

## **RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE**

### **CALL FOR EVIDENCE ON THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON THE RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY IN SCOTLAND**

#### **SUBMISSION FROM SCOTTISH ISLANDS FEDERATION**

The overarching concern of the Scottish Islands Federation (SIF) is the sustainability of Scotland's island communities. This submission is informed by the local knowledge, perspectives, interests and experience of our membership of island based community organisations.

#### **What particular impacts has COVID-19 had on the lives of people in Scotland's island communities?**

Although full implications of COVID-19 have yet to play out, it is evident that confirmed virus cases, associated hospitalisations and deaths have thankfully not been widespread amongst island communities. Restrictions on travel to and from islands is recognised and appreciated as probably key to our protection, to date.

Social impacts of lockdown measures on island life have been extensive, disrupting normal patterns of island life for most islanders. Closure of schools and workplaces has entailed challenges of integrating 24/7 childcare with home working for some families, while loss of household income and earnings opportunities associated with seasonal tourism and also the fishing industry has also been problematic for many.

Although Government measures have extended vital financial support, their scope and duration is a major concern for islanders accustomed to summertime earnings supporting them through low or zero income winters.

As throughout Scotland, concern for the mental health and wellbeing of island folk of all ages is widespread. Deferred hospital appointments have caused anxiety for some, while many elderly people have endured protracted solitary confinement in their homes. Children and young people have missed months of education and been unable to socialise with friends, while some parents have been struggling to provide for their families. Many islanders face prospects of financial hardship, business uncertainties and are apprehensive about what the future may hold.

During lockdown, informal social networks and volunteers have generally risen to challenges of mitigating social isolation with telephone conversations and regular deliveries of shopping, prescriptions and cooked meals in some areas.

#### **What lessons have been learned for the future?**

**Digital Connectivity** is critical to the resilience of remote and island communities. Reliable broadband and mobile phone coverage is integral to effective crisis management and information dissemination. SIF stresses the vital importance and urgency of extending and upgrading digital connectivity to support the recovery and sustainability of all remote and island communities.

During lockdown, digital connectivity supported remote provision of health care and responses to medical emergencies, but some island communities remain disadvantaged in this respect. Capacity for remote conferencing for business, educational and governance purposes is far from universal on Scottish islands, where online technologies are not yet fully inclusive. This also limits opportunities for employment, training, entertainment, consumer choice and social contact, all taken for granted elsewhere.

**Transport and Travel:** Travel to and from islands continues to be restricted to keep passengers safe but as lockdown restrictions are relaxed, many islanders feel uneasy with visitors in our midst, some of whom seem insensitive to islanders' concerns. Some islanders feel that their journeys should be prioritised over visitors from the mainland so long as ferry capacity is limited, and also that Cal Mac should be more proactive enforcing social distancing guidelines, particularly when passengers are disembarking.

Constraints on travel during lockdown gave rise to increased online shopping and dependence on deliveries from the mainland, to the extent that Tesco in Oban lacked capacity to meet islanders' needs for several weeks, to the frustration of some.

**Fisheries:** Loss of mainland markets for catches triggered retail sales in some island localities, but on a relatively modest scale, nowhere sufficient to offset overall financial losses to the industry.

**Health:** Limited capacity of local health and medical resources to meet potential needs remains a particular concern as islands open up after lockdown, especially in the absence of effective test, track and trace measures suited to the circumstances of remote island communities and our visitors.

Each island situation is different so arguably needs its own emergency plan tailored to local circumstances, especially with Community First Responders stood down during lockdown. On Eigg, for example, with no resident GP or nurse, 999 calls did not link up with the local coastguard team, and islanders felt vulnerable to medical emergencies. NHS 'Near Me' proved useful, but need to access specialist support through GPs limits take up of specialist services.

Subject to resilient connectivity, digital medical care may help to address travel challenges related to island health care provision in the longer term.

**Livelihoods:** Tourism has become an established cornerstone of many island economies, integral to jobs, shops, transport and other services, with self-employment, small and micro-businesses forming the backbone of many island economies. The negative financial impact of lockdown on islanders has been exacerbated by higher costs of island living and doing business on islands. Many islanders have suffered reduced income, some losing their entire livelihoods.

Government support has mitigated immediate impacts of the crisis but recovery of island economies is likely to depend on carefully targeted longer term support. Holiday cruises and coach tours now seem unlikely for the foreseeable future, so potential to

engage islanders as stakeholders in shaping more inherently sustainable models of slower, greener tourism might usefully be encouraged.

Some businesses have been able to adapt and generate revenue through 'Isle20', a successful online marketing platform established soon after lockdown, which showcases products of over 400 island producers previously dependent on island visitor spending. 'IsleEat' is now developing a similar platform for local food.

Plans to re-open Scotland for tourism might present a welcome lifeline for some businesses, but discussions within the SIF network reflect anxiety in many situations, rather than universal relief. Continuing restrictions on travel associated with social distancing to keep people safe has left many businesses with insufficient customers to cover operating costs in the short term, potentially extending into 2021.

In south west Mull, both pubs, both campsites, a restaurant and some B&Bs have all announced that they do not propose to open this season, regardless of relaxation of lockdown measures permitting them to do so. The news was welcomed by some locals who consider themselves to be at risk of the virus, but visitors have arrived nonetheless.

Insofar as islands' dependence upon established models of tourism has proved unsustainable, perhaps strategic diversification of investment in island economies might reasonably extend to making more of islands' inherent potential for local food production and renewable energy generation. This might helpfully address continuing fuel poverty on islands as well as imminent challenges of powering road transport with electricity, so shaping more circular, locally driven, equitable and innovative island economies.

Noting successful arrangements for Scottish Government and Local Authority staff to work productively from home during lockdown, SIF would welcome strategic investment in digital connectivity to allow for decentralisation of such workforces and more equitable distribution of high quality well remunerated jobs throughout Scotland, including new employment opportunities for islanders.

Island communities might particularly benefit from an enhanced range of flexible employment opportunities, subject to essential measures to ensure that house prices are not consequently inflated beyond the reach of local people.

**Young People:** The retention and attraction of young people is critical to the sustainability of island communities, so viable long-term island livelihoods are a vital concern for SIF.

For many young islanders, particularly those who have left school but are not yet in further education or work, lockdown has been a tough and unsettling time. The future may appear pretty grim with less prosperous island economies offering limited opportunities, especially with Brexit looming.

Young people should be effectively engaged, empowered and supported to help shape bright futures for themselves and their islands. SIF recognises the pan-European Youth Parliament movement as an important means of presenting young

islanders with opportunities to engage with peers, inform their awareness, and broaden their horizons to constructively address issues of common concern.

New routes to employment in renewable energy, IT and enterprise might be facilitated through island based apprenticeships and training opportunities.

**Arts, Cultural and heritage:** This sector is of vital importance to island communities, in terms of cultural tradition, creative expression, community cohesion, livelihoods local economies and more.

With many festivals and events cancelled this year, many island enterprises will suffer a significant drop in income across a range of sectors. Organisers of such events are keen to resume planning for future events as soon as possible, subject to resolution of problematic uncertainties concerning finance and constraints associated with the virus.

**Governance:** Local Authority decision making can be integral to the local quality of life, but island communities are not always fully engaged in the process. The COVID crisis has indicated that Council and also NHS administrations welcome and depend upon local community engagement to address local needs in some island situations. Island volunteers have undertaken shopping, delivered food parcels, prescriptions and meals and developed telephone befriending services, in addition to making scrubs, face coverings and masks for hospital staff, where PPE supplies were limited.

Across Scotland, and not least in some island situations, unpaid local people have rallied to address local needs. Such empowerment has generally added value to local and central government resources (eg through local knowledge to aid cost-effective communications and deliveries).

In some island situations, the capacity of the community to immediately apply local expertise and knowledge to address emergent challenges in terms of health and social care could be more effective than 'official' measures and interventions originating from the mainland. (eg see [mullhealth.com](http://mullhealth.com))

A key aspect of the recovery process for islands could be core support for community anchor organisations to enhance management of local assets with a greater say in decision making, across the full spectrum of sustainable development goals.

**What has been the experience, particularly in island and rural communities, of maintaining access to food supplies during the COVID-19 emergency?**

*“It is essential that systems are in place to ensure that during the "new normal" phase, where there will potentially be more people on the islands, food supplies and medical care will be safeguarded, while shielding and vulnerable people continue to receive the support they need”* (South West Mull & Iona Development).

Throughout lockdown SIF has maintained contact with a number of island shops, some in very marginal and fragile situations, their year round viability generally dependent upon summer spending by visitors. Burdened by freight and transport overheads at the far end of a long supply chain, few island shops are able to match

the prices, variety and quality of products available on the mainland, at the best of times.

During lockdown, access to affordable groceries has presented challenges for some island households accustomed to mainland supermarket prices and choices, particularly those suffering reduced income.

Needs of vulnerable islanders have generally been well met, however. On Mull, for example, dozens of people shielding have been receiving weekly food parcels; the food bank established at the beginning of lockdown has been regularly supporting c. 40 households and dozens more accept regular meals prepared and delivered to their doors by volunteers, without charge.

Many island shops have welcomed the increased patronage of islanders during lockdown, and worked hard to support their local communities very effectively, whilst grappling with challenges of new ways of working, involving social distancing, home deliveries, PPE, customer communications and temporary shortages of supplies. Some retailers struggled to meet increased demand at times, with stock deliveries limited by restricted ferry timetables and suppliers' inability to immediately respond to shortages of particular items on some islands.

Initially, some supermarkets also struggled to keep shelves fully stocked, and some islanders were frustrated by inadequate provision for 'click and collect' and home delivery arrangements to meet their needs.

Increased dependence upon commercial carriers for deliveries during lockdown has reportedly resulted in increased incidence of 'dump and run' in some island situations with expensive items simply left on ferries or in sheds, with recipients left to guess what has happened. The key to more reliable island deliveries is the 'common carrier' requirement, a legal term which currently only applies to Royal Mail and Parcel Force.

Lockdown had a major impact on many islanders' usual shopping patterns, and the late start to the tourist season may leave the future of some small island shops in the balance unless they are able to adapt, perhaps in collaboration with each other, as primary outlets for island produce of all kinds, with capacity to tap into remote online markets.

**Can you share the findings of any research that may have been undertaken into the impacts of COVID-19 on the sector(s) and communities in question and how they have responded? Are there examples of innovation and best practice internationally in responding to COVID-19 that could benefit the sector(s) and communities in question in Scotland?**

SIF is aware of work by Scottish Rural Action, The Scottish Community Alliance, Community Land Scotland and Development Trusts Association Scotland, as well as by Island Innovation and Strathclyde Centre for Environmental Law and Governance. See also: <https://mullandionaferrycommittee.org/2020/06/16/coronavirus-survey-results/>

**What is your assessment of the resilience of the sector(s) to the COVID-19 crisis, and how might resilience to future shocks, including further waves of infection from COVID-19 and future pandemics, be improved?**

SIF is keen to emphasise the key role that island communities and development trusts in particular have played in response to COVID-19 and expect to play in terms of ongoing resilience going forward, subject to available resources.

Going forward, SIF hopes that community anchor organisations on islands may be recognised as legitimate stakeholders in decision making in crisis times, and adequately resourced to play key roles in the management of local assets and delivery of services to help assure local resilience.

**How effectively has the support provided by the relevant division(s) of the Scottish Government and/or related bodies addressed that sector's / those sectors' needs? Has support been equitable, and has it been appropriate to the long-term recovery that you would like to see?**

SIF lacks familiarity with data to present informed comment on each sector, but has great confidence in the sensitivity, responsiveness and dedication of the Scottish Government's Islands Team. The ongoing work 'behind the scenes' directly benefitting island communities during this difficult time has proved invaluable and is very much appreciated.

An impressive level of financial support has been mobilised rapidly to help island businesses and communities. On a small island, however, every individual job and business is hugely important, and SIF is aware of the struggles of some island businesses to access support. We advocate continuing monitoring of the situation to ensure that support is available to island businesses to aid their recovery and sustained resilience.

**What lessons can be learned from how the relevant divisions of the Scottish Government and/or related bodies have responded to the impact of the COVID19 emergency on the sector(s) in question? Are governance arrangements adequate to deal with disruption, such as that caused by COVID-19? Can you provide specific examples of good practice in this respect?**

The capacity of community-led organisations to respond appropriately to local needs at island level has been recognised, appreciated and supported by both Scottish and local government. Even though island Community Councils, Development Trusts and other island NGOs have not been trained, resourced nor mandated to act on behalf of their communities in an emergency situation, trusting them to do so seems to have been the most expedient strategy available to suddenly overstretched mainland based authorities bearing responsibilities for large geographic areas.

Too often, the best interests of island communities seem relatively marginal to the strategic priorities of Argyll and Bute, Highland and North Ayrshire Councils.

Although 'area committees' bring more localised focus to deliberations of elected representatives, the development of 'cabinet style' decision making by mainland

Council administrations can effectively relegate islanders' concerns to peripheral agendas.

Some SIF members have suggested that 'Development Councils' might help to address the democratic deficit which is arguably contributing to the depopulation of islands. The evident degradation of some historically vibrant island communities into seasonal holiday destinations or unsustainable colonies of retired incomers arguably reflects the disempowerment of island communities to pursue our own best interests. Wider forces of the free market for desirable residential properties on islands risks progressively undermining islanders' capacity to shape more sustainable futures for our communities, where much depends upon the availability of affordable housing for islanders of working age.

Bodies such as the Social Enterprise Academy have successfully demonstrated practical approaches to online training and support to help build local capacity, vision, skills and leadership essential to the survival of island communities.

Community Councils, Local Authorities, Third Sector organisations and others have also adopted online platforms for working and meetings during lockdown. SIF is keen for such practices to become more normalised to encourage wider engagement of community stakeholders in the work of these bodies.

**In what ways do you anticipate that COVID-19 will result in longer-term or possibly permanent changes to ways of working in the sector(s) and what are the practical and financial implications of these changes?**

COVID-19 has highlighted the vital importance of digital connectivity, to inclusive equality of opportunity for island communities, with potential to boost island economies through online marketing and home working arrangements.

COVID has also highlighted the vulnerability of island communities to over dependence on patterns of tourism which have now been proved unsustainable.

Diversification of investment might usefully focus on local food production to help assure future resilience of islands in crisis times, as well as increased renewable energy generation to help shape more circular island economies.

Such initiatives could also help to address challenges of climate change faced by islands. Scottish islands have considerable potential to shape more sustainable futures for ourselves, addressing fuel poverty, health and social care and other local priorities, subject to appropriately targeted capacity building measures and investment.

SIF advocates the collaboration of Local Authorities with island communities to shape and implement sustainable energy and climate action plans (SECAPs). Islands need to consider the practicalities of adapting to climate change, and actively pursue opportunities for renewable energy generation, potentially including wider production of hydrogen to decarbonise island heating and transport, as pioneered in the Orkney islands.

Insofar as the importance and urgency of energy transition for islands seems more readily acknowledged by the Scottish government and at European level than by Westminster, Brexit presents real challenges to funding opportunities likely to be available to Scottish Local Authorities to support their island communities.

Uist Wind Ltd has suggested that technical support chains need to be developed, to address currently limited capacity to develop low carbon technologies specifically appropriate to islands.

Brexit is also creating a massive uncertainty around the future of island crofting and farming as well as continental fish markets.

**What should the Scottish Government be doing to support the sector(s) in question to deal with these future challenges?**

Overall the Scottish Government should be concerned to support island businesses most critical to the survival and prosperity of island communities.

Island based hospitality businesses dependent on temporary seasonal workers from elsewhere, or whose profits benefit remote shareholders, might contribute less to overall island wellbeing in the long term than resident shop keepers, carers, builders, plumbers, mechanics and electricians.

The loss of a few such jobs on a small island might be more damaging to the best interests of an island community than closure of a hotel employing live in staff, who save their salaries to spend elsewhere.

Many Scottish island communities are suffering depopulation because we have no say in the future of any residential property left empty. Too often island housing stock tends to be sold to older incomers or to become holiday accommodation, leaving key workers – doctors, nurses, teachers – unable to secure year round accommodation, while island schools become less viable with falling numbers of local children. Some islanders are concerned that unfettered market forces tend to conspire against people of working age finding affordable homes on islands.

Financial support measures might helpfully address such dysfunctional demographic trends evident on islands, as might a dual housing market, such as operates in the Channel islands to cap the proportion of housing stock given over to holiday homes. Alternatively, a planning requirement to register a residential property's change of use from year round accommodation for islanders to a second home or as a business investment might help stem depopulation trends of some island communities.

The Scottish Government might helpfully take the lead by investing in digital connectivity and considering how public sector jobs could be made more flexible and available to residents of islands.

With islands potentially inherently more secure from risks of virus spread, yet also much more vulnerable to impacts of any outbreak, the National Islands Plan is more pertinent and vital than ever to island communities.



It is essential that the Scottish Government's Islands Team has sufficient resources to constructively address challenges of islands in the wake of the initial COVID wave, since the context in which the plan was prepared has significantly changed. SIF advocates further community input from islands to shape developments appropriate for each. Some have advocated lock step with policies applying to mainland communities through the crisis, but there are often diverse opinions held amongst residents of any island.

Associated issues have sometimes been simplistically expressed as 'health vs wealth', or 'lives vs livelihoods', but island realities are actually rather more complex. Some feel that it is most expedient for decisions affecting their islands to be made from afar. Unlike some European islands, in Scotland (notwithstanding particular exceptions in Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles) we generally lack a democratically mandated figure or body to represent or advocate the best interests of any particular island community on behalf of all residents.

Community Councils can serve as a helpful starting point for open discussions or surveys in some instances, with Development Trusts possibly better placed in others, while there are also elected Councillors with responsibilities for island constituents. Insofar as the development of the Scottish Islands Plan successfully engaged island populations in constructive processes towards deciding amongst ourselves what is best for our individual islands, perhaps some similar processes may now help to inform the Plan's implementation, factoring in new implications of COVID, alongside considerations of Brexit and challenges of climate adaptation.