

**OUTCOMES FROM THE CONVENTION OF THE HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS  
15 MARCH 2021**

**Outcome 1: Population – National and Regional Update**

- COHI members welcomed the national and regional strategic updates on population provided by the Scottish Government and the COHI Population Working Group. During a rich discussion, COHI members outlined a number of areas for strategic focus to meet the complex and urgent population challenges felt across Highland and Island communities. These included detailed discussion on issues such as economy, jobs dispersal, tackling climate change, digital infrastructure, rural housing (including market distortion), culture and quality of life, retention of young people, and transport. On the ‘repopulation zones’ concept, members highlighted the importance of exploring the idea in detail – particularly in relation to potential unintended consequences on other local areas should a ‘zone’ be established. CoHI members recognised that in order to achieve these objectives in practise it will be necessary to reconsider and re-appraise existing approaches in order to adopt the necessary innovative and radical approaches seen as required.
- Overall, COHI members supported and endorsed the following:
  1. the Scottish Government’s newly published Population Strategy, “A Scotland for the Future: The Challenges and Opportunities of Scotland’s Changing Population”, and agree to approach the national challenge of population in a collaborative manner
  2. the principles of ‘Repopulation Zones’, put forward by the COHI Officers Population Working Group, based around three themes of initial priority: economy and jobs, infrastructure and public services & community
  3. the Repopulation Zone Action Plan and the themes and related engagement activity within the Plan
  4. the deepening of engagement and alignment between the Repopulation Zone development activity and the implementation of the national population strategy
  5. the notion that Scottish Government and the Population Working Group give consideration to the financial implications of the establishment of Repopulation Zones and, as part of the initial development activity, identify budget provision to facilitate the start-up phase.
- CoHI members urged the Scottish Government and the COHI Population Working Group to produce a detailed set of proposals to be brought back to the next session of COHI which is to take place in October.

## **Outcome 2: EU Exit / ESIF**

### **EU EXIT**

- COHI Members noted the substantial impact of EU Exit on the economy of the Highlands and Islands, evidenced by the latest UK Government trade statistics, published on 12 March. The impact of EU Exit on the food and drink sector was noted as particularly concerning, especially on the shellfish, salmon and whisky trade, with the continued viability of smaller businesses under considerable threat. The Scottish Government will continue to work with CoHI partners to assess and mitigate the impact of EU Exit, including assisting with the identification of new markets as well as building on existing markets.
- COHI members agreed to pursue the possibility of sending a joint letter to the UK Government's Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the Rt Hon George Eustice MP, highlighting, in particular, the needs of smaller producers and exporters.

### **ESIF**

- COHI Members recognise the importance of the larger Shared Prosperity Fund and note that particulars are still being developed. CoHI is keen influence decision making at UK Government level to ensure the Highlands and Islands are included within this Fund given they have largely been excluded from both the Community Renewal and Levelling-Up Funds. As such, Scottish Government will continue to press UK Government hard for the decision making on all Funds to properly reflect need and intelligence across the whole of Scotland.
- A shared statement to be signed by all political leaders of COHI shall be formulated. It should express the view, shared by all, that the particular financial needs of the Highlands and Islands should be considered as a whole - as an area of sparse population and considerable disadvantage in terms of GDP - and all other economic indicators mean that the gross financial funding available to the Highlands and Islands must be at least as much as was enjoyed from the EU through comparable funds.

## **Outcome 3: Workforce & Skills**

- The Convention recognised the pivotal importance of enabling factors for effective skills investment, including a clear and compelling economic vision, physical and digital infrastructure and growing our working age population.
- Through the Highlands & Islands Skills Leadership Forum continue to identify the skills needs of the region, providing a clear understanding of the challenges, and the opportunities emerging. COHI recognises the critical importance of promoting the green economic recovery and ensuring that the necessary skills and training to drive to Net Zero are available for the citizens of the Highlands and Islands,

- Continue to strengthen support to for those facing redundancy locally through the scale up of PACE. Working closely with local employability partnerships to ensure a coherent and effective response. Recognising the importance of responding with flexibility and agility to the challenges and opportunities of the post-COVID recovery.
- COHI recognises the importance of integrated delivery of skills at a local level, particularly in view of the large geographical area and limited transport opportunities, especially for some of those wishing and requiring to participate in upskilling or training.
- CoHI members recognised the progress made, and importance of, partnership working on skills.

#### **Outcome 4: Crofting**

- COHI members acknowledged that crofting plays an important part in protecting remote rural populations throughout the highlands and islands and that low impact high nature value agricultural activity supports biodiversity and helps mitigate climate change impacts.
- The Scottish Government will work with the Crofting Commission and other CoHI partners to implement the actions in the, soon to be published, National Development Plan for Crofting.
- Amongst other things this will include the establishment of a short-life working group to identify actions required to deal with absenteeism; bring crofts and common grazings back into active use; explore opportunities for new crofts; and create more opportunities for young new entrant crofters.
- In terms of direct enabling action to reduce barriers and create further opportunities for new entrants, the Scottish Government reiterates its commitment to review crofting legislation next Parliament.
- The Scottish Government will, in collaboration with its delivery partners (including Nature Scot and Forestry), explore the benefits of introducing a peatland restoration and forestry roadshow to promote the opportunities that will be made available.
- The Scottish Government will also continue to provide support to crofters through the Croft House Grant, the Crofting Agricultural Grant Scheme, the bull hire scheme and its operations from Knocknagael and other support mechanisms.

### **Outcome 5: Gaelic and Post-Covid Recovery**

- COHI members were encouraged to view Gaelic not as an isolated task but as shared by, connected with and integrated into the varied work of COHI bodies and authorities. In line with this COHI members supported the request to increasingly include Gaelic in their work in particular in education and in community based initiatives but also being mindful of wider economic and infrastructural opportunities.
- COHI members recognised that there are a number of excellent opportunities where authorities have the potential to increase the rate of growth and progress with Gaelic. These include their Gaelic language plans, commitments in the National Islands Plan, the Faster Rate of Progress initiative and more.
- Along with these opportunities there are significant public authority and Gaelic organisations networks for the promotion of Gaelic in learning, in media and in arts. COHI members also agreed that there were significant benefits in the promotion of Gaelic and these benefits were in education, in cultural life, in the economy and in identity.
- COHI will continue to look to the public sector to ensure continuing positive support for Gaelic to maintain growth and momentum in order to address the challenges that exist for Gaelic in Scotland.