

Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee
T3.60,
Scottish Parliament,
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

Date: 31 October 2019

Dear Committee,

Response to Call for Views on the National Islands Plan

We welcome the opportunity to respond to your call for evidence on the Proposed National Islands Plan and believe this plan is a positive way to help harness the potential of our islands and the people who live and work there.

SCDI recently published the report of The Rural Commission: *'An Economy for All of Scotland'* that outlines steps we believe need to be taken to support and capitalise on the potential that exists in every part of the country. We agree with the strategic objectives outlined in the National Islands Plan, but it's important to recognise the interconnection between each of these individual objectives. Successful communities need all of these objectives but the relative importance of each, and the prioritisation of them, will be different in each community. As such we don't believe any of these objects can be given a higher priority over another at the national plan level but at a local level the prioritisation of each will vary.

We agree that "an inclusive Plan will promote genuine community empowerment at the local level enabling decisions to be taken as close as possible to where their impact will be felt", and the success of the plan will be how effectively that is perceived. We also believe that a move to locate more decision makers and service deliverers on and close to our island communities could have a marked impact on the success of the services and their responsiveness to the local needs of island communities.

We particularly welcome the Government's commitment to produce a long-term plan and investment programme for new ferries and development at ports. Our islands rely on the connectivity our ferries provide and long-term certainty and confidence in the provision of services is vital. We also believe it's important to look at how we increase the frequency of ferry services and a simplification of vessel classes to deliver greater flexibility. It's also important to

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note the importance role that air services play and to take a holistic view of transport connectivity.

We welcome the recognition of housing as a particular issue in sustaining and growing many island areas. Our Rural Commission report highlights some of the challenges faced in developing new housing, bringing into use older properties, and carrying out improvements, where land values make it uneconomical. In particular, we'd like to see encouragement of properties with an annex, addressing the burden of VAT, and greater recognition of construction as a key sector of need.

Digital and mobile connectivity plays an ever more important role in delivering and accessing services. Ensuring that the rollout of fibre to the premises is delivered future proofed infrastructure is vital. Recognising that this connectivity is of greater importance where transport connectivity and access to public transport is more limited.

As we look to reach net-zero, we need to strike the balance between conservation, restoration, and utilisation of every part of Scotland, recognising that economic, environmental and community sustainability are interlinked. There will always be areas of the country that generate more carbon than others, but those areas are often the same as those which can generate the greatest renewable energy and have greater natural carbon storage. Ensuring we value and recognise the needs and resources of each area is important in understanding both sides of the same coin.

As with any plan its success will ultimately be determined by how well embedded in decision making it is, how much influence the people who live and work on our islands have into its delivery, and how well recognised the relationships are between each strategy.

We welcome the opportunity to continue to engage with the committee on its work and please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Best wishes,

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