



## Berneray, North Uist and Benbecula Report



Islands: Berneray, North Uist and Benbecula

Date: 20/06/19

*This report has been produced by the Strathclyde Centre for Environmental Law and Governance (SCELG) and Scottish Island Federation (SIF) in the framework of their collaboration with the Islands Team of the Scottish Government. The goal of this report is to capture the essence of the discussions that have taken place at the consultation events on Berneray, North Uist and Benbecula. The report will be sent out to participants who authorised us to do so in order to receive further comments and feedback. The report is not to be considered as an indication of what will ultimately go into the National Island Plan, but it will inform the latter. The report is also not to be considered as an indication of the position of Scottish Government on any of the points mentioned therein.*

## Introduction

Between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> of June 2019 three consultation events took place on North Uist and Benbecula, one of which was a focus group with pupils at Lionacliet High School. The goal was to capture both what works well on the island and the challenges faced by the communities on Berneray, North Uist and Benbecula . The consultation is required by the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, as a means to inform the National Islands Plan that Scottish Government will be presenting to Scottish Parliament on 4 October 2019.

## Berneray, North Uist and Benbecula as a great place to live

The consultation highlighted the following things that make living on Berneray, North Uist and Benbecula great:

- Community
- Physical/Natural Environment
- Safe Environment
- Wildlife
- Low Crime Rate
- Culture and Heritage
- Primary Healthcare
- Gaelic
- Crofting and Fishing
- University of the Highlands and Islands
- Volunteer Sector
- Opportunity for outdoor activities
- Part time job opportunities
- Small class sizes



It is evident that there are many things that make Berneray, North Uist and Benbecula fantastic places to live. The list above only affords a glimpse, but it does highlight that across the three events, it was evident that there is a true sense of community on the islands, which results in a thriving volunteer sector. The islanders also relish the natural beauty and space of the landscape,

which affords many opportunities to pursue outdoor activities, whilst culture and history are seen as being vital to continued growth. The low crime rate is also viewed as a positive aspect of island life, whilst the current education facilities, in relation to both small class sizes at secondary school and the presence of the University of the Highlands and Islands Campus, were both well regarded.

### **Challenges on Berneray, North Uist and Benbecula**

The consultation moved on to discuss the current challenges on Berneray, North Uist and Benbecula and the main concerns of the island community. The following are the main issues that were shared by the participants at the event (see Annex for more details):

- Increasing Population Levels
- Economic Development
- Environmental Protection
- Health and Wellbeing
- Education
- Community Empowerment
- Transport
- Digital Connectivity
- Fuel Poverty
- Land Management
- Biosecurity
- Tourism
- Wider range of higher education courses
- Cycle track
- Equitable allocation of finance/resources across islands



## The National Islands Plan and the Response from the Participants

During the consultation, several key challenges were discussed in greater detail. We wish to make it very clear that a more in depth focus was undertaken for the purposes of the face-to-face consultation, and should not be considered as any indication of prioritization in the framework of the National Islands Plan.

The areas discussed more in depth were:

- Increasing Population
- Community Empowerment
- Economic Development
- Transport
- Health and Wellbeing
- Environment

For each, participants were asked to provide more details about the challenge, their proposed solution, next steps, who should undertake these next steps and when. The following are the suggestions that we believe stemmed from the participants present at the consultation on Berneray, North Uist and Benbecula :

| Challenge                    | Suggestion from participants   |
|------------------------------|--|
| <b>Increasing Population</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Scottish Government to commission independent research in order to better understand the drivers that encourage people to move/return to Uist</li> <li>▪ Revisal of current housing policy taking into account the specific needs of island communities.</li> </ul> |



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|                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Revision of local service funding to develop facilities that encourage the retention and integration of young families into the community.</li> <li>▪ Consider the possibility of developing on island opportunities, such as a ‘gateway house’ to allow potential residents to experience island life with less financial pressure.</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Community Empowerment</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Explore the possibility of revising the current governance structure to ensure that decision-making is taken as close as possible to where the effects are felt (island centric, to the specific island in question).</li> <li>▪ Increase funding routes and opportunities for local democratically elected groups (possibly community councils) to take on a greater decision-making role.</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Economic Development</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Explore the possibility of funding schemes to encourage the development of small, local businesses on the island</li> <li>▪ Explore funding options for business space and training that can promote the entrepreneurial potential of island communities.</li> <li>▪ Recognise that boosting economic development on an island requires joint thinking with other policies such as, for example, housing, transport, digital connectivity.</li> <li>▪ Explore the possibility of increasing funding and support for school leavers in terms of mentorship programmes and apprenticeships, to encourage youth to stay</li> </ul> |
| <b>Transport</b>             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Review transport policy so that it fully takes into account the fragility of island communities (transport for island communities is not just a service, it’s a lifeline, it’s a right).</li> <li>▪ Explore the possibility of introducing priority booking for islanders for both ferries and air travel.</li> </ul>   |



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|                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Review RET to ensure it does not promote ‘fast’ tourism at the expense of islanders.</li> <li>▪ Undertake further research into the number of missed bookings, cancelled crossings etc. to allow for a clearer picture of supply and demand.</li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>Health &amp; Wellbeing</b></p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Revise current health service to ensure it is ‘island proofed’ for local communities               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- This includes improving the flexibility of current contracts to adequately reflect the uniqueness of island health systems and local arrangements, whilst reducing the number of short term contracts to ensure longevity of the service.</li> <li>- This should include a review of NHS 24, the patient transport policy and the current GP referral procedure to ensure that they are appropriately ‘island proofed’</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Develop remote and rural health care as a specialty in its own right</li> <li>▪ Explore the possibility of increased linkages between further education and the healthcare needs of the local community</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Environment</b></p>            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Support and invest in the revision of current island infrastructure (travel and energy supply) to better support the greening of the island economy.</li> <li>▪ Marketing campaign to encourage reduction of carbon use holding the likes of the Uists as a hub of innovation.</li> <li>▪ Improve funding streams to support community led environmentally friendly initiatives.</li> <li>▪ Encourage the exchange of knowledge and good practices between island communities.</li> </ul>  |



## **Berneray, North Uist and Benbecula Vision**

Island communities know that good governance requires an integrated and holistic approach to policy. We wish to stress once again that the National Islands Plan and its implementation will not address specific issues in isolation, but rather will consider all factors together whilst taking into account their crosscutting nature. In addition, each island has its own unique character and its own unique challenges. From the consultation events on Berneray, North Uist and Benbecula we have identified the following specific traits:

Firstly, it is essential to note the geographical distinctiveness of Berneray, North Uist and Benbecula, in that, although all are individual islands, they are connected by causeways over the tidal strands. The aim was to gather information from residents of all three islands from the multiple consultation events.

In terms of increasing the population of the islands, it is evident that further independent research must be undertaken in order to better understand the drivers that encourage people to move/return to the islands. However, it is clear that housing and boosting economic development are crucial to increasing the economically active demographic on the islands, but that both sectors need to be adapted and reconsidered having island communities at the heart of such policies. These two areas have very strong and immediate positive ripple effects if dealt with properly.

In terms of transport, the current infrastructure in place for both ferries and air travel does not provide the necessary 'lifeline' service that the island communities are wholly reliant on. There is a need to revise the transport sector to ensure that it is driven by island communities, and that it is fully recognized as being a 'lifeline' service for islanders rather than just an economic service. For Berneray, North Uist and Benbecula, one specific issue is a lack of capacity due to the large amounts of tourists; a revision of the current RET system to ensure it doesn't promote 'fast' tourism, as well as the introduction of priority booking for islanders for both ferries and



air travel could have a transformative effect for those living on the islands, and consequently improve many other sectors including health, economic development and depopulation.

The current healthcare workforce on Berneray, North Uist and Benbecula is aging, and there is significant concern that current policy, which promotes short term contracts and a lack of long term planning, has resulted in the health and wellbeing sector not being viewed as a route of desirable employment for younger people. It is therefore essential that, in order to promote 'cradle to grave' care, a revision of current policy is undertaken to ensure that it is 'island proofed' and allows for the uniqueness of local arrangements which are present on many islands. Specific mention should be made of the lack of current mental health support available, which participants expressed was being keenly felt by the island community and having an extremely negative ripple effect in general.

Finally, there is a clear desire for increased community empowerment through the creation of a system by which the island communities can take "ownership" of the decisions that affect them. Improved community empowerment can also assist with the development of local resources and the island economy, as well as a boost to environmentally friendly practices to ensure that essential services are appropriately island proofed in order to retain/increase jobs in the local economy.







## What now?

First and foremost we wish to thank those who attended the consultation events on Islay. We encourage you to fill in the on-line consultation at <https://consult.gov.scot/agriculture-and-rural-communities/national-islands-plan/>. You can find the consultation document that provides background information about the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, the National Islands Plan and the Islands Communities Impact Assessment at <https://www.gov.scot/publications/national-islands-plan-islands-communities-impact-assessment-guidance-consultation/>.

More importantly, please send us any comments/feedback on this report at [n.crook@strath.ac.uk](mailto:n.crook@strath.ac.uk)

The National Islands Plan will only be useful if it is truly informed by the island communities and by all those who have an interest and a stake in Scottish islands. Thanks to your participation in the consultation event and your comments and feedback, we are confident that the work being undertaken towards the National Islands Plan is capturing the voice of island communities. We are also sure that this is only the beginning and that, together, we can make sure that the National Islands Plan is not just “another” plan, but “The Plan” that works for island communities in Scotland.

### Useful links:

- *On-line consultation* - <https://consult.gov.scot/agriculture-and-rural-communities/national-islands-plan/>
- *Consultation document* - <https://www.gov.scot/publications/national-islands-plan-islands-communities-impact-assessment-guidance-consultation/>
- *Islands (Scotland) Act 2018*
- *Strathclyde Centre for Environmental Law and Governance (SCELG)* - <https://www.strath.ac.uk/research/strathclydecentreenvironmentallawgovernance/>
- *Scottish Island Federation (SIF)* - <http://www.scottish-islands-federation.co.uk/>



- *SCELG portal on the consultation -*

<https://www.strath.ac.uk/research/strathclydecentreenvironmentallawgovernance/ourwork/research/labsincubators/eilean/islandsscotlandact/consultations/>



## Annex

### Challenges about living and working on Berneray, North Uist and Benbecula

|   |   |  |
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| <p><b>-Depopulation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Jobs/opportunities for young people to have training careers on the islands (good annual ones)</li> <li>• Long term jobs</li> <li>• Affordable housing</li> <li>• Improved long term employment</li> <li>• Improved childcare</li> <li>• Population increase to make islands more sustainable</li> <li>• Increase availability of housing and land</li> <li>• Retention of younger population</li> <li>• Affordable Housing</li> <li>• More opportunities for career progression (without leaving)</li> <li>• Improved social housing</li> <li>• More opportunities for young people</li> <li>• Housing grants for young families</li> </ul> | <p><b>-Economic Development</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employment</li> <li>• Affordable housing/land</li> <li>• More funding to bring teachers to island</li> <li>• More support for residents i.e. RET</li> <li>• More locally based jobs</li> <li>• Exporting of energy</li> <li>• Wind</li> <li>• Tidal</li> <li>• Capital funding for projects</li> <li>• Investment in infrastructure</li> <li>• Lack of full time permanent employment</li> <li>• More support for small businesses</li> <li>• More jobs</li> <li>• Affordable housing</li> <li>• Keep out local ATC unit at Benbecula</li> <li>• Cost of living</li> </ul> | <p><b>-Transport</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved transport links</li> <li>• Improve ferry reliability</li> <li>• More summer ferries</li> <li>• Evening bus service</li> <li>• Need for dedicated slips for Uig-Lochmaddy &amp; Uig-Tarbert</li> <li>• Air service</li> <li>• Lower prices, just enough to fill the aircraft</li> <li>• Improved pavements</li> <li>• Reduce postage costs coming to islands</li> <li>• Improve 'spinal' road</li> <li>• Improve roads and signage</li> <li>• Increase reliability and frequency</li> <li>• Improve spinal route (2 way)</li> <li>• Increased community transport</li> <li>• Cheaper flights with a set price</li> <li>• Improve all transport links</li> <li>• Priority for islanders on ferries/flights</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>- Community Empowerment</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Local governance/determination</li> </ul>  | <p><b>- Environmental protection</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Developing the environment</li> </ul>   | <p><b>-Health and wellbeing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lyme Disease</li> </ul>   |



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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Less centralization of facilities</li> <li>• Imbalanced local government</li> <li>• Tool/Plant Cooperative/share</li> <li>• Carpool/carshare</li> <li>• Greater community influence on council decisions</li> <li>• Local decision making</li> <li>• Decentralisation of local government (Stornoway)</li> <li>• Unfair advantage of larger central belt firms over island firms (need better procurement rules)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Long term climate change strategy</li> <li>• Adequate environmental protection</li> <li>• Better recycling</li> <li>• Tourism infrastructure</li> <li>• Better interpretation of local environment, culture, heritage, wildlife &amp; archeology.</li> <li>• Flood and coastal management</li> <li>• Reduce deer populations</li> <li>• Community skips</li> <li>• Public toilets</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coordinate the doctors appointments between Stornoway &amp; Uist</li> <li>• Stop centralizing health services</li> <li>• Local delivery</li> <li>• Access to specialist healthcare</li> <li>• Sustainable level of emergency services</li> <li>• Increase local facilities</li> <li>• Especially swim pool &amp; library</li> <li>• More support for elderly &amp; infirm</li> <li>• Childcare</li> <li>• Pavements (safe verge to enable walking)</li> <li>• Access to secondary healthcare</li> <li>• Fill health board vacancies</li> <li>• Increase homecare provision</li> <li>• Tackle alcoholism</li> <li>• Respite care</li> <li>• Mental health services</li> <li>• More community events</li> <li>• Dental services</li> <li>• Homecare</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>-Fuel poverty</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fuel costs</li> <li>• Affordable fuel</li> <li>• Reduce cost of living</li> </ul>   | <p><b>-Land management</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase sustainability of food &amp; fuel</li> <li>• Better land management</li> </ul>   | <p><b>-Biosecurity</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Geese population</li> <li>• Gunnera (kill)</li> <li>• Hedgehogs (move)</li> <li>• Rats (kill)</li> </ul>  |



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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Regulation of fuel costs &amp; electricity</li> <li>• Equality with mainland (good, services, utilities and fuel)</li> <li>• Local electricity supply to tackle fuel poverty</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support for crofters and diversification</li> <li>• Drainage</li> <li>• Post Brexit crofting support</li> </ul>  |  |
| <p><b>-Digital Connectivity</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved IT infrastructure</li> <li>• Physical &amp; digital</li> <li>• Improved mobile phone coverage</li> <li>• Improved internet</li> <li>• Use of technology to connect community</li> <li>• Broadband connectivity</li> <li>• Improved signage/Uist app for tourists and locals</li> <li>• FTP broadband</li> <li>• Internet access everywhere</li> </ul> | <p><b>Other</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improved infrastructure for tourism</li> <li>• Fulltime daycare</li> <li>• Wider range of higher education courses</li> <li>• Cycle track</li> <li>• Delivery of goods from mainland (costs, charges &amp; availability)</li> <li>• Equitable allocation of finance/resources across islands</li> <li>• Education <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Attract more teachers</li> <li>- Better higher education opportunities</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Better, affordable housing</li> <li>• Build tunnels (Skye, Barra, Harris)</li> <li>• More childcare provision</li> <li>• Develop links with other island communities</li> <li>• More secondary school teachers</li> <li>• Fewer motorhomes</li> <li>• Renewable energy</li> <li>• Better access to credit union</li> <li>• Effects of Brexit</li> </ul> |  |





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