Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the proposed National Islands Plan. We welcome anything which brings greater focus and resources from the Government and its agencies on our islands, their economies, and their communities. Much of the content of the Plan will be familiar to islanders and those who have worked in the field over the past decade. It provides a unified and comprehensive list of the challenges facing island communities and rightly highlights organisations that have been effective at addressing those challenges.

We would have the following observations on the current plan as presented:

- While all of the priorities listed are of importance to island communities, there would be widespread agreement in the private sector that 13 strategic objectives is too many and risks diluting resources and focus. These are tough choices, but it is still important that the choices are made.

- Our recommendation is that Priorities 1-4 (Population Growth, Economic Development, Housing, Transport) and Priority 12 (Education) are key. The challenge for the Outer Hebrides for the next decade, and beyond, is addressing our demographic issues, to prevent the islands slipping into irreversible decline. Attracting people to live on the islands requires jobs or other opportunities. However, without transport, housing and schools no one will be interested in the jobs. In addition, improved transport, housing and education provide an economic stimulus in their own right. Other priorities seem to be either subsidiary to these (e.g., specific economic areas) or national priorities which may require some tailoring for island communities (e.g., climate change).

- Of particular importance for us is that progress is made urgently on ferries, as they touch all aspects of island activity. The delays to new vessels and ongoing uncertainty is affecting both the commercial and personal lives of islanders. This plan avoids mention of the dreadful situation on vessel delivery, and many of its actions will do little to address this urgent and critical problem. We have six ferries serving the islands, which, based on a 20-year economic life, requires one new ferry every 3.5 years to even maintain the status quo. The Loch Seaforth is our youngest vessel that entered service just under five years ago, and it will be at least two years before another new vessel is introduced. This means current policy is delivering about 50% of the capacity needed to maintain the current infrastructure, saying nothing about growing/improving it.

- While the scope of the project is encouraging, the content in it is disappointing. It is a list of actions which the government will take. In most cases there is no commitment to a policy outcome that will be achieved by these interventions. Outcome measures are very rare in the document - we spotted one.
relating to Broadband (step change in digital coverage) and one relating to Education (equality of educational opportunity).

- In addition to avoiding specific outcomes, much of the content of the plan is familiar or covered in policy areas. For example, most of the actions relating to Gàidhlig are already covered by other policy areas, or simply re-iterates the day-to-day responsibility of some of the agencies (e.g., HIE’s remit on economic development)

- The plan contains a broad set of admirable aspirations, supported by a set of qualitative actions. But many of these aspirations have existed for years if not decades, and it is unclear, without quantitative measures and performance indicators why these actions will provide better outcomes

- The priority on delivering the plan spoke at length about engagement, but said little about how the financial resources required to deliver the plan will be obtained through Government. The plan is unlikely to be effective unless it can secure the necessary financial resources required to deliver it.

- We notice that a commitment has been made to build a stronger, year-round tourism sector in the islands. We welcome this ambition, but note that most of the industry on the islands is “micro” owner-operated businesses, often supplementing agricultural or other income. A year-round tourism economy is attractive from an academic economist perspective, but in reality, these businesses will require significant support to manage this transition.

- Finally, much work has gone on recently towards an “Islands Deal” covering the Western Isles/Outer Hebrides, Shetland and Orkney, which between them account for 70% of Scotland’s islanders. We would recommend the REC reviews this document, and how much of the thinking can be reflected in the National Islands Plan. We believe that in many ways this demonstrates a more forward-looking, transformative and progressive view of our island communities into the twenty-first century (for example the pivotal role of the interconnector to allow the islands to export energy