



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

DRAFT

Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee

Wednesday 6 October 2021

Session 6



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RURAL AFFAIRS, ISLANDS AND NATURAL ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE
7th Meeting 2021, Session 6

CONVENER

*Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Emma Johnston

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD)

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)

*Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)

*Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

*Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)

*Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)

*Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)

*Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Douglas Cowan (Highlands and Islands Enterprise)

Jane Craigie (Rural Youth Project)

Camille Dressler (Scottish Islands Federation)

Dr Jonathan Hopkins (The James Hutton Institute)

Derek Logie (Rural Housing Scotland)

Jenny Milne (Scottish Rural and Islands Transport Community)

Artemis Pana (Scottish Rural Action)

Ailsa Raeburn (Community Land Scotland)

Philip Raines (Scottish Government)

Alex Reid (Scottish Rural and Islands Transport Community)

Kieran Sinclair (Rural Youth Project)

Dr Ruth Wilson (The James Hutton Institute)

Scottish Parliament

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[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:40]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Finlay Carson): Good morning. Welcome to the seventh meeting in session 6 of the Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee. I remind members who are using electronic devices to switch them to silent mode.

Our first item of business is a decision on whether to consider in private at future meetings our work programme, pre-budget letter and approach to stage 1 scrutiny of the Good Food Nation (Scotland) Bill. Are we agreed?

Members *indicated agreement.*

European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018

Official Controls (Transitional Staging Period) (Miscellaneous Amendments) (Scotland) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/297)

09:40

The Convener: We move to agenda item 2. I refer members to paper 2. The Official Controls (Transitional Staging Period) (Miscellaneous Amendments) (Scotland) Regulations 2021 are made using powers under the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018. Under the protocol between the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government, the committee is required to consider whether the procedure attached to the Scottish statutory instrument is appropriate or should be changed.

The instrument is subject to the negative procedure and Scottish ministers have categorised the instrument as having “low” significance, as the amendments are solely to make relatively minor changes to the transitional arrangements that are in place. The Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee considered the instrument at its meeting on 21 September and agreed that the negative procedure was appropriate.

Is the committee content that the negative procedure is appropriate for the instrument?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Subordinate Legislation

Official Controls (Transitional Staging Period) (Miscellaneous Amendments) (Scotland) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/297)

Meat Preparations (Import Conditions) (Scotland) Amendment (No 2) Regulations 2021 (SSI 2021/288)

09:41

The Convener: We move to agenda item 3. I refer members to papers 2, 3 and 4. As the committee agreed that the negative procedure was appropriate for the Official Controls (Transitional Staging Period) (Miscellaneous Amendments) (Scotland) Regulations 2021, we now consider it and the Meat Preparations (Import Conditions) (Scotland) Amendment (No 2) Regulations 2021, which is also subject to the negative procedure.

Does any member wish to raise an issue regarding either of the instruments? I would like to write to the Scottish Government for clarification on a response that it made with regard to the positioning of checkpoints. It stated that they were “no longer appropriate and insufficiently flexible”.

As no other member has any comments, is the committee content to note the instruments?

Members indicated agreement.

European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018

The Phytosanitary Conditions (Amendment) (No 2) Regulations 2021

The Animal Health, Plant Health, Seeds and Seed Potatoes (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2021

09:42

The Convener: We move to agenda item 4. I refer members to papers 5 and 6. The committee will now consider the first two of five statutory instrument consent notifications. Under the protocol between the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government, the consent notifications have been categorised as type 1, meaning that the Scottish Parliament’s agreement is sought before the Scottish Government gives consent to the United Kingdom Government to make secondary legislation that affects devolved competence.

Does any member wish to raise an issue with either of the consent notifications? As no one does, is the committee content that the provisions set out in the notifications should be included in UK SIs?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Is the committee content to delegate authority to me to sign off a letter to the Scottish Government informing it of our decision?

Members indicated agreement.

The Trade and Official Controls (Transitional Arrangements for Prior Notifications) (Amendment) Regulations 2021

The Official Controls (Temporary Measures) (Coronavirus) (Amendment) (No 2) Regulations 2021

The Official Controls (Extension of Transitional Periods) Regulations 2021

The Convener: We move to consideration of three retrospective UK SIs that were made over the campaign recess. As the instruments have been made, the Scottish Parliament will not have the opportunity to agree to the Scottish ministers’ consent, as it has already been given.

The committee is invited to note the decision and write to the Scottish Government for more information about the Scottish and UK Governments’ longer-term plans for import checks

for plant and animal products as a consequence of EU exit.

Are members content with that approach?

Members indicated agreement.

09:45

Meeting suspended.

09:49

On resuming—

Scotland's Island Communities

The Convener: We move to agenda item 5. Before questions from members, I invite our panellists to make a brief presentation on the national islands plan survey and its findings. I also invite Philip Raines, who is interim deputy director of rural economy and communities in the Scottish Government, to make some opening remarks. I will then hand over to Dr Ruth Wilson.

Philip Raines (Scottish Government): Good morning. I hope that you can hear me clearly and that my American accent carries well.

I thank the committee for inviting me. I welcome this opportunity to talk about the survey and the way in which it will underpin our approach, ensuring that the national islands plan and our strategic ambition for the islands are well grounded through the five-year lifetime of the plan in an understanding of what is happening in the islands.

Members of the committee will need no reminding of the duties under the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 to create the national islands plan of December 2019. The national islands survey should be seen as a key chain in ensuring that the plan and underlying strategy are well grounded, continue to be well grounded or become ever better grounded on an understanding of what is happening in our island economies and communities.

The initial work to create the plan by December 2019 was done through consultation, involving visits to 40 islands and consultation with 1,000 people. The plan was published in 2019. The exercise revealed significant data gaps and limits in our statistical and qualitative understanding of the needs and opportunities in islands at that disaggregated level.

Recognising that it would take some time to address the gaps, Dr Wilson, Dr Hopkins and their colleagues at the James Hutton Institute were commissioned to produce the survey as a staging post to ensure that we had robust data to ensure that the development of the plan and, in particular, the implementation route map—that is, the delivery of the plan—were well grounded in an understanding of what was going on in the islands.

On the back of the survey, the plan is to put together a research group that will successively and continually address research gaps over the five-year period. We should therefore see the survey as a stopgap—an important one—that highlights key points around what is going on in the islands. Members will no doubt be interested in

those points, which will come out in the workshop discussions later.

I will hand over to Dr Hopkins and Dr Wilson to set out the results and to say a bit more about how the survey was put together.

Dr Jonathan Hopkins (The James Hutton Institute): Hello. Ruth Wilson will give the first part of the presentation. Can you all see my second screen?

The Convener: Yes, we can.

Dr Ruth Wilson (The James Hutton Institute): Good morning. Thank you very much for inviting us. We are pleased to have this chance to share our work with you.

I am Ruth Wilson and I am here with Jonathan Hopkins. We are social researchers in the social, economic and geographical sciences department at the James Hutton Institute. The department has a large portfolio of expertise in rural and island issues. Last year, we were commissioned by the Scottish Government to conduct the national islands plan survey. I will briefly outline what we did and talk through some of the main findings. I will then hand over to John, who will explore some of the nuance in the data.

We surveyed people living in Scotland's islands to explore their perceptions of island life in relation to the objectives that are set out in the national islands plan. We were helped in that by a research advisory group comprising representatives from the Scottish Government's island team, the Scottish Islands Federation, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Community Development Lens and Scottish Rural Action.

The process that we used is set out on slide 3. I will flag a couple of aspects that needed particular attention, one of which was the wording of the survey questions.

We wanted to know about aspects of normal, everyday life on the islands. However, this time last year when the survey was carried out, we were very much in the midst of Covid-19 and lockdown, when life was turned upside down for many people. Therefore, a number of our questions—those about daily habits, for example—asked people to think about times before March 2020 in order that we got a sense of normal, everyday life that we could use as a baseline for comparing findings with those of future surveys.

We really wanted to remove barriers to people completing the survey. We sent it by post, with the option to complete it on paper or to fill it in online. There was also a telephone option. All three options were available in English and Gaelic. We sent the survey to 20,000 adult island residents aged 18 and over on 76 individual islands.

The survey covered all the main objectives in the national islands plan. There were questions about population, economy, transport, housing, fuel poverty, digital connectivity, health, social care and wellbeing, the environment, communities, culture and education. It was very wide ranging.

Some of the islands in our sample have very small populations and it would not be appropriate to apply statistical tests to such small numbers. At the same time, we wanted to draw meaningful comparisons between the islands with greater specificity than is sometimes afforded by local authority boundaries. In particular, we felt that it was important to consider outer islands separately from mainland islands and islands that are connected to the mainland.

In consultation with the research advisory group and a statistician, we came up with nine island groups, which the committee can see highlighted on the map on slide 5. Those groups are the Argyll islands; Arran, Bute and the Cumbraes; Skye and the small isles; Lewis and Harris; Uist and Barra; Orkney mainland; Orkney outer isles; Shetland mainland; and Shetland outer isles.

There was an overall response rate of 22 per cent, with 4,347 people from 59 islands responding to the survey. That is very good—we have a huge set of results. As we will not be able to go into everything today, we will instead highlight findings that particularly stood out to us; namely, where people felt very strongly about an issue, where questions attracted very different responses or where responses indicate areas of concern.

Aspects of island life that score highly include environmental indicators such as air quality, seeing a lot of wildlife and having green or blue spaces within a five-minute walk from home. High proportions of island residents engage in pro-environmental behaviours such as buying food locally or generating their own renewable energy.

Another area that scores well is community spirit, with a majority of island residents feeling a sense of belonging to their local area and agreeing that there are physical spaces where the community can come together.

Aspects that attracted more negative responses include economic development. A minority of residents felt that there were jobs available locally to suit different interests, skills and ambitions, that businesses in the local area were growing or that there was access to childcare services to suit their working hours.

Housing indicators also score quite poorly. A majority of residents did not feel that there was a variety of housing types, sizes and tenures to meet people's needs, that affordable housing was available locally or that there was enough housing

available to meet demand. On the other hand, a majority of residents thought that there was a high proportion of holiday lets and second homes in their local area.

Digital indicators show high levels of access to the internet from home, at 96 per cent. However, only two thirds of respondents agreed that their connection at home was fast enough to do what they want online and fewer still agreed that their connection was reliable. That proportion decreases again with respect to the availability of a good mobile signal at home or in the local area.

With regard to education, although there was strong agreement that children have access to good quality primary school education, fewer people felt the same about secondary education and fewer still felt the same about the availability of college and university courses that can be accessed online or in person. Those are some high-level findings.

10:00

Perhaps one of the most important observations to emerge from the survey is how diverse the islands are, given the high degree of variation across the island groupings in the responses to many of the questions. It is great that we now have a source of data that reveals some of the things that make our islands different.

Some of those differences exist between the main island groups. For example, there was greater agreement on Orkney mainland that a variety of housing was available to meet people's needs than there was on Skye and the small isles; there was greater agreement on Shetland mainland that there was access to secondary school education offering a wide range of subjects than there was on the Argyll islands, Uist and Barra; and 81 per cent of residents on Shetland's outer islands agreed that there was a strong sense of community, while the figure for Lewis and Harris was less than two thirds.

However, the most striking differences occur within local authority island groups, for example, between Orkney and Shetland mainland and their outer islands and between Lewis and Harris and Uist and Barra. On Shetland, for example, more of its mainland residents felt that jobs were available in the local area than residents of its outer islands. Almost all residents of Shetland mainland reported that they could easily access a hospital, dentist or pharmacy, while substantially fewer residents of its outer islands reported the same. The proportion of residents who are able to access a bus within walking distance of their home was much higher on Shetland mainland, and speed and reliability of internet connections were a particular concern on Shetland's outer islands compared with the

mainland. As a result, if we divide Shetland into mainland and outer islands subregions, we can see very clearly differences that are often masked by local authority boundaries.

We also looked at differences between ages, genders and income levels, with age emerging as an important factor in shaping people's views of island life. We were particularly struck by some differences between young people aged 18 to 35 and older age groups. Compared with other age groups, young islanders were less likely to say that they would stay in the islands, which is partly explained by people in that age group leaving for further and higher education opportunities. However, only a quarter of respondents felt that young people are supported to remain in, move into or return to the local area, and less than a third agreed that it is easy for young people who want to live in their local area to do so.

Responses to other questions suggest that young people feel more positively about aspects of island life than older residents. For a start, young people were actually more optimistic than older people about all measures of job availability. They also had a greater sense of empowerment than older people, in that more of them felt that they can influence decisions made by community organisations such as development trusts and community groups. It is notable, though, that that sense of empowerment was very low for all age groups when it comes to local and national Government. Finally, there is higher use of local language and dialects among young people, with Gaelic and Orkney and Shetland dialects more widely read and written among young respondents than older respondents. The emerging story is one of general acknowledgement of the difficulty that young people face in living and working in the islands, but young islanders themselves have a higher degree of optimism in the local economy and local decision making and, if language is taken as an indicator, stronger engagement in local culture than older age groups.

When you look at the differences between island groups and residents, you see a tremendous amount of detail and nuance, and John Hopkins will now drill down into some of that and show you an online tool that you can use to explore the results themselves.

Over to you, John.

Dr Hopkins: I thank Ruth Wilson for that very good overview of everything in the survey. As she noted, the survey was very broad and covered several topics and questions, so the report is accompanied by an online results explorer that is available via the web link at the bottom of the current slide. That tool enables anybody to access the large volume of summary graphs and tables and to explore the responses from different

groups—either the island groups that we have just highlighted or groups based on age, gender, household income, whether respondents have health problems or disabilities or whether children under 16 lived at home. As the screenshot on the right-hand side of the slide shows, the explorer has a very simple interface with drop-down menus to identify questions and variables that you are interested in and a button that you press to show the summary results.

On the following slides, we will show some of the graphs from the online results explorer that illustrate interesting observations and insights from the survey. They will either expand on what Ruth Wilson has just described or feature additional results. In particular, we focus on island group differences, on age group differences and on some insights that relate to household income. I emphasise that the interface does not show whether the results are statistically significant. The following slides show examples of what we view as interesting differences and information on important issues that could be prioritised for more detailed analysis in future.

Slide 14 shows particularly interesting differences in responses across different age groups, as was noted earlier. The age groups are shown as columns. The height of each column is equal to 100 per cent of responses, with the number of responses beneath the column. The survey asked people whether they thought that they were likely to stay on their island for the next five years. To the nearest whole number, 92 per cent of respondents who were aged 66 and over said yes to that question, as did about 90 per cent of people aged 36 to 50 and a similar proportion of those aged 51 to 65. As Ruth Wilson mentioned, a somewhat lower proportion of the youngest age group—about 71 per cent—indicated that they were likely to stay on the island for the near future.

Slides 15 and 16 show more details about people's perceptions of how easy it is for younger people to live and work in the local area. Slide 15 shows the overall responses across all islands in the far-left column and the responses for the nine island groups in the remaining columns. The dark blue colour shows strong agreement and light blue shows agreement, so 31 per cent of people across all islands agreed or strongly agreed that it was "easy" for young people to live and work locally. However, perceptions were much more positive in Orkney mainland and Shetland mainland. In Orkney mainland, 53 per cent agreed; that is in sharp contrast to views in the outer islands, where the overall level of agreement was a bit lower.

If we look at the same question when it comes to perceptions across the different age groups, we see further evidence of greater optimism among younger people, as Ruth Wilson highlighted.

Thirty-nine per cent of people aged 18 to 35 agreed or strongly agreed that it was "easy" for young people who want to live and work in the local area to do so. Although 45 per cent of that group disagreed—shown by the red and dark red colours—we can see through visual comparison across different age groups that the youngest age group was, overall, the most positive.

Slide 17 picks up the very salient issue of affordable housing and differences in perception between neighbouring island groups. We highlight the west, in particular. For instance, in the Argyll islands, only 19 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that there was affordable housing in the local area. There was a similar figure for Skye and the small isles. However, respondents in Arran, Bute and the Cumbraes were much more likely to agree that there was nearby affordable housing, with 49 per cent doing so. There was also a considerable difference between Lewis and Harris and Uist and Barra in the Western Isles.

Slides 18 and 19 relate to job availability and show further differences between the island groups—in particular, the mainland and the outer islands of Orkney and Shetland—and greater optimism in younger people. The survey asked residents to consider their local area and whether jobs were available to suit different interests, skills and ambitions. Across all islands, 30 per cent of people agreed or strongly agreed with that. However, in Orkney mainland, 58 per cent agreed, and 42 per cent agreed in Shetland mainland, with somewhat less positive views in the outer isles of those regions.

Slide 19 illustrates that, for the same question, people aged 18 to 35 were more positive about local job availability than any other age group. When people who agreed and people who strongly agreed are taken together, 38 per cent of the youngest age group agreed that jobs were available locally, compared with 29 per cent of respondents aged 36 to 50 and lower proportions in the two older age groups.

Slides 20 to 22 show contrasting views and perceptions among residents on tourism and its impacts. I will focus on the "all responses" column on slide 20. When asked whether there were job opportunities in tourism in the local area, 62 per cent of people across all islands agreed or strongly agreed, although there was some variation across the island groups.

When respondents were asked whether tourism had a positive impact in their local area, views tended to be positive overall: 76 per cent agreed or strongly agreed. However, when they were asked whether there was adequate provision for the number of tourists in the local area, the view was much more negative, with 67 per cent overall either disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. That is

shown by the light and dark red on slide 22. However, in some island groups, the figure was higher: in Skye and the small isles, 93 per cent overall disagreed and, in the Argyll islands, 82 per cent disagreed.

The survey identified other subtle but, we suggest, important differences between different demographics. We asked whether people were confident in using the internet to do a number of tasks, including attending health and social care appointments. If we divide the responses based on age group, we see that the percentage of people who felt very confident in using the internet to access such appointments, which is shown by the dark green on slide 23, declined from 67 per cent of people aged 18 to 35 to 32 per cent of respondents in the oldest age group, which was age 66 and over.

Lastly, we have two slides that highlight some other interesting differences that the survey showed. People were asked whether they had installed equipment to generate renewable energy for use at home. It is clear that there are high rates in Orkney, particularly the outer isles, where 36 per cent had installed such equipment. In Orkney mainland, 22 per cent had done so.

The next slide is on fuel poverty and is split by gross household income. Respondents were asked whether they had had to choose between keeping their home warm and buying food or essentials within the past year. It is notable that 18 per cent of island residents whose household income was below £20,000 a year stated that they had. In other groups, the proportions were much lower, but it is clear that some respondents in the higher-income cohorts also had to make those decisions.

I hope that the presentation has provided some insights into the broad survey. We hope that we have highlighted some of the nuances between different groups and different island residents. We encourage the committee to investigate those further.

Following on from the survey, the subregions, or island groups, that we used are being used in a Government consultation on development of an islands bond, and Ruth Wilson is supervising two PhD students who have just started work on aspects of migration. We also very much hope that the survey findings will be used in the island community impact assessments that are coming up.

The final slide highlights our contact details, provides links to the outputs that we mentioned and acknowledges our funding from the Scottish Government.

The Convener: I will kick off the questions. About 22 per cent of islanders responded to the

survey, and some of the slides show that there are huge differences between islands. Data in itself is not bad, but how it is interpreted can lead to the wrong conclusions being made and the wrong policies being put in place. If we want to know how the policies that we put in place are improving things, we need to have an idea of what our targets are. The survey is the first of its kind, so we have no baseline information by which to decide whether things are improving. How can we measure the success of future policies that are based on the survey?

Dr Wilson: The purpose of the survey is to gather the baseline data that is missing. The intention is to repeat the survey in future years and compare results against the baseline data. We have had a huge number of responses to the survey and, if we are able to achieve—*[Inaudible.]*—we will be building a substantial evidence base regarding the islands, which has, thus far, been missing.

10:15

The Convener: Given how different even the outer and inner Shetland Islands are, is there potential for an islands policy to cover the various extremes that we can see in the feedback? How will the survey help to form policy, given that the feedback is so different? There is quite a difference, even between different age groups, without even looking at whether it is the inner or outer Shetland Islands. How are we going to use the survey?

Dr Wilson: That is a really good question. One of the reasons why we have made available the results explorer, which Jon Hopkins showed you, is so that people can look in depth at responses to different questions by age group and by different island groups. To my mind, islands-related policy should be highly sensitive to the differences between different island groups and different types of people. That is what an islands policy should strive to achieve. I know that that is easier said than done, but we are now building the evidence base, which should help to inform the development of that place-based policy. Too often in the past, the islands have been grouped together with mainland rural and remote regions, so it is great that we now have a focus on the islands. However, it is really important to acknowledge the differences between outlying islands and mainland islands in policy.

Philip Raines: The convener's question goes to the heart of how we use the data. I am relatively new in this post, and I was struck by the fact that it is not an island policy as such but an islands policy. That emphasis on the fact that we have to avoid inappropriately lumping different communities and circumstances together is

essential. Ruth Wilson talked about the importance of developing a longitudinal comparative data set. That will build on the excellent work that the James Hutton Institute has done and will be critical.

At the same time, we need to be more nuanced in how we get what you might call everyday data that is needed to fill the gaps that were identified as part of the development of the plan. The research group, which will inform the delivery of the plan, will have a critical role. Different things are needed to ensure that there is a more nuanced approach to delivering the strategy to support very different communities.

The Convener: Karen Adam has some specific questions on how the pandemic and Brexit might affect the survey.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): Good morning. The witnesses mentioned questioning people and guiding them to think of life before March 2020, but things have changed significantly in many ways, and some things will never be the same again. Does the plan adequately accommodate the post-EU-exit and post-pandemic landscape? If not, how could the new landscape be incorporated into the plan? What would that look like in terms of changes of direction, aims and objectives?

Philip Raines: The pandemic is going to create significant challenges right across Scotland in determining what needs to happen to support recovery and how much things have changed as a result. That is one reason why we will need to continue to collect data. For example, the survey will need to be repeated at a later date to continue to get that data.

I can highlight one way in which the islands plan has adapted to the changing circumstances of the pandemic and the new sets of priorities that might come forward. The partnership working group, which was set up initially to steer the plan's delivery, was asked to review the plan's 13 strategic objectives to determine what I guess might be called the early set of priorities—the post-pandemic priorities—to address the circumstances faced by the islands in respect of not just the pandemic but, as you said, Brexit. The group identified five key priorities that probably needed early-door activity—in other words, not across the five-year span covered by the 13 original priorities—and, as a result, there has been a kind of in-flight adjustment to the priorities.

There is no getting away from the fact that, as well as adjusting to the pandemic, the islands will continue to be affected by certain fundamental issues. Of course, the same issues will affect much of rural Scotland, too. As we cannot lose

sight of those issues, there will need to be a balancing act.

Dr Wilson: The James Hutton Institute and Scotland's Rural College have undertaken some joint work on the impacts of Covid in rural and island areas, and we are on the cusp of going back to re-interview some people to whom we spoke last summer to find out how things are panning out. I just wanted to point out that work is going on; we were able to respond quite quickly to the pandemic in that respect, and it was great to be able to conduct a lot of that research online. There is a suite of research as well as a report that we can provide you with a link to, if you would like to look at it.

The Convener: Thank you.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I thank the witnesses for attending this morning. I am interested in how you have grouped the islands together. I live on Islay, one of the Argyll isles, and I know that even those isles have different subsets of islands, with islands off islands, islands linked by bridges and islands linked to the mainland by ferry. Have you been able to get different evidence or information from those groups?

I found the differences between, for example, mainland Orkney and its smaller islands quite stark, and I wonder whether we are missing a wee trick here, given that the Argyll isles are separate from the mainland. Do the differences between blended and island-only local authorities come out in the evidence?

Finally, with regard to selection of the panel, I note that the youngest involved were 18-year-olds. Given that, in Scotland, people can vote from the age of 16 and that young people have a lot of strong views about things, I am concerned that we are missing out on a huge area of evidence. Do you have any plans to expand the criteria for selection?

I will ask Ruth Wilson to start off and then move to Philip Raines. Perhaps Jonathan Hopkins can answer the question about the criteria for selecting people.

Dr Wilson: I am sorry to put him on the spot, but Jon Hopkins is probably a good person to talk about the island groupings, because that was very much his work.

It would be great to have further refinement, but we are trying to balance getting enough people in the island groups to ensure that individuals cannot be identified and thus have their anonymity compromised with the ability to make meaningful comparisons. However, having seen the differences that have emerged between the outer islands of Orkney and Shetland and the mainland

islands, I think that we will look to change things for Argyll in the future.

I am trying to remember your other question.

Jenni Minto: I was asking about the difference between the islands, which you have touched on. I was also asking about the difference between local authorities—the fact that there are island-only local authorities and blended local authorities—and about the age range of the people who were surveyed.

Dr Wilson: The age range was 18-plus—we wanted to speak to adults. You start to get into ethical questions about surveying people younger than that age, but we definitely want to address that. I have a feeling that there was a practical issue around acquiring the names and addresses of people under 18, so we acquired our sample of names and addresses from another organisation. I have a feeling that it perhaps just did not have the data for younger age groups, so we were working with that practical limitation. However, for the survey, those aged 16 to 18 are a critical age group, because that is when people make big choices that affect their future lives.

Jenni Minto: Exactly. Does Philip Raines want to come in?

Philip Raines: I am happy to do so, although I am conscious of the time, and I suspect that Jon Hopkins might be able to answer some of those questions a bit more effectively. Your point about 16-year-olds is a strong one. If there are some technical issues about how we can gather that data in the future, I hope that we will find a way through them.

Jon Hopkins is probably better placed to pick up on the nuances of the committee member's question.

Dr Hopkins: That is no problem. I thank Ruth Wilson for giving a really good overview answer earlier. It is very difficult to design a survey for the Scottish islands. I believe that, at the last census, there were four islands with a population of more than 10,000. A large number of islands have a very small population. It was important that we had groupings that enabled us to produce meaningful statistics and which were based on large enough numbers.

As a geographer, I am very aware that, as soon as you start to group different islands and different areas into arbitrary units, it becomes a very emotional issue—it can be a very contentious issue. Obviously, that was not our intention. We agree absolutely that it is important to consider island areas such as Argyll and Bute, which has a mainland area and an island area. We ensured that we were able to pick up responses from just the islands.

A related point is that we did not have a mainland comparison in the survey. It would be interesting to think about how we could measure progress on the islands against progress in mainland communities and to consider whether some of the survey's findings could be relevant to mainland communities. Some of the age group differences might reflect mainland situations. We cannot say that on the basis of the data that we have, but it is something to consider in the future.

The Convener: It would be appropriate now to move on to questions about young people from Ariane Burgess.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Thank you for going through your work and explaining it. I love the online results explorer. Is it possible to see the breakdown of the data on fuel poverty—is there a slide for that? That is not my main question, but I ask that because we are working on the issue in the Parliament.

Respondents to the survey felt that, in some cases, there was a lack of support for young people to remain on islands. One key reason for residents' leaving is the lack of jobs in general or jobs within their skill set. Are we starting to get enough data on the provision of jobs in different locations—in different island groupings—and in different sectors? I am looking for a mapping exercise that allows us to see where there are well-paid jobs with secure long-term contracts. Part of what underlies that question is that I am working on the issue of Highlands and Islands Airports Limited's wanting to centralise air traffic controllers to Inverness, taking away well-paid jobs. The sense is that taking away those jobs destabilises communities. I would love to start to understand whether we have well-paid jobs in the islands with good prospects for young people. That question is directed to Philip Raines and Ruth Wilson.

10:30

Philip Raines: I am happy to take that up. The fuel poverty question is obviously for colleagues in the James Hutton Institute.

To be honest, I think that that is a fantastic point and a question that we need to get into, and I would look to work with Skills Development Scotland and with others to provide that kind of mapping of the profile and the landscaping of those jobs across the islands. You are right. We need to understand how changes in businesses, economic activities and public sector decisions would ripple through the area. It is a relatively small pond, so a small stone can still have a huge impact.

However, it is also critical to think about where the jobs will come in future, and about what the

potential is. We need to have an understanding of where those kinds of high-paying jobs, or better-paying jobs at the very least, are going to be located, not just in the islands but across rural Scotland more generally. That is because people will have the same sorts of issues everywhere.

It is going to be important to be able to think about how we take advantage of some of the new economic opportunities, particularly when it comes to some of our collective environmental ambitions and how we can ensure that those high-paying jobs are there, as well. That nuanced data is critical. My sense is that we probably do not have enough of it and we probably do not use it as systematically as we can, but it is going to be essential.

Dr Wilson: I will just point out that, although we did not show them in the presentation, questions in the survey asked about particular sectors. There was an overarching question about whether

“Jobs are available to suit different interests, skills and ambitions”,

and then there were separate questions about fishing, agriculture, forestry, tourism and low-carbon and renewable energy. There is some detail there.

In response to the question about fuel poverty, the answer is yes, it will be possible to look at what I think you were getting at—fuel poverty by age group. That information is available through the results explorer. I have not attempted to bring that up live during the meeting but, certainly, we can point you towards the relevant graph afterwards.

Ariane Burgess: Thank you.

The Convener: Do you want to continue with your questions on housing, Ariane?

Ariane Burgess: Yes. There seems to be a low level of satisfaction with housing availability and affordability on many of the islands. Is the Scottish Government’s commitment to delivering 11,000 affordable homes in remote, rural and island communities enough, and how can we ensure that enough of those are on the islands, where they are needed?

I will give just a little background to that. I travelled round all the island groupings—not enough in Argyll, unfortunately, but certainly to Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles—over the summer. In the Western Isles, I found that each island had housing issues—there was a lack of housing—but the issues were all different. I am not sure that we have a true understanding of the reality of what it means to create housing in such places. Again, I put that question to Philip Raines to begin with.

Philip Raines: I am very happy to pick that up. Having asked a representative of the Scottish Government about whether we have got it right, you will not be surprised that I endorse and am very positive about the commitment that has been set out in the programme for government and through the housing to 2040 strategy.

Another of the commitments that was set out, which I know colleagues right across Government are working on, is the rural housing plan, which will take account of the distinctive issues that, as the committee will well understand, affect not just islands but remote and rural locations as well. It is very much at the forefront of people’s minds that the ambition is there.

I guess that it will be for others to judge in due course whether we get it right. I know that Jonathan Hopkins wanted to comment at this point, but that is my answer.

Ariane Burgess: I will come back in on that. One concern is about labour and about getting materials to islands. Has that been considered? I also think that, in some cases, communities have land but house builders do not want to build there because they are difficult to get to.

Philip Raines: My colleagues across Government are certainly alive to those challenges, but it is in how they play out in individual areas that we will probably have to take a very tailored and specific approach with the strategy. I know that housing colleagues in particular are very alive to the fact that this has to be about developing local relationships in order to understand local conditions, which, as you have pointed out, are not just about housing stock or any shortage in that respect but the potential, if I can put it that way, for developing housing. They are looking at the local issues, which might be materials, people or even, in some cases, land availability, and will be working to develop solutions there.

The best thing that I can say at this point, and in these early days of developing the delivery of that commitment in the programme for government, is that people absolutely understand these kinds of issues. Whether they can find their way through to solutions to address them—and this might feed into some of the bigger issues such as Brexit that were alluded to at the start of our evidence session—is another question that needs to be seen through, but the will is absolutely there to make this happen.

Dr Hopkins: This is a really important point. We have had a number of data collection exercises, both qualitative and quantitative, and what strikes me is the way in which housing is linked to many other issues and has many knock-on effects—I am thinking of demographic change, for instance, and

the links to different jobs. I agree with Philip Raines that there needs to be a balance between having a national strategy to plan where housing should go and having local data on where there is housing need and where housing affordability issues are particularly pertinent. We hope that the data that we have collected in the survey will point to that.

As Ruth Wilson has engaged with island communities much more than I have, she will be able to provide more insights on that.

Ariane Burgess: I want to change the subject with a question for colleagues in the James Hutton Institute about Boundaries Scotland. I am a member of another committee that has been looking at electoral boundary changes for Shetland, Orkney, the Western Isles, Argyll and Bute, Highland and North Ayrshire. I am not necessarily looking for an answer to this, but I just want to flag up that Orkney, Shetland, the Western Isles and North Ayrshire were happy with the results of Boundaries Scotland's work. On the other hand, Highland and Argyll and Bute, which are, as Jenni Minto has pointed out, blended mainland and island authorities—I know that North Ayrshire has some islands, but Argyll and Bute and Highland have a lot of them—were the least happy with the results, and I think that it would be very worth while if you could somehow track that in the work that you are doing.

The issue is about representation of rural, far-flung areas in blended authorities, because what ended up happening was that mainland rural areas started to have less representation and islands that felt more connected to the mainland felt that they were losing something, too. Perhaps it would be good to bring some cross working into this.

Dr Wilson: That issue has certainly come up in our interviews with people in those local authority areas and, indeed, members of those local authorities. It is really difficult to deal with all that diversity; the diversity that we have shown today is just in the islands, and when you bring in mainland parts of Scotland, it becomes really difficult to understand and respond to the different needs. Our research has been taking more of a place-based approach to understanding those differences. Policy has been moving in that direction, but the more of that approach that can be enabled the better.

Dr Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The report is an interesting and valuable piece of research, but I am keen to know whether some of the questions were road tested on people from islands before they were asked. A couple of questions come to mind, the first of which is the one about fuel poverty. The people who are most likely to suffer from fuel poverty are older people in

certain parts of the islands, who are also—I would have instinctively thought—culturally the very least likely to answer the blunt question, “Can you afford to heat your house and eat?” and the least likely to be convinced about the anonymity of the results. There may be no way around that, but did you consider it?

Dr Hopkins: I can answer a couple of those points. Ruth Wilson might be able to talk about the testing of the questions, because the wording of the survey questions was thoroughly tested.

We found that there were different responses and different response rates between different age groups. If you look at the sample of people that we sent the survey to and the response rates that we got, you will see that there is a much higher response rate among older people, but we did not look at that by question.

A high percentage of people said, “Don't know” in response to the fuel poverty questions. Obviously, we cannot interpret that as anything other than a “Don't know”, but that might indicate the reticence to respond to those issues that you suggest. We have to treat that data very sensitively. We do not believe that there are any issues related to anonymity because of the way the survey has been reported and set out, but that is an important point.

Dr Allan: People will not be surprised to hear me mention this, but the other issue that I want to ask about is Gaelic. In your summary, Dr Hopkins, you say that younger people are more likely to use Gaelic. I would love that to be true, but it is not. It might be important when considering the results in relation to Gaelic to be clear on the distinction between the very welcome increase in—the question referred to this—the opportunities for the minority of younger people who speak Gaelic to use Gaelic in reading and writing and the prevalence of Gaelic use among younger people. Those are two different things.

Given the sensitivities around the issue and the amount of misinformation out there about Gaelic, I am very keen that whenever the report is summarised that it is made clear that those are two different things. Anyone who lives in the islands will be able to say that, as I am sure that you realise, Gaelic use among younger people is, sadly, less than among older people.

Philip Raines: It is difficult for me, and would probably be impish of me, to comment on age differences among Gaelic speakers, so I can only go with the wisdom of folk such as Alasdair Allan and the research that is coming out. That proves to me that we have to be alive to the prevalence of the language, how it is being used and the culture that lies behind it among existing communities, particularly the older people of those communities,

as well as what seems to be the clear enthusiasm, at least in pockets, among the younger age group for taking up the language and culture and for the distinctive identities that come with that.

With this issue, as with everything to do with the islands, you can get a lot of different results that are probably true across different islands, because of their diversity. It might well be the case that much of this is true in different parts, but whether that presents a national picture, particularly with regard to groups that might be more rooted in the language and culture than otherwise—

10:45

Dr Allan: I think that we are talking slightly at cross purposes. What you have said is very true and welcome, but it is important that, when we present these results, we do not skew the picture by suggesting that on the islands Gaelic is being used by younger people more than by older people. That would skew our understanding of what we need to do to revive Gaelic, and it is, by any objective measurement, not the case. I am not a prophet of doom about Gaelic—quite the reverse, in fact—but it is important to be factual when we present data about it. To be honest, some of the way in which this has been presented risks conflating the prevalence of Gaelic use and the opportunities for reading and writing Gaelic amongst a minority. We just need to be clear about what the data means.

Philip Raines: I will make two points about that but, in essence, I agree with you. In fact, the points that you are making are not specific to Gaelic but could be made about any of the conclusions that might be drawn from the survey. The survey has already been published, but—I am sure that our colleagues from the James Hutton Institute will whole-heartedly agree with this—we need to ensure that the right caveats are presented about the collection of the data and the conclusions that can be drawn from them.

The second issue is how we use the data. For me, the interesting question is: why are some of these things emerging, given that, as you have said, there are a lot of other data suggesting otherwise? Can that be used to create a more nuanced picture? The issue is how we use that data in the full context of all the other things that are known about and are well understood, and it becomes the responsibility of us in Government to talk to our stakeholders about that issue.

The Convener: Those are important points, and I am glad that we have got them on record.

We have only five minutes left, so we will move to final questions from Beatrice Wishart and Rachael Hamilton.

Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD): I want to ask about the data on transport, because I feel that in the executive summary there has been a bit of pulling together and mixing up of interisland ferry travel and mainland travel. When you were looking at different island settings, what account did you take of islands with small populations and only one way of getting to mainland Shetland? What consideration was given to travel outwith the islands? Some islands have only ferries, while others have a mix of ferries and interisland air travel. What account was taken of islands with small populations versus outer islands with larger populations?

The Convener: I see you nodding, Jonathan. Do you want to respond first?

Dr Hopkins: I do not think that I was nodding, convener, and I apologise if I gave that impression. Without putting her on the spot, I would suggest that Ruth Wilson could answer that question.

Dr Wilson: I can try. We asked separate questions about interisland travel and travel to the mainland by ferry and plane, but we have not done any detailed analysis of different islands' responses to those questions. I would point out, though, that it is exactly the type of query that the results explorer would be able to help with.

It is also important to note that although the report has been published with the main findings, there is a lot more detail in the survey data, and a great deal more that it can be used for. We asked a large number of questions on different modes of transport and the data is there to be delved into in more depth.

Beatrice Wishart: Without proper transport, the islands cannot survive and thrive, so the question is very important, especially when it comes to future policy.

I note the comment in the report that middle-aged residents are more likely to make use of interisland ferries, but if that is the only choice, that observation will cut across the whole population.

The Convener: Your point is well made.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): The data present statistical evidence that transport is an issue in the islands, but, for me, it does not give a picture of the impact of connectivity in the islands. How we can look at that issue? Was the fact that it did not present the impact of that gap in transport connectivity on the people of the islands a deficiency of the survey?

Dr Wilson: That is a really good question. In the survey, we focused more on use and availability of transport, although I point out that one of the statements that we sought views on was

“When I make journeys to or from my home, it is easy connecting between different forms of transport”,

which perhaps seeks a more qualitative view of people’s experience. However, it might be a deficiency of the survey that it did not really ask people how they felt about transport, because certainly something that we try to think about in our research is how, when someone on the islands sets foot outside their house in the morning and goes about their daily activities, things such as transport, digital and healthcare impact on their daily lives. The survey might not have captured that.

Rachael Hamilton: As a follow-up to that, did the survey contain an “Extra Notes” or “Other Notes” section where you could gather people’s thoughts, and if so, where can we access that?

Dr Wilson: We did gather people’s thoughts in a box at the end of the questionnaire where they could share their views. The data is being processed to be sent to the Scottish Government for it to look through; basically, it is undergoing a thorough anonymisation process—we cannot have someone being exposed as the person who made this or that comment—and then the quantitative data sets will be passed to the Scottish Government. I am not sure what is planned for the qualitative comments.

Rachael Hamilton: Would anyone else like to comment on the gaps in the survey with regard to people’s overall thoughts on connectivity?

Philip Raines: I will, perhaps, offer a more general observation. I tend to view this as something of a gateway survey. Given its trailblazing nature, certainly with regard to the Scottish islands work, there will be ways in which we can improve it and get better questions to ask.

However, one of the critical things about it is that it identifies areas that we will have to address in more targeted and forceful research. I do not think that we should use the survey to answer all the questions that you are asking. You have rightly picked up on the complexity and nuances in it, which I guess brings us back to your colleague’s previous question about each island area and locality having a different mix of transport and the different impacts as a result. The same is true for transport as it is for housing, accessibility and a number of other issues that we have covered—we need to use the data to think about what more we do not know. That said, we are getting indications from this, and that is what I hope our research group can highlight more clearly as we move forward.

The Convener: That is a fine note on which to conclude. I thank the witnesses for their evidence this morning.

I suspend the meeting so that we can get our next panel in front of us.

10:54

Meeting suspended.

10:58

On resuming—

The Convener: I welcome to the meeting our second panel of stakeholders. We have Camille Dressler, the chair of the Scottish Islands Federation; Douglas Cowan, director of communities and place at Highlands and Islands Enterprise; Artemis Pana, national co-ordinator at Scottish Rural Action; Derek Logie, chief executive of Rural Housing Scotland; Jenny Milne and Alex Reid from the Scottish Rural and Islands Transport Community; Jane Craigie, director, and Kieran Sinclair from the Rural Youth Project; and Ailsa Raeburn, chair of Community Land Scotland.

We have a very big panel and only 90 minutes for a huge range of questions, so try to keep your responses as brief as possible. I will kick off with a question that it will be difficult to give a brief answer to: what is the main challenge facing Scotland’s various island communities? I will start with Camille.

Camille Dressler (Scottish Islands Federation): Thank you for a good question. The survey highlighted all the issues that are problematic for the islands: housing, good connectivity, the availability of jobs and the retention of population. I am pleased that the survey has given some baseline indication of those issues. However, I agree with Philip Raines that it is a gateway survey and that we need more information and better definition of what the issues are, island by island, given that the survey has indicated that there are big differences between groups of islands—and between mainland islands and outer islands, as is the case in Shetland and Orkney.

11:00

Douglas Cowan (Highlands and Islands Enterprise): In the short term, probably, it is about how the islands recover from their economic challenges. I guess that that is the case for islands generally; one has to generalise, I suppose. Given the sectoral make-up of the economy—the large proportion of food and drink and tourism businesses—islands have been relatively harder hit than other parts of the Highlands and Islands, which in turn have been relatively harder hit than the rest of Scotland.

Although there are in the short term some specific economic challenges, in the longer term,

for me, the main issue is population. The long-term population decline that we have seen on many of our islands and in many of our island groups is projected to accelerate in the coming years and decades. For me, that is the biggest long-term challenge. It hits on and picks up many of the issues in the survey and in the national islands plan.

Artemis Pana (Scottish Rural Action): All the challenges have been outlined in the survey and in what Douglas Cowan and Camilla Dressler have said. However, I have a distinction to make. The issues and challenges are interlinked, and depopulation is an outcome, not a challenge in itself. Given that depopulation is the outcome of those challenges, we need to look at what their root cause is. It is institutional. Specifically, it lies in the tendency to centralise the design of policies and services in a way that fails to grasp the complexity and diversity of rural and island areas.

The islands plan is a fantastic piece of work—as is the survey itself—because, in order to grasp that complexity and diversity, we need data and a vision.

Derek Logie (Rural Housing Scotland): I echo what Artemis Pana said about policy being developed for island circumstances. That is very important as we go forward.

It was interesting to see from the survey which islands and areas people thought that it was relatively easy to get a house in, and in which areas housing was an issue. In the areas where housing investment has previously been made and where the social housing is—Lerwick, Kirkwall and Stornoway—it is relatively easy to get a house.

I have just done a quick analysis of where investment went according to the last lot of data that I had from the Scottish Government. Of the 150 houses that were built with Scottish Government investment in 2019-20, most were built in Stornoway, Lerwick and Kirkwall, despite the fact that those three communities make up something like only one fifth of the population of island communities. We really need to start finding ways to island-proof our housing policies, so that we meet housing needs within those communities because, as Artemis Pana also said, depopulation is a symptom of the lack of housing within those communities.

Jenny Milne (Scottish Rural and Islands Transport Community): I know that transport has been touched on briefly. As an organisation, we have spoken to a large number of organisations that are representative of our stakeholders, from regional transport partnerships down to communities. Everybody has said that it is about

the practical problems that face islands when it comes to transport.

There are practical problems in relation to ferries, which Alex Reid will elaborate on in a minute, but it is also about the lack of infrastructure and—particularly, when we start to look at decarbonisation—how we get vehicles such as an electric quad bike to other, outer islands, including Ulva. There are also practical issues in relation to the depletion of bus services in some areas, as well as the vehicles' suitability and accessibility, because taxis and 22-seater buses are not required to be accessible, so some people who try to access them cannot do so.

Earlier discussion touched on skill sets. That is a massive challenge for islands, because we are starting to look at electric vehicle maintenance and installing chargers, but the skill sets are not there. I will pass over to Alex Reid to follow up on some of those practical issues.

Alex Reid (Scottish Rural and Islands Transport Community): I will comment briefly, because I am conscious of time. As Jenny Milne highlighted, transport is a real challenge and we should remember that all demand for transport is derived from something else, such as the need to get to services or to work. The challenges that face Scotland's islands are nuanced and specific to different types of islands. Ultimately, we need to design solutions that take account of the fact that human beings need to move to and from different places and how we move, using transport, is always going to be a core component of the challenge.

Jane Craigie (Rural Youth Project): I will pick up on what Alex Reid and Jenny Milne were saying about the practicalities. I often describe young people's situation as having to deal with a trio of woe—transport, housing, and job opportunities and earnings. They are interlinked, so one feeds the other. The young people we deal with, particularly in island communities, quite often need multiple jobs in order to earn sufficient income, yet their income is 20 per cent lower than that of their urban peers. They also have to deal with practical implications. For example, Amy Dunnachie, who lives on Jura, has a development role between Islay and Jura, so she has to have a car on each island. She is a young person who is trying to make ends meet, but she has that trio of issues. It is very often practical housing issues that deter young people from living on or returning to islands. They have to find accommodation that is right for them, that is cheap to heat and where they have space to leave their tools or wellington boots when they come back from work. Very simple things often make a real difference to young people.

Kieran Sinclair (Rural Youth Project): Those issues are fundamentally important and I echo what Jane Craigie said. I live on Hoy, where we have had some housing issues and there was a demand for housing to be developed. Although councils and different groups said that homes were available, those homes were derelict ruins that cost about £300,000. Who could afford to buy a property like that or finance the redevelopment?

It might not be the most important issue, but diversity and equality often get left out of the discussion. We need to pay attention to how living in very rural parts of the country affects the lives of LGBT people and look at what we need to do to improve their lives. The Equality Network has provided research that says that young LGBT people leave for Glasgow and Edinburgh, for example, because they do not feel that remote communities have enough for them and because discrimination against them in rural Scotland is about double what it would be in an urban area. Although that is not statistically the most fundamental issue, we should also pay attention to equality and diversity.

Ailsa Raeburn (Community Land Scotland): We welcome the survey and, particularly, the nuances that it highlights across the various islands that we are talking about.

A key issue that pretty much everyone has mentioned is the lack of affordable housing for all tenure types, particularly for young people but also for professionals who want to move to the islands. There are big issues across the islands with retaining and securing new staff, because there is no housing available. As well as being chair of Community Land Scotland, I am also chair of the Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust, and we are in serious danger of losing a teacher, who has been living in a house that was a holiday let. During Covid, he managed to secure a tenancy, but the owners are now thinking about selling, and we have no other accommodation for him. Housing is critical and it is impacting on local services.

I am sure that we will also hear about the impact that a lack of affordable housing is having on businesses' ability to retain and attract staff and the impact that that is having on services. As Ruth Wilson said, the survey gave a clear message about the impact of second homes and short-term lets removing significant stock from available housing.

With regard to businesses, it is about support for small and starter businesses, which tend to be more prevalent on islands, and the availability of business space. Communities on Mull and Jura have recognised that and are looking to provide that business space.

We also need to realise—and find ways of ensuring—that island communities can benefit from the natural capital resources that they have. There are ideas coming forward around wealth funds and better development contributions, as well as greater ownership of natural capital. There are issues around growth in land and housing values because of natural capital interest from the private sector.

Finally, and particularly on very small islands, it is the community itself that performs a huge number of roles, including providing housing and business space. In some regards, the community is the local development agency and the housing agency, but it has to fight for even the most basic of resources. It would be good if there were an opportunity to talk about that in more detail.

The Convener: Thank you; I appreciate your opening comments.

I have one more question before we move to questions from other members. We had quite some debate about how organisations ensure that they represent the islands and we were going to try and select representatives who had first-hand experience of living on islands. How do you ensure that your organisations represent the diverse nature of islands, particularly given the diverse nature of the survey results?

Douglas Cowan: Our structure is such that we have eight area teams across the Highlands and Islands, delivering support to businesses, communities and social enterprises—[*Inaudible*.] Three of those teams represent island authorities, so we have teams in Shetland, Orkney and the Outer Hebrides. We have a team in Lochaber, Skye and Wester Ross, a team in Argyll and the islands, and staff across a number of islands. We engage broadly through stakeholders, such as community planning partnerships, and directly with businesses. We account manage around 170 organisations across the islands, which we engage with regularly. Many of those are community anchor organisations, which are the type of organisations that Ailsa Raeburn just mentioned, with deep roots within island communities. We engage pretty broadly and have been in economic community development across all our islands for 55 years, so we have a reasonable understanding of and handle on the islands' issues.

Derek Logie: Rural Housing Scotland is a small charity, but we have done significant work all over Scotland, including the three archipelagos and the Argyll islands. With regard to representation, we have two members of staff based in island locations; our head office is in the Isle of Mull, and a member of staff is based there; and our comms person lives on the Isle of Jura and works for us from there. Over the years, we have made a

speciality of working in island communities and helping them to deliver affordable housing. We started off 20 years ago by helping to build about 18 new affordable houses on the Isle of Gigha. We also work in places like Colonsay, Tiree, Coll and the Isle of Mull, where we helped to deliver the first community-led project at Ulva Ferry.

11:15

We have done fairly well in different island communities over the years and we have been working closely with Stòras Uibhist over the past year to develop new approaches to enabling young people to stay in places such as South Uist. Last week, we announced that we had secured funding from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation to employ a new project manager to deliver a programme of what we are calling smart clachan in Uist and—we hope—in Tiree and North Ronaldsay, too.

The Convener: Thank you; that is most helpful. We move to further questions from members.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): It is important that island impact assessments do not become just a box-ticking exercise and that, if concerns or issues crop up through the assessments, they are acted on. Are witnesses able to share any examples that they have come across where a concern or issue that was raised in an impact assessment has had a substantive impact on a public body's course of action, so that something has been implemented off the back of the assessment?

Camille Dressler: Fuel poverty has been subject to an island impact assessment and we are looking forward to the result of that being incorporated into the current work on fuel poverty, so that is a very positive way of using that tool.

A very local example of another way of using the tool is that, when Caledonian MacBrayne decided to up its freight charges and change the way that the freight delivery would happen on small islands, we requested an impact assessment and that is currently being done. Even though CalMac is not a statutory body that has to do an impact assessment, it has been considered, and we welcome the fact that any policy change or different direction is subject to those impact assessments, to see exactly how the change will impact the islands.

Alex Reid: I will answer from a transport standpoint, which Camille Dressler briefly covered in relation to actions that have been taken. Unquestionably, moving freight to and from our islands is a real challenge and the economic impact of not being able to do so needs to be clearly understood. In the case of those islands that have, to a degree, benefited from the road-

equivalent tariff, that has created benefits but also some unintended consequences. For example, in peak periods during the summer, demand for limited space on ferries can exceed supply, and that becomes of particular concern, not just for residents but for businesses that have to move freight on and off the islands. As Camille Dressler highlighted, the more clearly we understand the impact of the ability to move freight to and from islands, the better the decisions we can make on how the ferries are organised, in order to accommodate the freight that needs to be moved. That is even more the case now when we look at what is happening because of Brexit and the outcomes from Covid.

Kieran Sinclair: I live on an island, but I am not a director of an organisation, so Jane Craigie could answer that better on behalf of Rural Youth Project.

Jane Craigie: Our organisation represents young people. We work with individuals to help build their enterprise, leadership and activism skills and to give them the confidence to have their say in making changes in the local community.

When it comes to assessing impact, we look at people-based things: for example, whether they have grown in confidence, developed a business or created mentoring partnerships to be able to make the change that they want.

As a proof of concept of what we have been doing, the Rural Youth Project smart village is a really good example of our impact. We brought together 15 young people from all over Scotland—including Kieran Sinclair—and, using the LEADER funding that we had, they have come up with a smart village. What they thought they needed for that smart village was totally down to them, and they generated all the content. That is a really good place in which to see the impact of young people working together to talk about the things that they need. It is all there in that smart village.

Artemis Pana: I have an example to demonstrate the limitations of island impact assessments. It goes back to before the islands plan. As everybody knows, in August 2015, the Scottish Government rolled out the extension of free nursery care to three and four-year-olds and to a lot of eligible two-year-olds. That provision, as members are aware, has increased over time, and the benefits of the policy are unquestionable for parents and children alike.

However, there have been unintended negative outcomes in rural and island areas, specifically for playgroups, which are, in reality, a form of support for parents as well as children. Once free nursery provision came in, a lot of playgroups lost their funding, and some closed because children were being put into nursery and there were not enough

children to enable the group to be run. I am not sure of the impact on children of that unintended negative outcome but, certainly, the impact on parents was detrimental and continues to be so. That would not have taken place in an urban setting, where I think there would have been a lot more choice and support about where to go as a parent to socialise, to get peer support and so on.

I raise that example because, with all the good will in the world, if we were developing that policy now, I do not think that an island impact assessment would pick that up from the outset without extensive consultation and understanding of local areas and how things interlink. Talking about how education and parenting support interlink in rural and island areas, for example, is different from talking about how health and social care interlink.

Island impact assessments are a fantastic tool, but they cannot be relied on as the only tool for developing national policy or tailoring national policy to island and rural areas.

The Convener: I move to Ariane Burgess, who has questions on population.

Ariane Burgess: I was going to come in on transport, but that is okay. I direct my question to Jane Craigie, Artemis Pana and Ailsa Raeburn—I would love to hear from all the witnesses, but we simply do not have time.

Only 24 per cent of respondents to the survey felt that young people are sufficiently supported and encouraged to remain in, move to or return to islands. How can the forthcoming Scottish Government budget be directed to address population and re-peopling issues in Scotland's islands, particularly for young people?

Jane Craigie: It is timely that we have put together a manifesto, which we presented to Mairi Gougeon last week. I have circulated it to the clerk. There are a lot of asks within that.

I think that young people feel that what they need most is to be given the time and space to have their say on what they need in their local communities. The Scottish Government's intent to have more community-led local development is great. Our ask would be that at least 30 per cent, and preferably half, of the people who are involved in community-led action be young people. We all know that they have great ideas, great energy and a great can-do attitude, and that they are the people who will be living in those areas in future.

We have found from our work that the creativity comes from young people. They see things through a different lens, they have the power to embrace what is needed from an environmental consciousness point of view, and they live where they live because of two overriding things:

community and the landscape or environment. Community is really important to them.

For Scotland to tackle some of its big endemic challenges, more power to make decisions should be put into the hands of young people, but not without the support of elders. We see really good intergenerational mentorship and partnerships in the Harris tweed industry, for example. When a young person buys a loom, the older weaver's support comes with it, through teaching the younger weaver. There are new ideas, with vibrant young people thinking about how tweed can become a modern fabric for young people rather than its reputation of maybe 20 years ago.

It is important to get young people involved in not just community action but solutions such as housing solutions. For example, Rural Housing Scotland is looking at smart clachans, which involve combined living and working space. Can we look at planning permission being more pro youth? Young people need smaller units and perhaps combined work and living space. How can we be more creative? We should praise the Scottish Government, as compared with the Westminster Government. Committees such as this one listen to communities and creative solutions. Members should keep doing that, but bring in more young people.

Artemis Pana: I want to go back to a really important point that Kieran Sinclair made about equality proofing every action that we take in relation to supporting island areas. We would certainly expect the budget to take into account equalities—for example, the support that needs to be put in place for young women entrepreneurs and what additional barriers we can address through the budget that might be faced by young or older LGBT people, people who live with a disability or in poverty, or people from a black and minority ethnic community.

I want to reinforce something that Jane Craigie said and a linked point that Kieran Sinclair has made through the Rural Youth Project manifesto. In order for the budget implementation to work for the beneficiaries—young people who wish to return to or remain on the islands—we need to involve them in the solution-setting process, and not just consult them for their views, take them away and do something behind closed doors. That process of participation and co-production—the mechanism that goes beyond consultation—is expensive. For it to be done well, resourcing is needed, and the budget needs to allocate adequate or significant amounts to that.

I urge the committee and others who are responsible for the budget to consider devolving as much of it as possible to local areas for them to design local services and use local mechanisms to identify local needs. That links into the community-

led local development narrative that Jane Craigie offered.

Ailsa Raeburn: I will start with a fantastic positive. It is great that so many young people want to move to or stay on the islands. They recognise what great places the islands are to live on and that they have a great sense of community—that came across in the survey. The question is how we facilitate that.

Obviously, access to housing is the number 1 issue, and some communities are already looking at that. Gigha has a great cross-generational housing scheme: the housing is specifically designed so that there are flats to enable young people to stay on the island and take the jobs that are there, as well as housing for older people. There are great examples of how we can start to accommodate more young people to stay on the islands. We need to share those lessons.

11:30

Access to land, which we have talked about, is important. Crofting will play a part. Many young people are interested in crofting, but there are big issues with the allocation of crofts and, in particular, absentee croft owners. We cannot expect young people to stay but offer them only poor substandard housing or caravans. As community leaders, it is our responsibility to provide the sort of accommodation that will encourage all those who want to stay. There are also issues with providing the right sort of support and flexible space for start-up businesses, which lots of young people are interested in. We have not quite cracked that yet.

Jane Craigie made a good point about engaging more young people in governance and community development. As Jenny Minto will know, South Islay Development has a youth board, which feeds into the work of the development trust. There are lots of good lessons that can be shared more widely about different ways to encourage young people to stay and the sorts of services and resources that we need to put in place to enable that to happen.

Jenni Minto: As we have such a huge panel, I will direct my questions specifically to Douglas Cowan and Ailsa Raeburn. Ailsa has just referenced the way in which particular communities work and other people have given different examples. That is one of the big positives of the size of the panel.

On sustainable economic development, I am interested to know how you tailor your support to different types of islands. We learned from the survey that not every island is the same. Jura has been referenced a couple of times. It has had a very strong community action plan and is now at a

point where everyone is working, so it needs volunteers or some kind of support to move it to the next level. How do you tailor support for different islands and types of business? There are three sectors: the public, private and community sectors. How do you support the different types of businesses in those sectors?

Douglas Cowan: I touched on our structure earlier. We have eight area teams that look after how and what we deliver in each area. The teams are led by senior executive members of staff who have a fair bit of delegated authority to flex what we do regionally to reflect local circumstances, based on their knowledge of the local area.

We do not do a lot of work with the public sector. We work collectively with public sector partners and stakeholders, but we do not directly support what they do. I touched on the number of island organisations in our account managed portfolio. We currently account manage around 488 client organisations across the Highlands and Islands and, of those, 173 are on our islands—there are disproportionately more on islands than there are across the rest of the region, for many of the reasons that we have talked about and that you will fully understand.

Those organisations cover a broad range of sectors. We have 47 social enterprises, which is a significant number in the total cohort, and, of them, a large number are community anchor organisations. At the moment, we work with 33 community anchor organisations, such as the Isle of Gigha Heritage Trust. Those provide a lot of services in local areas. Often, along with the Scottish Government, we fund a development officer resource to look at the needs and opportunities in a local area and to help implement actions to address the opportunities for or threats to an island.

In the business sectors, the largest number of account managed clients come from the food and drink sector, which is big in our island areas, and we have a significant number of clients in tourism. We also have clients across creative industries and life sciences—including some big players, such as BASF Pharma in the west of Lewis, which is a significant employer in anyone's language—as well as some quite small organisations in other areas that are either businesses or social enterprises in communities. We engage broadly across our whole patch.

We help those organisations in a variety of ways, from community anchors, which we help on a broad basis, to businesses and social enterprises, which we help with a range of things from professional advice to capital investment, if, for example, they are looking to invest either to grow or to change what they do. We have a range of tools to support clients.

Ailsa Raeburn: Community Land Scotland has members across all the islands. The survey showed how different the islands are. Up in Shetland and Orkney, our members tend to be facilities, shops and renewables, in the Outer Hebrides they are large crofting estates, while on Eigg and Gigha they are general estates with housing stock, hotels and restaurants. Our community members are really broad, operate a huge range of assets and are now involved in a huge range of projects. As I said earlier, they are the local economic development agencies.

They are incredibly well supported by HIE, where account management is available. There is a range of Scottish Government schemes, such as the regeneration capital grant scheme, the rural tourism scheme and the rural and islands housing fund. There is a lot of resource out there. If I had been asked to comment on the island communities impact assessment, I would probably have pointed to that support to say that there is a real recognition that islands are different and have different requirements. For example, costs are a major issue: build costs on islands are much greater than they are on the mainland.

There is a huge number of types of organisations dealing with a lot of different assets. They are all very responsive to local issues. However, I go back to the point that the boards are groups of individual volunteers who are unpaid and do it because they love where they live; they want their families to have a place to stay and to come back to, they want the school to stay, and they want their old folk to stay on the islands and not be shipped off to a mainland care home because there is no care on the island. Those people really love where they live, and they want to see their communities survive, but they often have to jump through hoops even to get basic support for staffing and access to the funds.

We need to find ways to support those community anchor organisations in particular. We are not talking about big amounts of money—we are talking about the way in which the funds are managed and administered. If there is an opportunity to input into that, it will be really helpful to make that point.

Jenni Minto: I agree with you about the effort that communities put in. We have learned from the Covid pandemic that, if funds can be made available more quickly and easily, that gives us better value. Thank you for making that point.

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): As Jenni Minto said, it is a huge panel. However, I see that as a positive, given the disparity of the populations that we are talking about and the range of challenges that island communities face.

I will focus my questions on job opportunities in fishing, agriculture and tourism. Those sectors are clearly big economic drivers in the communities, but how will they be affected by Brexit?

Douglas Cowan: Two major issues that affect the economy are EU exit and the pandemic, which we currently face or are perhaps just coming out of.

It is clear that we have more food and drink and tourism businesses in our islands—indeed, in the Highlands and Islands—than elsewhere, so there will be a bigger impact and slower recovery for the region. Businesses will change the way that they trade. We already see signals that exports to and imports from Europe are decreasing but, equally, there are opportunities elsewhere in the world.

At the moment, there are actually significant job opportunities in the tourism sector. We hear from businesses across the Highlands and Islands that they are unable to get sufficient employees and staff to address demand. A number of businesses are closing for periods of time because the staff that they employ need breaks. A day or two ago, I heard that one significant business in the sector has had to cancel bookings because of staffing issues.

There is a range of issues and detail in that, but that is my overview of some of the issues that relate to EU exit, which are compounded by the pandemic.

Jim Fairlie: I will not go round the panel on that question. I just wanted to get a brief overview and, unfortunately, there are too many witnesses. Although that is good, it is also bad in terms of our time.

I was interested to see that there is a perception of low opportunity in low-carbon and renewable energies in the islands. I have always imagined that the islands are a low-carbon and renewables powerhouse—perhaps I am wrong and you can tell me differently—so why is there not a perception that the opportunities in that industry are greater?

I do not know who is best placed to answer that.

Kieran Sinclair: I probably have a generic young person's perspective.

That perception exists because lots of local people are excluded from that market on Orkney. It is an industry in which people from further away come in and we are not looking to see what training we can provide or job opportunities we can create in rural communities in Orkney.

Orkney has the highest fuel poverty and yet we are a powerhouse, or we should be. We have resources right here but who—[Inaudible.] I do not necessarily know who is making the decisions

about power and energy on our doorstep for local communities, particularly young people.

It is not just that. Lots of other things come into play. The landscape needs to be more attractive so that people want to stay and work here. However, people are alienated from the opportunity. They do not know how to get into that industry.

Ailsa Raeburn: For me, the issue is ownership of the resources. On Eigg and Canna—the situations that I know particularly well—as well as Gigha, the communities own the renewable resources and can maximise the benefits from them in terms of jobs and keeping money within the local supply chain. We are starting to develop the concepts of community wealth building and the circular economy.

There will be fantastic opportunities. That comes across in the survey and is shown in the recent announcement about the ScotWind leases, which involve potential revenue to Scotland running into hundreds of millions of pounds. Community Land Scotland has proposed that a percentage of that revenue should be invested back into local community renewables to give communities ownership of the renewable resources so that they can start to deliver against many of the Scottish Government's broader objectives on community wealth building, net zero and a circular economy. For us, the issue is ownership of the resources—either 100 per cent ownership or ownership in partnership.

11:45

Jim Fairlie: I want to quickly touch on that. The Highlands and Islands has a massive opportunity right now, but I am not sure that we are tapping into that opportunity properly. One of the questions in the report was whether, in general, tourism has a positive impact. Seventy-six per cent of respondents said that it had a positive impact in their area, but 67 per cent said that there was not enough adequate provision for the tourism industry so that people can come and get the benefit of the islands. Such areas have natural resources such as wind, tidal, solar and all the other things that can be pulled together. If such resources were community owned, the money from that could be invested in the community so that the tourism sector could get the provision to allow it to flourish. I see that as a massive opportunity, and I am interested in what the witnesses think about that.

Camille Dressler: Community ownership is a force for good, but the problem is that it might not always be as sustainable as we would like it to be. We need to develop community tourism schemes in which communities, not outside bodies, are in

charge of the tourism strategy. We have seen the issues on Skye and in relation to the north coast 500. Community organisations on islands should be more involved in developing their own tourism strategies through working with communities. We should also develop young people's skills so that they can respond to demands. We should make the industry a good career prospect; it should not be thought of as a low-end service industry.

It is important to consider the impact of Brexit. Previously, islands were able to access substantial funding for cultural projects and other projects based on the quality of their resources in relation to, for example, archaeology or the blue and green economies. I do not think that we will get such funding now, which is very worrying.

Douglas Cowan: I will make a couple of points. We recognise the tourism opportunities. We have done a couple of things over the past couple of years. We have run a programme on communities leading in tourism. We have provided community leaders in rural areas with the skills to allow them to have better engagement with the sector and to take greater ownership of tourism in their area. Related to that, last year, we provided community organisations with support for local infrastructure. That allowed communities to invest in infrastructure to address their local needs and to take ownership of such issues locally.

On the energy opportunities, Ailsa Raeburn gave her thoughts on Scotland, and we are doing a fair bit of collaborative work with potential developers, the supply chain and communities on how to leverage in benefit to our island areas, which are at the front end of many of the opportunities in renewable energy.

There are negative perceptions about employment in a couple of sectors. Although there are opportunities in tourism, they might not always be perceived as good opportunities. Historically, there might have been an element of truth in that, but the opportunities in the sector are now much better. Similarly, there are really good jobs in aquaculture in rural and island areas, but they are not always filled easily.

Jim Fairlie: I take your point about the attitude to jobs in the hospitality sector. We need to address that across society, not just on the islands. The hospitality sector is a fantastic sector to work in, and we need to make such jobs far more professional so that they are seen as an opportunity, rather than as just being for students or people who cannot get work elsewhere.

The Convener: Jenny Milne has asked to come in; we will then go to Jane Craigie.

Jenny Milne: I wanted to pick up on a few of those points. SRITC has a broad range. We are a community interest company and we are all

volunteers. A large number of our people are based in islands in our communities. What they are feeding back on the energy side of things is about the skill set; I talked about that briefly earlier, and we have touched on it just now.

The islands are relying on residing skill sets. If they want to put in technology, energy-related products or an electric vehicle charging point—for example, Orkney is a great hub for alternatively fuelled vehicles—that skill set has to come from the mainland. I say “the mainland”, but we are all islanders; we in mainland Scotland are on an island. We need to think about those issues and about how we address those skill gaps. We have the desire to harness that energy, which is great.

I have an example. In Tomatin, north of Aviemore—not an island—they have taken money from the wind farm nearby and created a fantastic community hub that is available for tourism. It has electric vehicle charging points; it is on the A9; it has a fantastic hall; and, if you have not been there, it has a great cafe, with a view of three bridges. We need to be able to harness that a lot better. The issue is the same as it is for school teachers, whereby people on islands are restricted because of housing. We have the same problem when we start to bring specialist people to islands: where do they stay?

From the tourism point of view, we must remember green tourism and how people are interested in travelling in a different way to get to their destination. For example, people cannot really do the north coast 500 by public transport. There is a glitch. They have to wait for a day and a half to get a bus. We need to look at tourism, energy and transport together, because that is what people want and is where they are going. They do not want to always be taking their car, post-Covid; they want to look at different options. They definitely do not want to be taking a camper van on a ferry.

I could ramble on about it, but I will not.

Jane Craigie: That was a really good observation about the potential of tourism. I will frame it from a young person’s perspective. There are a few things to consider.

In general, young people are very receptive to tourism, if they are in a good mental space, are entrepreneurial and have ideas. Tourism is a good entry point for them to come in and start up and try new businesses. A lot of young people have started up businesses during Covid, because they have ended up at home and have had to do something. Examples are cupcake businesses and food trucks, which are real microenterprises. Although those do not generate a huge income, £18,000 to £20,000 of income from a tourism

venture is significant for the lives of the young people concerned. That receptiveness is there.

Young people have also started up arts and crafts businesses, so there is a really important link back to heritage. They also have a real sense of can-do. Miriam Hamilton on Lewis has been a weaver for only three years, but she has set up a little shack on the outside of her house in order to sell her products. They have that real sense of can-do, and they will make the best of what they have.

I will also mention stand-out private companies that are involved in food, drink and tourism. Two that have come across our radar through young people we are involved with are Bruichladdich distillery and Isle of Harris Distillers. They have a real intent to employ young people and to embrace their ideas, and they are an important part of the tourism economy.

As well as looking at the public purse, therefore, it is important to look at how private companies are a real catalyst for change in those communities and are empowering brilliant young people locally to learn to become a distiller or marketer, for example, rather than looking further afield. Private business, the receptiveness of young people to tourism and a real sense of can-do among young people when it comes to starting up their own businesses—anything that we can all do to encourage more of that in local places on the islands is really important.

The Convener: Thank you. We move to transport questions from Rachael Hamilton.

Rachael Hamilton: I am going to go round the panel, and I would like short, sharp answers, not long sentences, because this is such an important issue. Transport was one of the most frequently mentioned issues in the consultation on the islands plan. I have two questions. What would you like to see in the islands connectivity plan? What are your priorities for the islands infrastructure plan?

Alex Reid: To be brief and succinct about priorities, there has to be a devolution of administration and governance when it comes to how connectivity of transport is managed. We have talked about the fact that different islands have different nuances, so that responsibility has to be devolved.

Secondly, very importantly, although the road equivalent tariff has quite a number of benefits for islands, it could be described as a blunt instrument. Again, there are a lot of nuances in the frequency and type of travel that takes place to and from different types and locations of islands. More focus needs to be placed on how RET can be more fine-tuned to the needs of different islands.

Thirdly, there is the skills standpoint, which we have touched on. It is very important that the skills that will ultimately be required to improve transport, both for today and on the route to net zero, have to be locally developed. As Jenny Milne touched on, we cannot and should not import all those skills from the mainland; we have to look at schemes, policies and programmes that help to develop those skills naturally and organically.

Rachael Hamilton: Jenny, do you have anything to add?

Jenny Milne: Yes. One of the reasons that I had for founding the Scottish Rural and Islands Transport Community back in 2019 was to give a voice to islanders and people living in rural areas. It is great that we have been given that opportunity today.

We have not talked massively about ferries, but a lot of what is in the media about islands is about ferries. Ferries underpin the lives of those who reside on and travel to and from the islands. In the connectivity plan, there needs to be a real commitment to our ferry service. The fleets are old, there are capacity issues and, at the moment, it is costing the Government more money to maintain them than it would be to look at a longer-term plan. We need to look at that.

From a budgeting point of view, with regard to our wish list for the future, I ask the Government to please give some money to communities. The communities know what they need and what they want to do, and I have lots of them in my organisation. They just need a little bit of money, not hundreds of thousands of pounds, and they should be able to get it without having to do too much procurement paperwork. That is where we will see a difference, because they know what is needed—not all of us necessarily know, but they do.

Douglas Cowan: On priorities for the connectivity plan, I agree with Jenny Milne that ferries are the big issue. We hear about it all the time. Reliability and resilience issues are impacting our communities across the islands at a time when there are enough other problems to be getting on with.

Routes to and from ferry terminals are also an issue; we cannot forget the roads network to and from the terminals. There is also the opportunity in aviation. There is interest in the low-carbon pilots that are being done, and we should not forget about that.

On infrastructure generally, one of the big issues in addition to housing and ferries is digital connectivity. An infrastructure fund should be used strategically; maybe it should be used to leverage in other funds to address some of those big, difficult issues.

Rachael Hamilton: Have we got time for one more response?

The Convener: Yes.

Rachael Hamilton: I would like to hear from Camille Dressler.

Camille Dressler: Low-carbon transport within the islands should be a no-brainer, considering the renewable resources that we have on the islands. That needs to be seriously looked at, particularly given the hydrogen revolution. In Brittany, I have seen hydrogen fuel stations that take up only the space of a car park. I do not see why we cannot have those in Scotland.

We also need to address the problem of freight delivery and passenger transport to the islands. A new model for ferries will need to be looked at for the future, particularly to address the issue of net zero. There is a lot of work to be done on infrastructure.

The Convener: We move on to questions from Mercedes Villalba.

Mercedes Villalba: We have significant public ownership of island transport infrastructure, including ferries and HIAL, which has experienced industrial disputes recently because of the centralisation of its air traffic controller jobs to the mainland. My question is for Jenny Milne and Alex Reid. Do you have any views on the responsibility of the Scottish ministers to island communities in relation to public ownership of transport infrastructure as it relates to connectivity and jobs for the islands?

12:00

Jenny Milne: A valid point to make on public ownership is that it would be good if the publicly owned companies had all their employees based in island and rural areas so that they could fully understand the problems in those areas, but that is not the case at the moment. Such issues can seem very remote for somebody—do not take this the wrong way—who is sitting in the central belt in Edinburgh or Glasgow. Such involvement would be appreciated.

Alex Reid: I echo that point. Ultimately, based on what our members tell us, the biggest frustration is that there is a lack of regular engagement on the challenges that they experience with the ministers who are responsible for building policies to resolve those challenges.

As I mentioned earlier, more devolution of the administration and governance of transport operators such as Caledonian Maritime Assets Ltd would start to address that issue. A lot of challenges that we face come down, at the centre of it all, to communication. Better frequency and

quality of communication would ensure that locals and islanders feel that the pains that they are experiencing are fully understood and being addressed in a more agile way. That is particularly true as we come out of Covid.

Beatrice Wishart: My question is for Jenny Milne and Alex Reid, but I will respond to a comment that Derek Logie made in his opening remarks. I would not like people to have the impression that it is easy to get a house in Lerwick—I can assure you that it is not, although I agree that we need to build more houses outwith Shetland’s central belt, as I would call it. Mr Logie made a valid point about the population and the number of houses in the Lerwick area. Building two houses on an island that has a population of fewer than 50 could make a huge difference to bringing people in.

My question is about the reliability of Scotland’s ageing ferry fleet and how it is damaging island economies, which you highlighted in your paper. What are your thoughts about connecting islands with tunnels, where it is geographically possible, rather than replacing ferries?

Alex Reid: I am glad that you have asked that question, because that is the feedback that we have had from some of our members, particularly those in places such as Shetland, where there are smaller islands and shorter trips that are served by ferries that could—with a bigger and bolder vision—be served by fixed links such as tunnels or bridges. Although ferries will always be an important part of how people move back and forth from islands, that opens up a bigger question about the cost and economics of running different types and sizes of ferry on specific types of routes. A clearer cost benefit analysis in the longer term of whether a ferry versus a tunnel or bridge might serve communities better would be appropriate in relation to opening up further economic opportunities for those islands.

Jenny Milne: I echo that point. We reached out to more than 400 members of SRITC for evidence for today and a number of organisations, individuals and communities asked us to explore the option of tunnels. We are not necessarily looking at joining up with Ireland, but we are looking at smaller connectivities. I hope that that can be taken forward.

The Convener: I put the same question to Douglas Cowan. Has Highlands and Islands Enterprise considered that?

Douglas Cowan: We have looked at a number of options relating to fixed links in the past. A key thing to consider is the basis on which they are looked at. It is a matter of looking at the longer-term social and environmental impact as part of the whole-life cost benefit analysis rather than

looking at just the economic impact. I do not think that we are looking at any fixed links right now or that we have looked at any very recently. I have certainly been aware of a number of fixed link studies in the past that have looked at options to link islands, and to link islands with the mainland.

Ariane Burgess: I want to pick up on the islands infrastructure fund. When the Scottish Government announced that fund, it said that it would have

“a transformative effect on the community as a whole.”

I would like to hear your thoughts on how we can involve communities in the design and allocation of that fund to ensure that it is truly transformative. We heard earlier that community-led initiatives need to be funded, so money is obviously needed.

Camille Dressler: That is a very good point. In all those schemes, community participation on the islands is absolutely crucial for the infrastructure to be targeted adequately. There is a real need to find a mechanism to continue the participation that started with the consultation mechanism on the national islands plan. That will be crucial for the success of the application of the infrastructure plan.

Artemis Pana: That is a tough question, because the infrastructure is very much linked to planning and the potential opportunities that are presented through national planning framework 4. It would be good to streamline opportunities for communities to have their say on local infrastructure with the processes that empower them through the planning system.

Local place plans are very contested at the moment. They are a very good idea on paper—I am sure that Ariane Burgess is aware of that, in the light of her role as convener of another specialised committee. However, if there were ways of investing in communities so that their views on that particular infrastructure fund and on wider planning issues for the locality were taken on board, that would maximise the impact of any investment that would be put into the community for the particular outcomes that have been asked about.

Karen Adam: I thank the panel for a very insightful session. I have learned quite a bit from it.

I had a specific question about education, but it may have grown arms and legs from hearing people give their feedback. In considering how to close the attainment gap for children in an island context, it is clearly important to recognise that inequalities are caused not only by poverty but by a range of situational factors that surround each household, which could include access to subject choices that suit a young person’s needs, for example. The point that Kieran Sinclair made

about access to support for the LGBT community is pertinent. Professionals need to be able to take a holistic, multi-agency approach to assess and respond to needs in each individual situation.

What does a holistic approach look like when it comes to seeing poverty through the lens of not just educational attainment but social support, general practitioner provision and housing, for example? How can we ensure that young people on the islands have the same opportunities that young people on mainland Scotland have to close that attainment gap?

Kieran Sinclair: That is a big question. It probably comes down to funding.

I went to Kirkwall grammar school in Orkney, which is a really good school. It was quite diverse and captured equality really well because we had access to probably every subject that you could choose.

We had a thriving drama and music department. There is something important about having access to the expressive arts and not just the so-called essential subjects. People will be better at certain things. Having a diversity of subjects, choices and options draws in teachers from different backgrounds and brings in such a variety of skill sets and personalities that it starts to eradicate certain levels of bullying. LGBT people in a drama department start to find each other—I speak from experience. You start being able to express yourself. I do not want to put too much pressure on drama teachers in general, but, in Kirkwall grammar school's case, they were really good at curating a safe environment.

Having such a safe, open environment in schools in really remote places such as Orkney, Shetland and other islands is fundamental to alleviating the sense of social isolation. The school can become a really good centre for people, encourage cultural exchange and bring people together regardless of their backgrounds. All we have is a publicly funded school and that brings together people from every economic, social or cultural background, whatever their identity. It is a really good melting pot.

There is an opportunity in such remote areas, if the schools are funded properly—I imagine that that is what it comes down to—so that pupils have a choice of subjects, to enable expression and give people choices. That would alleviate so many problems and make them happier places for people to be in. There are broader problems with services outwith schools, but that is the fundamental basis from which I would start. Many other local services, such as mental health services, are needed to support people and address poverty levels, but I would start with schools and invest there first to ensure that people

get really good chances. If people are given the opportunity and invested in at school age, they will have a really good chance of bringing themselves out of whatever state they are in.

Jane Craigie: That is a brilliant question, Karen Adam. For me, everything comes back to community and to listening to young people. There are some really good examples of that.

Kieran Sinclair made the point about schools. Leadership in schools is really important. I have an example of an inclusive school on the mainland in Ullapool. We have just done a 360-degree interview for the latest issue of *Tread: A Journal of Rural Youth*, the magazine that we produce for the Rural Youth Project. It considers not only how communities embrace what the place needs but what young people could learn to feed into that place. The headmaster of the high school in Ullapool has done a really good job of engaging with local businesses—land managers, food businesses, manufacturers and the fishing industry—and is at the heart of that community. The other person who is really influential in that community is the harbourmaster, who has allowed things to happen on the harbour front, such as allowing young people to set up a food business.

The way to reduce the attainment gap is to involve young people in what they want their future to be. As we know, some of them want to do something practical rather than academic. We are lucky that we have the University of the Highlands and Islands, which is a great organisation. I know that Ullapool is not an island community, but some of the issues there are similar to those in island communities. Lecturers from the UHI come in to Ullapool to teach young people about fish farming or stalking. It is all about the community deciding what young people need and asking young people what they want to learn—that is exactly what the headmaster of Ullapool high school does.

I find what those young people have to say so poetic. They have taken such inspiration from their elders as well as people from outside their community. As a result, they are starting to see the place where they live as their home for the next 20, 30 or 40 years—and potentially as their children's home. What has to come first is community and engaging young people in what they need and want.

12:15

The Convener: I appreciate that education is a huge topic, but time is against us and we have to move on to the equally huge topic of housing.

Dr Allan: In that case, convener, I will be brief.

In the interests of time, I will ask Derek Logie one or two specific questions about housing. A few

folk have touched on the fact that the Government is putting money into affordable rented housing in island areas, but obviously it is up to local authorities and housing associations to decide where those houses are built. That is not a criticism, because I understand the difficulty of evidencing demand in areas where there have been no houses to apply for and of building houses where doing so is more expensive and there are no economies of scale. If we do not fix some of the problems, how do we get past the issue alluded to by Beatrice Wishart of there being a risk of houses getting built in towns instead of in rural areas?

Derek Logie: We need to get away from the idea of housing being built to meet evidenced housing need through waiting lists and so on and instead look at the impact of housing on the economy, community wellbeing and sustainability, and on regeneration and the prevention of depopulation.

The issue of housing relates to a huge number of policy areas, and investment has to be directed with reference to those areas as well as directed at simply meeting housing need, which is a very inexact science. In fact, it tends to be a self-fulfilling prophecy, in that you get told that there is housing need in Stornoway, simply because that is where the houses are and where people sign up for them. Where there are no houses, there is no housing need, either because there was never any social housing there or because it has all been sold off. As a result, we need to look at the different policy areas targeted by housing investment.

Dr Allan: I appreciate that we are running out of time, so this will be my final question. The other issue that was alluded to in the report was that in some, though not all, places on the islands it is becoming increasingly difficult—indeed, impossible—to buy a house. The housing market is obviously influenced by second homes and short-term lets, and I know that there are some measures in place to address the latter issue. Again, this question is for Derek Logie. What do we have to do in this respect? Are there any examples from other parts of the country or the world that we can learn from? What can be done to get around the impact of second homes not just on the availability of housing but on the prices of all the other houses in certain places? After all, without rehearsing the obvious, I can tell you that there are places in my constituency—and, I am sure, other member's constituencies—where it is not really possible for a young family to buy a house.

Derek Logie: There are two—or more—things that we need to do. First, we need to help young people, in particular, to build their own homes by

providing them with grant funding. For some reason, we got rid of rural home ownership grants; I do not know why that happened, but we need to bring back something like that—perhaps the islands bond will be that very thing.

Secondly, we also need to look at how we restrict the number of Airbnb and short-term lets in particularly pressured areas. Airbnb has hollowed out the long-term residential letting sector to the extent that a lot of people who have very good jobs cannot find anywhere to live on Skye or such places. As well as looking at the control areas that are going to be brought in, we need to think about how else we can help people in that respect. Those are the two main issues that we should be looking at.

Jenni Minto: I am interested to know more about the idea of 20-minute neighbourhoods in the Government's plan. I think that Artemis Pana has some research on that, as might Derek Logie.

Artemis Pana: That issue was discussed at length at last night's cross-party group meeting. I do not have any research on that, other than the feedback from the Scottish rural parliament, which is very mixed.

As a country, we do not have a set definition of 20-minute neighbourhoods. Various policy areas of Government use very different definitions. We are waiting for the NPF4 consultation, which will probably outline the Government's view of what a 20-minute neighbourhood would look like. As rural and island communities and stakeholders, that will be our opportunity to comment and to see whether it is applicable in our situations. It certainly will be applicable across quite a bit of rural and island Scotland, because remote rural towns are basically the model of a 20-minute neighbourhood. At the Scottish Rural and Islands Transport Community conference, someone said that, if you go three miles outwith those remote rural towns, suddenly, you will be in a community that is as far removed from a 20-minute neighbourhood as possible. However, there are ways around that. We need to get the definition right and we need to get whatever investment comes with that definition right as well.

The Convener: Would anyone else like to come in? I think that Camille Dressler indicated that she would like to speak.

Camille Dressler: The housing issue is a huge problem. Without housing, young people will not come back, because, even if they have jobs, they cannot stay. In the case of community land trusts, which have been able to give some of the land to young people for self-build homes, there has been an issue with banks refusing to lend money or agree mortgages for self-build homes if the land remains in the ownership of the land trust. That

situation needs to be addressed to provide more flexibility for land trusts to use that land for building new houses, without encouraging an opportunity for making money further down the chain. It would be good to look at those new models and how they could be strengthened—addressing the problems with banks' confidence in the model would be transformational.

Jenny Milne: I agree with Artemis Pana. Last week at our annual gathering we discussed 20-minute neighbourhoods and mobility hubs and a number of examples were presented to us. The key point for us is that, when there is a definition, it uses urban-centric terminology, which is then deployed in rural and island areas. As an organisation and a group of enthusiastic rural and island participants, we need to be part of the process because 20 minutes on Princes Street is very different to 20 minutes in Kirkwall. That is a key point.

Jane Craigie: We are beginning to look at that, but, to be honest, we have not moved far on it yet, convener. I echo Jenny Milne's point that the urban situation is very different to the rural situation. However, we are keen to look at that.

Derek Logie: Earlier, I talked about the idea that we are developing of the smart clachan, which is about creating a live-work space, which minimises the need to travel and encourages greater sharing of resources in those spaces. We are looking at how that might be developed as a rural model for a 20-minute neighbourhood.

The Convener: Thank you. There are a couple of topics that we have not touched on, including health, and we are coming to the end of the session. However, the topic that is at the forefront of everyone's mind, particularly with the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26—coming up, is climate.

Ariane Burgess: I have been asked to direct my question to one person, which is difficult. I will put the question to Artemis Pana and maybe we can sneak in one more person.

The national islands plan document says that the Government and public bodies will put in place "adaptation plans on islands that are at greater risk from climate change"

and that those adaptation plans will link closely to "development plans for those islands".

It is important to ensure that development plans, which contribute to infrastructure and town planning, consider changes, such as rising sea levels and stronger storms, and increase the resilience of communities and local economies, without increasing emissions. I would appreciate hearing your thoughts on those priorities for

climate adaptation plans. I am sorry; I know that there was a lot in that.

Artemis Pana: It is a lot and it probably needs its own discussion but I will comment very quickly. There is a real lack of information in the islands around the potential impact of climate change and how quickly it will hit. At the moment, the concern is around decisions being made on how we mitigate the impact, and Ariane Burgess is right that we need to look at how we involve communities in deciding how that impact is managed.

I am sorry; I am probably not the right person to take that question at the moment, but maybe somebody else on the panel can answer it.

Ariane Burgess: Thank you. Would someone else like to speak to that?

Camille Dressler: It is really important to have a sustainable energy and climate plan for each regional and local authority, and the community and island plans for energy transition need to feed into those plans. If each island is encouraged to devise its own clean energy transition agenda, that will look at every opportunity to mitigate climate change issues. Obviously, rising sea levels are a huge problem for islands that are quite low, and planning authorities have to be mindful of that. It is a question of the island communities and the planning authorities working together to embrace the issue of climate change in the planning process.

Ariane Burgess: Thank you.

The Convener: I thank all the witnesses for their contributions this morning. Lots of answers to our questions have led to more questions that need to be asked, so I am sure that, over the coming months and years, you will all appear in front of us again, as we take forward our work relating to the islands.

12:28

Meeting continued in private until 12:45.

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