within the action priorities quite rightly. Community land trusts have a long-term vision for their land asset and the relationship it holds with the community. A think piece written by Dr Calum Macleod captures the relationship between land and population wonderfully by stating 1“Stemming the flow of people from our sparsely populated area must feature at the top of policymakers’ ‘to do’ list if we are serious about creating a thriving rural Scotland by 2050. That means reframing our relationship as a society with land and landscapes so as to enable our most vulnerable rural communities to flourish as a matter of social justice whilst simultaneously safeguarding our natural heritage and combatting the existential threat of climate change.”

A nurturing of our land and the relationship of people will act as an enabler and it is important that community land owners have the opportunity to engage with the implementation of the islands plan as their focus and vision is long term and is coupled with a continuing commitment to address depopulation.

Effective implementation of the plan is critical to bridge the gap between policy setting and policy delivery. An implementation strategy will need to take account of and ensure alignment of stakeholders as well as proposing the principles of good governance and accountability. It is recognised that whilst time resources may be a constraint, in order to effectively implement the plan sufficient human and financial resources should be allocated to ensure effective implementation of the plan. This will help to ensure that the actions outlined do indeed build upon the National Performance Framework and the Sustainable Development Goals. It is imperative that islands are given the opportunity to exploit opportunities in a fair, inclusive and equitable way and that policies and plans become practical and move beyond the theoretical debate.

The shift towards more local democracy and the potential of transformational change is critical to island communities and as such performance measurement will help to retain focus, support review and ensure there is accountability. The shaping of the future must be carried out with ongoing involvement of island communities and this needs to be effective in all areas of community leadership, to ensure ownership of the plan. It is excellent to see that indicators will be developed in collaboration with a number of different parties and it is important to ascertain in each island who the local leaders are. The community land trusts in the Outer Hebrides have demonstrated a clear commitment to working with local partners, such as Comhairle nan Eilean Siar to further influence and impact decision making, but also to support new ways of

---

1 Dr Calum Macleod (11 October 2019) ‘Thriving Rural Scotland’ to help inform discussion on priorities for Scotland’s fourth National Planning Framework (NPF4)
working. Clear feedback within the plan outlines the need for indicators, robust data, meaningful monitoring and one participant of the consultation quite accurately has outlined the need to avoid tick box measurement, which is quite correct. The actions outlined at Objective 13 will be key to setting clearly defined actions, measurable indicators, defined responsibilities and allow for effective performance measurement.

The plan seeks to be *green* as an underpinning principle and this would seem to align with the Scottish Government’s renewed focus on Climate Change issues. Sight should not be lost of the place-based approach and the desire to move forward with renewables and sustainable land management. The community land sector is committed to sustainable land management and some communities have had the opportunity to benefit from renewables and electricity generation to further invest into communities and deliver against many of the objectives outlined in the plan. There is a recognition that in order to fully benefit from opportunities communities need to be able to benefit from not only management of assets, but associated revenues and in order to reach this point there needs to be a sharp shift away from “silo” working and mindsets that aren’t flexible in the approach to management of assets.

The plan is comprehensive, the strategic aims and objectives are holistic and seem genuinely inclusive. Implementation is critical and stakeholder engagement is a large part of that picture. As outlined in the plan there is a need to ensure island communities recognise the plan as their own and use it to ensure accountability at a Scottish Government level. The regular review process is important the need for all stakeholders to be willing to work in collaboration to focus on outcomes is essential.