

REC Community Engagement Meeting

Islands (Scotland) Bill

Orkney – 2 / 3 October 2017

The Committee met with local community members and business interests to discuss their views on the Islands (Scotland) Bill. These notes are an informal summary of the views expressed.

What were your expectations of an islands Bill?

People felt that...

- The Bill needs to be genuinely about making Islands communities sustainable.
- The principle was good but that work would be required to manage peoples' expectations.
- There are some big economic drivers in Orkney, but there is a feeling that local views on how these can work best are not being taken into account.

The Bill creates a duty to publish a national islands plan and lay it before the Scottish Parliament. What are your views on this provision?

People felt that...

- They were generally supportive of an islands plan and they had a large number of suggestions for what should be addressed and included.
 - Internet connectivity is the priority issue. If that problem can be addressed it would have positive knock-on impacts on employment, education, healthcare and family life.
 - The plan must address the aging demographic of the islands and work to attract and keep young families on the islands.
 - The plan should raise the profile of the Islands. They have a lot to contribute in terms of the quality of their produce and the tourism offering.
 - The plan should focus on tangible services that impact on people's lives such as transport and health.
 - The plan should give recognition to the fact that islands can't operate on the same scale as businesses on the mainland. However, they often have the same costs and regulations imposed on small businesses and then additional costs are added to get produce off the island.
 - Procurement – the plan should provide a level playing field for smaller companies. Public sector procurement rules are perceived to limit involvement by local companies, resulting in larger central belt companies delivering services that could be carried out by local companies. Local authorities can't be seen to be favouring local companies, due to procurement legislation.

- HIE is viewed by some as structuring their tenders in such a way that makes it difficult for island businesses to compete, despite HIE's intention of being supportive to island businesses. Larger companies from the mainland tend to win the contracts. However, it was noted that local island businesses can bid for European contracts as procurement laws in other countries are less strict.
- There is a "need to provide protection for local businesses against multinationals".
- The plan should target areas where there is a market failure – for example, freight, parcel delivery costs and internet provision.
- The plan should address the fact that there is no air discount scheme (ADS) available for business travel so business owners can't afford to get off the island to grow new contacts and create new business opportunities on the mainland.
- The plan should address inter island connectivity. Some people want to work full time but can't because they can't get to and from work. There is a lack of linked timetables and are often forced to stay nights away from home. The ferries rest overnight in Kirkwall but consideration should be given to overnighing a boat on the smaller islands so that they are available in case of overnight emergencies. It would also mean additional local employment.
- Young people were very concerned about transport (as well as digital connectivity), both in terms of cost and timetabling – this was such a challenge that some families buy a second home in Kirkwall, or a second car to keep on the mainland, to mitigate these issues. Young people from outlying islands also spoke of sofa-surfing to enable them to work late shifts.
- Support for other forms of education is an issue. Hostels are available on the Orkney mainland for those wanting to attend secondary school but nothing is available for those going to college or doing modern apprenticeships.
- Housing, particularly social housing and student accommodation, is lacking and makes moving out and becoming independent very difficult for young people – people are often offered the small houses they need on one of the smaller islands, which create knock on effects when they then try to access the labour market on the Orkney mainland.
- There are very limited leisure facilities for young people. Increased leisure facilities would also create jobs.
- Some islands in Orkney can't even get additional phone lines as there is no room in the exchange.
- There was an interest in the process ensuring that local communities and businesses can to input to the islands plan. The Scottish Government and local authorities currently go through a process but don't really get to the right level. Consultation therefore needs to be comprehensive and conducted in a way which encourages input. Often people have a problem understanding what is being consulted upon, this limits input.
- Essential to ensure that young people can have an input into local authority consultation and decision making

- People felt that there was a potential risk about devolving powers to communities if sufficient resources and skills were not available at a community level.

The Bill will require Scottish Ministers and certain Scottish public authorities to prepare island impact assessments. Do you agree with this provision? How do you think it should work in practice?

People felt that...

- Broadly positive but were aware that it needs to be more than a tick box exercise and were uncertain about how it would work in practice and what it would cover.
- You need to ask people who are actually living in the islands about the impact of the policy change under assessment.
- Important to have a decent vocabulary with officials, to ensure that they have genuinely taken into account Islands communities, to avoid marginalising islands. If islands were a state they would be 8th of population
- It would be good to apply islands proofing retrospectively.
- There was uncertainty about the outcome of the impact assessment as bodies are only required to do the assessment – not required to take action afterwards. What compliance or enforcement would there be? They questioned why someone outside the island should decide what is ‘significant’ for them.
- They questioned what would happen if bodies they come up with actions but need money to do it. Must the Scottish Government give it to them?
- Regulations and health and safety protocols which work well in more populated mainland areas restrict access to essential services on the islands.
- They gave examples of things which should be island proofed.
 - When they call Police Scotland to report a road traffic accident they have to go through a series of call centre questions which only apply to mainland or more urban areas. It was felt this wastes time.
 - Changing the training expectations for firemen operating on retainer – firemen need to leave the island to complete training for things that they will never come up against in their communities. For example, ladder rescue for multiple story buildings when there are only ground floor properties on the island. Or motorway crashes when there are no motorways.
 - People work multiple jobs on the islands. If they have to go away for days to train for one job it impacts negatively on their other work and their family income. For example, first aid training for fire and then separate additional training for the life boat. It would make more sense to combine these and have a general island first responder training.
 - Air rescue has a requirement for a certain number of crew members. This can be difficult to staff when you have a limited population. It can mean that you are not allowed to take the chopper out.
 - Fishermen are being regulated out of the industry and cost deters young people from entering.
 - People aren’t allowed to use swimming pools because they don’t have enough people to be lifeguards or money to pay them.

- Businesses can't access the Rural Payments Directorate or Inland Revenue real time reporting because of a lack of internet connection. Young people can't complete homework or access online training for the same reasons.
- Council procurement – need to get three quotes but there is often not three providers.
- Concern that the Scottish Government currently often adopts a one size fits all approach e.g. doesn't listen to building standards proposals. Houses in Orkney are the most energy efficient in the country but are held back by current regulations. Regulations could take into account the fact that 110% of electricity in Orkney is produced using renewables.
- Fuel poverty – it is hard to run these schemes in the islands where the need is greatest.
- The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation does not pick up on rural transport and fuel poverty issues.
- Any derogations from mainland policy or regulation must be risk assessed properly and a proportionate, common sense approach taken.
- Islands impact assessment should also be prepared for increases in budget areas as well as decreases. An increase in one area – to the detriment of others – may have a negative impact on the islands.

The Bill proposes to protect the Scottish Parliamentary constituency boundary of Nah Eileanan an Iar (the Western Isles) from change. Do you agree with this?

People felt that...

- If that is what the people of Nah Eileanan an Iar want then Islanders would be supportive.

The Bill proposes to make an exception to the rules for local government electoral wards to allow areas with inhabited islands to return 1 or 2 members (instead of the usual 3 or 4). What are your views on this proposal?

People felt that...

- Wards previously had a clearer identity. However, multi member wards mean that a councillor will have colleagues to work with and won't be so isolated.
- There were concerns about inter island accessibility. It is easier to get to the northern isles in Orkney if you live in Kirkwall. Getting between the smaller islands is very difficult.
- Smaller islands have smaller populations but that doesn't mean there is less work. For example, each will likely have a dock, harbour and school to be maintained.
- South Isles are included with Stromness and can be dominated by mainland Orkney issues.
- Looking at the number of members in one area will impact on other areas. Its all about the ratios.
- Concerns were also raised about the size of multi member wards on the mainland – which cover large geographical areas.

The Bill will provide a regulation making power for the Scottish Ministers to create a marine licensing scheme for coastal waters. Do you agree with this power? Do you have any comments on how it should be used?

People felt that...

- Marine development currently works well for Orkney and there is an appetite locally to extend the powers they already have.
- Sustainable development should be embedded as part of any scheme.
- Communities also need to be asked about any scheme.

Do you have any comments on the bill in relation to human rights or equalities?

People felt that...

- Digital connectivity is not a luxury. It is an essential life line service that would help to maintain the right to family life – video conferencing for schooling and the right to health.
- The human right to health care means that health services must be accessible, available and of good quality for everyone, on an equitable basis. This can be challenging on the islands.
 - If a mental health professional comes to the island everyone knows- there is a lack of privacy.
 - There is a lack of continuity and ongoing care for some clients as the practitioners may cycle.
 - Roving specialists could be useful for people with healthcare needs, but this might not help people in cases where they have a rare illness/disability. Better use could be made of webcams.
- There is a lack of diversity on the island which can make it hard for young people to be open about things such as sexuality, and can lead to bullying. Schools could approach this better, i.e. making it clear that discrimination is a criminal offence and taking a pro-active approach to education about diversity and sexuality.
- Young people acknowledged that the quality of life for someone with a family or older can be very good on the island (low crime, wildlife, culture), but felt that wasn't the case for those in their teens and 20s.

With all this in mind - does the Bill achieve its aims and are you in favour overall? Is there anything else that you feel should be included or excluded from the Bill?

People felt that...

- Overall they were in favour of the Bill and its aims. The content of the national islands plan and consultation on this would be central to making the Bill work.
- Rural areas, outside of islands also face similar problems.
- Queries were raised about the impact of the Bill, given it provides an enabling legal framework and further detail would need to follow in the national plan.

- Concerns were expressed about more power coming, when some feel that there is enough local democratic accountability in Orkney currently. The local council is made up of independents who don't have stated policies, stand without manifesto, often on single issues.
- Views were expressed that there is very poor political representation on broad sectoral issues. There needs to be a culture change to encourage better political representation.
- The Bill doesn't give the Scottish Government powers to influence private companies – only public bodies. Private enterprise has a monopoly on infrastructure – including some life line services - SSE, open reach, ferries, postal deliveries. There should be powers for the Scottish Government to include conditions in procurement contracts for private companies to protect the islands.