

**ISLANDS STRATEGIC GROUP  
MINUTE OF MEETING HELD ON 11 JULY 2017  
BREASCLETE COMMUNITY CENTRE, ISLE OF LEWIS**

| <b>Council Representatives</b>  |  |
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| Cllr Roddie Mackay, Leader Comhairle nan Eilean Siar  | Cllr Cecil Smith, Leader, Shetland Islands Council                                     |
| Cllr James Stockan, Leader, Orkney Islands Council  | Cllr Margaret Davidson, Leader, The Highland Council                                   |
| Cllr Robin Currie, Islands Policy Lead, Argyll & Bute Council                               | Cllr Joe Culliane, Leader, North Ayrshire Council <b>(by phone)</b>                    |
| Cllr Norman MacDonald, Convener, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar                                  | Malcolm Burr, Chief Executive, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar                               |
| Maggie, Sandison, Director of Infrastructure Services, Shetland Islands Council             | Stuart Black, Director of Development and Infrastructure, The Highland Council         |
| Cleland Sneddon, Chief Executive, Argyll & Bute Council                                     | Audrey Sutton, Head of Connected Communities, North Ayrshire Council <b>(by phone)</b> |
| Lesley McDonald, Head of Executive Office, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar                        | Paul Maxton, Orkney Islands Council  |
| <b>Scottish Government Representatives</b>  |  |
| Humza Yousaf MSP, Minister for Transport and the Islands                                    | Kevin Stewart MSP, Minister for Local Government and Housing                           |
| Murdoch Macleod, Location Director for the Outer Hebrides                                   | Ian Turner, Head of Islands Bill Team  |
| Catriona Kennedy, Assistant Private Secretary to the Minister for Transport and the Islands | Marissa Gallagher, Private Secretary to the Minister for Local Government and Housing  |

## 1. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

1. Meeting began with the Minister for Transport and the Islands welcoming everyone to the fourth meeting of the Group. Attendees were as per list above.

## 2. DRAFT MINUTES OF MEETING ON 30 MARCH 2017

2. A copy of the draft minutes from the meeting of 30 March had been circulated in advance of the meeting.

3. It was noted that the general election result had only amplified the issues raised by Brexit (item 3). The impact of Brexit on Scotland and the islands will be significant and Councils and the Scottish Government must continue to work together. Looking forward, the workload on the public sector will be significant and will take up time and resource and there will be a need to be flexible and combine resources as and when necessary.

4. The minutes were agreed by the group.

## 3. ISLANDS BILL

5. The Minister for Transport and the Islands introduced this item and provided the group with an update on progress with the Bill since the last meeting.

6. The Bill was introduced to Parliament on 9 June 2017 and published on 12 June 2017. The Minister gave a brief overview of the contents of the Bill.

7. The **National Islands Plan** – the Bill places a duty on the Scottish Ministers to prepare, lay before the Scottish Parliament and publish a 'National Islands Plan'. The Plan must set out the main objectives and strategy of the Scottish Ministers in relation to improving outcomes for island communities. This will be a key part for keeping island issues high on the agenda for this and any future Government.

8. **Island-proofing** – this Part of the Bill places a duty on the Scottish Ministers and other relevant public bodies that they must have regard to island communities in exercising their functions. Public bodies will have to prepare an island communities' impact assessment when a new or revised policy, strategy or service is likely to have a significantly different effect on island communities from its effect on other communities.

9. The Minister commented that he believed this was the cornerstone of the Bill. However, we need to be careful with this element as we don't want to make it a bureaucratic tick box exercise and it will need room to develop fully over the next few years.

10. The **Western Isles Scottish parliamentary constituency** – the Bill ensures that there must be a distinct Western Isles Scottish parliamentary constituency, bringing it into line with Orkney and Shetland.

11. **Greater Flexibility in electoral ward design for islands** by enabling the Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland the flexibility to recommend to Scottish Ministers electoral wards of 1 or 2 councillors be created covering populated islands, if they deem this appropriate.

12. The potential for **marine development licences**. Based on the experience of Shetland and Orkney we wanted all island local authorities to have the opportunity to have more control in the development of the seas around their island communities. The Bill provides a regulation-making power so that should a local authority with inhabited islands wish to become a licensing authority then a licensing scheme can be established by Ministers through secondary legislation to enable them to do that.

13. In discussion members made a number of points including:

- Broadly welcomed the flexibility to have 1 or 2 member council wards for islands. There was still a concern over the creation of large wards and the risk that this provision may exacerbate that problem.
- The island-proofing process should not be a tick box exercise. The Bill is an opportunity – of the type that comes along only once in a generation – and it needs to be something that makes a difference and that the public can understand.
- The issue of island-proofing and retrospection needs to be clarified.
- On island-proofing the responsibility for assessing and undertaking an impact assessment rests with the public authority. Potential for the Bill to be amended to do this in a more collaborative fashion with joint assessments. This will go beyond the authority doing them themselves and making that decision.
- The Bill should be a facilitator, to allow us to do things we couldn't do before. Needs to be a positive for the economic growth and development of islands.
- Need to future proof the Bill and lay the ground work for things that might happen in the future such as new grid connections.
- Keen to create a new mechanism around the use of a permissive power.

14. The Minister for Transport and the Islands responded that the Bill should be seen as part of a series of policies and strategies that are being taken forward with respect to islands, such as on the Crown Estate, transport and digital.

15. The Minister for Local Government and Housing mentioned that the Islands Bill is one of the first pieces of legislation but it will be followed by others such as the Planning Bill and the Local Democracy Bill that will come after the local governance review.

16. On the Boundary Commission issues regarding large mainland wards the Minister for Transport and the Islands explained that the Minister for Parliamentary

Business has responsibility for that issue and he would be happy to facilitate a conversation if that was required.

17. The Minister clarified that on island-proofing it was not retrospective but he was always willing to facilitate discussions within government on topics that matter to island authorities and communities. The Minister also emphasised that there would be a good deal of work that would be done with local authorities and other stakeholders on the detail of guidance. In terms of the permissive power the Minister commented that it would be difficult to bring forward what would be considered a 'Henry VIIIth' power but is always open to discussions on any amendments that can improve the Bill.

18. In a further discussion members of the group talked about a range of issues including issues around digital connectivity and the need to promote and encourage solutions that are coming out of communities themselves. This could be discussed further at a future meeting of the Group.

#### **4. THE NATIONAL ISLANDS PLAN**

19. The Minister for Transport and Islands introduced this item. In discussions with parliamentary colleagues and others to brief them on the Bill ahead of its introduction a recurring point was the importance of the National Islands Plan, and what it would contain.

20. The Government have committed in the Bill to introducing the Plan within a year of receiving Royal Assent, the likelihood is that as the parliamentary process begins we will be pressed for more detail on the content of the plan. The Bill also contains provision that there must be public consultation undertaken before laying it before Parliament. This provides a lot of opportunity to develop and scrutinise the plan without being too prescriptive on the face of the Bill.

21. Alongside those commitments, it is clear that the Islands Strategic Group will be playing a crucial role in helping the development of the plan. The paper circulated for the meeting provided some background on similar types of plans and strategies that are already in existence, and poses some questions around the structure and content of the first plan.

22. Members discussed the National Islands Plan and made comments including:
- The structure of the national Gaelic plan is a good and practical model and the *Empowering Scotland's Island Communities* prospectus is a good place to look at the potential contents
  - The plan should acknowledge the Islands Deal and the investment in our island communities.
  - Should be able to relate the National Plan with community planning and the Local Outcome Improvement Plans and locality plans that are being produced by Community Planning Partnerships.

- Need to be careful to ensure that the plan doesn't just focus on the hot topics and issues that are easy to quantify but on the issues that matter to island communities
- Focus on sustainability of communities, like the Gaelic plan needs to be scalable – tailor it towards island communities
- Should have commitments and targets, and a mechanism for monitoring and evaluation.

23. The Minister for Transport and the Islands responded that we recognise that there will not be a one size fits all in relation to our island communities but the plan will need to be relevant and focused on creating the right environment for growth.

24. There will need to be further discussions on the development of the Plan and the experience of the Group will be essential to ensure that it does work in the same direction as other plans such as Local Outcome Improvement Plans and locality plans.

## **5. HOUSING AND OTHER ISSUES**

25. The Minister for Local Government and Housing introduced this item focussing on the issue of housing on the islands with the ambitious targets the Government has put forward and the significant investment that has followed.

26. Members discussed the housing issues and made comments including:

- We cannot ignore the potential impact of Brexit on the construction industry and homebuilding in particular, need to promote a sustainable islands workforce.
- For housing in islands and sparse areas the Government's infrastructure grant is very helpful. Communities are looking at these opportunities.
- Often the biggest constraint in some areas is the provision of primary schools.
- Need to ensure that there is flexibility in the building process. This needs to be island-proofed regarding building controls, regulations, biomass and electric solutions etc
- Investment is required in inactive property – it shouldn't just be about building new homes.
- Flexibility is needed around funding, the grants can be limiting in terms of the criteria which doesn't work for all areas.

27. The Minister for Local Government and Housing responded by agreeing that Brexit is a risk and a potential constraint on the house building programme. A conservative estimate puts the number of EU nationals in the housing construction workforce at 10%. The rhetoric of the UK Government has not been helpful.

28. In terms of building control and regulations, recognised the differences that can arise in rural and island communities. Need to look at this area and the local authorities can be part of this with the ability to make changes through secondary legislation and guidance.

29. On inactive properties, the Minister indicated that there needed to be flexibility within the resource planning presumptions. In terms of procurement and other financial issues the Minister indicated that there is expertise provided by the Scottish Futures Trust and also Scotland Excel.

30. In terms of the flexibility of funding the Minister agreed that flexibility was needed and the authorities should speak to Government officials about what is required.

## **6. FORWARD WORK PLAN**

31. The Minister for Transport and islands introduced this item. He expressed a desire for the group to discuss and agree future topics that they wanted to discuss at future meetings of the Group.

32. It was noted that the Islands Bill and the associated work around that will be a key feature of these meetings but there are other challenging issues of importance to all six Councils that would be worthy of further exploration and discussion.

33. Given the changes in leadership at a number of Councils following May's elections, the time is right to revisit a proposed work programme for the group, and to map out some priority areas for future discussion.

34. The Minister indicated that he was very keen for the Councils to take ownership of the work programme and to take the lead in preparing papers for the group's consideration as they are best placed to advise on some of the challenges (and opportunities) that exist in these areas.

35. During discussion the following work programme was agreed:

### Autumn meeting

- Highland – Tourism
- Shetland – skills and training

### Winter meeting

- Orkney – renewables and fuel poverty
- North Ayrshire – social capital: capacity building, empowerment

### Future meetings

- Western Isles – environment and waste

Other topics could also include:

- Tax changes and islands
- freeports and financing
- transformational ideas

## **7. ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

36. Given the new UK Government and Ministers following the general election there was a discussion about whether it would be a good idea to have a look at common themes across the islands that could be raised with the Scotland Office.

37. It is anticipated that the next meeting of the group would take place in Edinburgh or Glasgow in late September or October. However, there are challenges of trying to find a date that suits everyone and the ISG secretariat will try and find a date that fits with diaries as best as possible.

ISG Secretariat