RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

PROPOSED NATIONAL ISLANDS PLAN

SUBMISSION FROM NEIL BRUCE

• Do you think the proposed Plan sets out both a clear strategic direction and practical approaches to delivery of the Strategic Objectives?
Yes, but please see below

• Do you have any comments on the actions outlined to support effective implementation of the proposed Plan?

All public bodies need to embrace the spirit of the Act now and not wait for further guidance, to become enablers, working together with other public bodies, and with island communities to ensure that the most effective, efficient and sustainable programmes can be implemented. Thinking and actions need to be joined-up and coherent. When there is investment, there should be broader thinking to ensure that where appropriate, value-added and future-proofing is built-in (for example, when building a ferry breakwater, if extra spend can enable creation of a sheltered anchorage for visiting yachts, an island could gain wider economic and social benefit if it were offered the opportunity).

In terms of Strategic Objective 2, to improve and promote sustainable economic development, there is a need to explicitly identify whether the costs of provision of services and goods are artificially higher and find the means to reduce them as soon as possible. This is a good example where objectives, in this case Strategic Objective 3, to improve transport services must be undertaken in tandem, as it is currently omitted from the latter objective. The provision of fuel and other essential products can be a serious challenge for island communities.

The synergies between Objectives 2 and 3 are as pertinent to all the others and there would be benefit in creating a matrix of interdependences and actions across them all (see for example the costs of implementing changes to energy production and sustaining island life).

Also using Strategic Objective 3 as example, there should be a workstream to ensure that the need to be ‘green’ is explicit and coherent: Caledonian MacBrayne’s current Online Passenger Survey/Booking Experience Survey does not appear to take this into account - https://servicescience.researchfeedback.net/s/jywqugb

In respect of Strategic Objective 7, to improve and promote health and wellbeing, the benefits of agencies which sustain and promote the culture of island communities and individuals would benefit from being explicit. Mention is made of the wishes of older people to remain locally and the loss of culture and heritage as and when they do leave: how their lives and experiences can be ‘captured’ should be included, which means that services including libraries, museums and others which are also community hubs, need to be retained and developed on islands, with the appropriate levels of professional support.
In the text around Strategic Objective 8, to improve and promote environmental wellbeing and deal with biosecurity, the challenge of waste disposal is recognised, but there are no actions proposed in response.

I am unclear why there is an explicit reference to an Island Community Impact Assessment for Fuel Poverty and no references to the use of ICIAs elsewhere in the Plan.

• Do you think the proposed Plan adheres effectively to its stated principles that it is “fair, integrated, green and inclusive”? If not, how might its adherence to any or all of these principles be improved?

In respect of ‘green’, please see the comment above regarding transport. CalMac has made very positive moves but needs to integrate this into all its improvements and wider service delivery.

The plan needs to move from words to action and there should be an evidence-based annual review of how public bodies have engaged with island communities within a formal framework. More than that, though, the Scottish Government should take responsibility for ensuring that public bodies demonstrate the early and ongoing engagement of island communities in how they develop and implement services, policies, strategies and plans, including changes to existing provision.

In Strategic Objective 10, to empower diverse communities and different places it is not sufficient to “support participatory processes aimed at providing island communities with a strong voice in the implementation of the Plan; (and) explore ways to strengthen the voice of island communities” – these need an agreed action plan in conjunction with the communities. Where responsibility is assigned to public bodies (transient visitor tax and the promotion of local regulations, for example) the Government needs to ensure there is a transparent audit trail (not only an ICIA) which demonstrates whatever decisions a public body wishes to make are supported by the island communities involved.

Generally, experience leads to the view that using the word ‘consultation’ suggests that public bodies know better than those who experience island life daily: the former make the final decision, which may be different to the wishes or needs of the island community, but there are ways in which island communities could and should be better involved and engaged in service decisions. The Plan offers an opportunity to rethink the nature of the relationship so that it can become much more a partnership between public bodies and island communities, where the distinct roles each has is recognised and used to mutual benefit. The following is only illustrative but can be developed as a model. While not all steps would be two-way, the illustration is intended to show that it should not be a one-way process, and that each step is interrelated (budget for example). It also demonstrates it is an ongoing relationship and that decisions need to be proactively reviewed and changed where necessary.
• The Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 sets out longer term timescales for Scottish Ministers to report on and review the Plan. Does the proposed Plan have sufficiently clear targets and measurable indicators by which to measure its performance?

It would be beneficial to develop a knowledge base as part of the island level data proposed in Strategic Objective 13 to capture how public bodies and island communities use the Act and Plan, to sustain and improve island life and lives. The data included should include when an ICIA is used, the results and decision subsequently implemented. There would be merit in also collecting and collating how well the outcomes achieved met those predicted, and what remedial actions were taken. This knowledge base would be publicly-available for public bodies and island communities to consult and use as and when appropriate.

• Does the proposed Plan align with the Scottish Government’s renewed focus on climate change issues, following its announcement of a climate change emergency?

See above about the need to integrate the Strategic Objectives.
• Does the proposed Plan deliver against the Scottish Government’s own National Performance Framework, and the underpinning Sustainable Development Goals?

No comments to make.