RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

PROPOSED NATIONAL ISLANDS PLAN

SUBMISSION FROM NORTH AYRSHIRE COUNCIL

North Ayrshire Council welcome the opportunity to respond to the Committee’s Call for Views. The very challenging timescale for the consultation response has limited the amount of engagement that the Council has been able to do to inform this response and we look forward to further engagement with the Scottish Government and our island communities as part of the development of the Implementation Plan.

1) Do you think the 13 Strategic Objectives in the proposed National Islands Plan are the right ones to meet the needs of island communities?

Overall the Strategic Objectives proposed are comprehensive and cover a range of issues facing our island communities. We welcome the place-based approach, recognising that all communities have different needs and that islands communities have specific but not always unique needs. Given this, island communities may wish to prioritise the objectives set out based on the relative importance of them to their own island.

Some of objectives and actions proposed will require significant investment, however it is not detailed where this investment will come from. It is important that commitments are deliverable and perhaps it would have beneficial to focus on a smaller number of actions and targeting resource towards these.

A number of the Strategic Objectives are interrelated, for example population and economic development (the North Ayrshire Inclusive Growth Diagnostic identified working age population as a key constraint on achieving inclusive growth in North Ayrshire). Given the nature of the objectives, associated actions should be closely aligned, avoiding duplication and clutter a time of limited resource. A whole systems approach should be applied to ensure the overall ambitions of the plan are realised given the complex nature of island challenges.

We welcome that the plan highlights the economic opportunity of the blue economy and clean growth, and that islands (and wider coastal communities) can play a leading role in establishing Scotland as a leader in this area.

2) Are there any issues which have been overlooked in the Strategic Objectives?

We would have liked to see a specific reference to young people in island communities and their human rights. Further to this, adult learning is not covered within the plan.

Whilst we agree that the issue of population should be a focus of the plan, this should not distract from a more coherent approach to population growth – North Ayrshire as a whole is one of eight Local Authorities anticipated to see population decline 2016-2026 (all of which are located in the West of Scotland), whilst the population of
Scotland as a whole is due to increase, illustrating that this is not just an issue for island communities.

The plan should highlight the importance of influencing the UK Shared Prosperity Fund given that Scottish regions have benefited greatly from European Structural and Investment Funds.

3) **Are there any Strategic Objectives that should be given a higher level of priority within the proposed Plan?**

Given the focus on Community Empowerment, we would have expected ‘Empowered Island Communities and Strong Local Partnerships’ to have been given a higher level of priority as these are crucial to the sustainability of services on islands. This objective is required if any of the other objectives within the plan are going to be met. The plan should reflect context of Locality Planning, as provided for in Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, and subsidiarity, with power delegated as close to people as possible.

The ability to recruit Health and Social Care Partnership staff is a key issue particularly given challenges with affordable housing, the significance of this issue is increasing given our aging population.

4) **Do you think the proposed Plan sets out both a clear strategic direction and practical approaches to delivery of the Strategic Objectives?**

See answer to question 1 – some of objectives and actions proposed will require significant investment, however it is not detailed where this investment will come from. It is important that commitments are deliverable and relevant to the ambitions of island communities. The Council welcomes that the plan allows Local Authorities to be involved in the creation of an implementation and delivery programme. This co-development of indicators and actions will allow them to be measurable and designed with other national and local strategies in mind such as the National Planning Framework and Local Development Plans.

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

In relation to **depopulation**, and as noted above, a more holistic approach is required. For example skills and cost of living is not the only issue, availability of affordable housing and diversity of jobs are also key. There are issues regarding access to health care and education in sparsely populated island areas, and the cost of delivering these services are higher.

In terms of **economic development**, the plan does not recognise the Ayrshire Growth Deal which includes ambitious plans for the marine sector on Arran and Cumbrae.

Actions regarding economic opportunity and business support should be aligned to national work developing a single point of contact and target operating model for enterprise support. Proposals to tailor business and community support to reflect the needs of island communities will need to be adequately resourced.
In terms of transport actions, the Council welcomes the reference to STPR2 however recognises that local and regional interventions are also required alongside increased maintenance requirements to ensure transport can meet communities needs on islands. This is challenging at times of constrained public sector budgets and these interventions will not be addressed through STPR2.

The plan notes the need for a future low carbon transport system on islands and promoting the integration of modes including through active travel which is welcome. It would be beneficial to recognise the challenges in delivering active travel on islands due to the rural nature, small population size and topography of our islands. All of which can make securing funding for delivery very difficult as it is not always possible to meet the anticipated standards of funders.

Policy decisions at a national level such as the introduction of Road Equivalent Tariff (RET) have had a significant effect on our islands which was not fully assessed prior to implementation. This has had an impact not only in terms of transport but sustainability, sustainable economic growth, health and well-being, climate change and the environment. It is recognised that the introduction of RET has resulted in a number of benefits for North Ayrshire's island communities including increased tourist numbers and the extension of the tourist season. It has however impacted on a range of factors such as road maintenance, queuing and marshalling, economic displacement, on island parking, ferry capacity and bus patronage on the islands. Infrastructure improvements are now required to support the additional pressures as a result of Road Equivalent Tariff (RET) not all of which will be capture through STPR2 as noted above.

Moreover, there has not been a proportionate increase in bus or rail journeys on the mainland to access the ferry terminals or on the islands themselves - these are in fact in decline. This suggests that the additional passengers are travelling in cars which poses environmental issues. Joining up ticketing and promoting sustainable travel for island journeys at a national or regional level would therefore be beneficial to redress this balance.

Further to this, there is an interrelationship between transport, energy and the environment, and digital, this will become more significant as the transport continues to enter into the digital and green economy – we need to consider how islands will be impacted by developments such as mobility as a service and ensure they are able to maximise opportunities in this sector and that any resulting impact from wider technological trends are not adverse.

In relation to housing, the narrative should reflect holistic nature of meeting housing needs for islands and the interrelationship between Strategic Objectives as noted above. The plan discusses affordability and land, but the issue is more complex. Housing can have profound economic impact if islands are failing to supply adequate workforce for business and industry – particularly in lower paid sectors which are often critical to the island’s economy. Other factors affecting housing provision include financial markets, second home ownership, depopulation, aging population, condition of housing stock, construction capacity, land ownership (as opposed to simply availability), housing for workers, and provision of accessible housing to suit the
changing needs of communities. All impact on the overall provision, with potential for problems to be magnified in an island context.

Regarding digital, we are happy to see reference to 5G and the internet of things (IoT). We need to ensure island communities and wider rural areas benefit from technological developments including 5G and can be a test bed for new technologies including the IoT, rather than concentrating these developments in cities.

Regarding health, the plan does not reflect either the Public Health Reform agenda or the Local Governance Review, where a whole systems approach to health and a ‘Health in All Policies’ approach would be the aspiration. The plan also notes an action to ‘support relevant local authorities to plan and develop sports facilities on the islands that respond to the needs of communities’ – the costs of creating and maintaining the infrastructure for sports activities are increasingly challenging for local authorities and the Scottish Government should detail how they aim to realise this action.

In terms of environmental wellbeing, we note the proposals for an islands forum, through Zero Waste Scotland, in relation to the implementation of the National Deposit Return Scheme. The Council would have expected more wider-ranging ambitions in relation to dealing with waste given the collection and disposal challenges on islands. For example, helping communities develop locally based, community/third sector run solutions.

The plan also states ambitions to ‘work with island communities to explore how they can contribute to the circular economy through small-scale pilots for example supporting local food production’ which is welcome but it is not clear how this will be delivered. It is disappointing that the plan does not recognise the merits of a Community Wealth Building approach and this is an area the Council is keen to discuss further.

The strategic objective empowering island communities highlights the work of Crown Estate Scotland. The Scottish Government is currently consulting on the Strategic Management Plan for the Crown Estate and as such there needs to be alignment between this and the Islands Plan. Marine planning gives island communities opportunity to promote sustainable development of their own waters, which best reflect commercial, recreational and conservation interests of the islands. This acknowledges ‘one size’ does not fit all in relation to island communities.

6) 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?

The plan should reflect the principles of Community Wealth Building which promotes a more socially just and environmentally sustainable economy.

The ambitions for an ‘inclusive plan’ have to be viewed in the context of the continued financial pressures which means local authorities have to make choices and to meet their socio-economic duties. It should be acknowledged that socio-economic profiles of island authorities are very different.
7) **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?**

The plan states that island communities will be involved in the monitoring of the plan which fits with the principles of community empowerment, however it is not clear how this will be done. Will existing engagement mechanisms be used? How will Local Authorities be involved and what resource will this take, given that we know and work with island communities?

The plan highlights issues of reliable and frequent data at an island level – this is not just an issue for islands and indeed is an issue for localities and local areas as a whole. North Ayrshire Council have published locality socioeconomic profiles for each of our six localities, including Arran, to help localities determine their priorities and inform local decision making, through the established network of Locality Partnerships and Community Councils.

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

Islands and wider coastal areas face unique challenges with regards to climate change. Climate change is a key theme however government must detail which investment will be aligned to the low carbon ambitions within the plan to ensure island communities can maximise the economic opportunity and the benefits to wellbeing of transitioning to a low carbon economy.

9) **Does the proposed Plan deliver against the Scottish Government’s own National Performance Framework, and the underpinning Sustainable Development Goals?**

In general, the plan aligns well to the National Planning Framework (NPF) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The NPF purpose is ‘To focus on creating a more successful country with opportunities for all of Scotland to flourish through increased wellbeing, and sustainable and inclusive economic growth’ and the Scottish Government have stated their priority of inclusive growth. Therefore, it is important that the initiatives within the plan do not exacerbate regional inequality. Whilst we agree with the need for tailored support to island communities, the Scottish Government should also consider how it supports fragile places like the rest of North Ayrshire and the Ayrshire region.