

Scotland's Island Communities

Meeting the Challenges

A survey by the Scottish Islands Federation
August 2016



1. Foreword

Almost 80% of the UK's inhabited islands are found in Scotland. There are 93 and they stretch from North Ayrshire, Argyll and Bute, Highland, to the Outer Hebrides, Orkney and Shetland. An asset to Scotland and with enormous potential the islands are often held back by a range of challenges, some in common with the rest of rural Scotland and some intrinsic to their small island situation.

We wanted to capture the current thinking from island communities themselves about the main issues affecting them and how they have responded or could respond.

The survey is the beginning of a process that will be used primarily as a foundation on which the work of the Scottish Islands Federation (S.I.F.) will be based. It provides a valid resource which has been endorsed by the participants and we would like to thank the 72 groups that took part and all the networks that helped to promote it.

2. Methodology & sample

A survey was circulated to all the community councils, development trusts, community companies and trusts that we could find contact details for – we aimed to reach the islands with a population of 10 or more (63 islands). A total of 72 responses were received reaching 34 of the 63 islands and giving coverage of 54%.

Figure 1. Islands & survey responses

| Local Authority | Inhabited islands | Total population | Islands with pop of 10 or more | No of survey responses |
|-----------------|-------------------|------------------|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| Argyll & Bute | 23 | 15,105 | 15 | 25 |
| North Ayrshire | 3 | 6,036 | 2 | 1 |
| Highland | 14 | 10,349 | 6 | 15 |
| Eilean Siar | 14 | 27,684 | 11 | 16 |
| Orkney | 21 | 21,349 | 15 | 10 |
| Shetland | 16 | 23,167 | 14 | 3 |

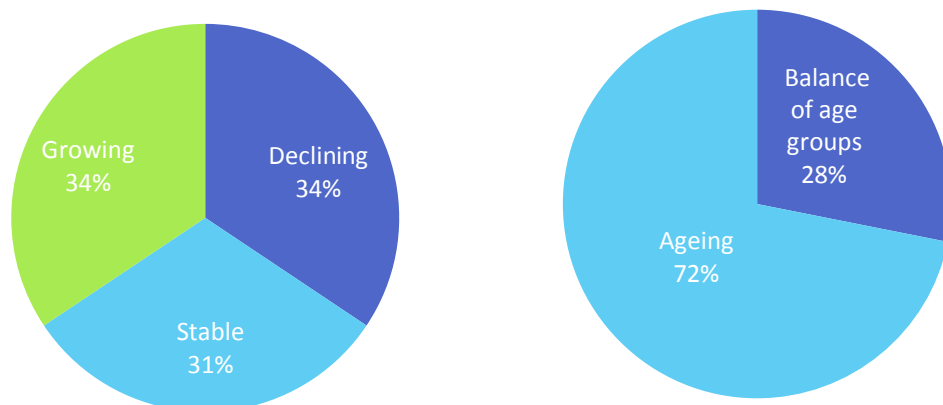
3. The islands - population

The islands have a combined population of 103,000 and while the overall population grew by 4% between 2001 and 2011, 32% of the islands showed a population decline. The majority of these were amongst the smaller islands with populations less than 50¹.

A similar picture from our survey; 34% felt the population was declining and the majority of these were the smaller islands.

The real concern highlighted was the shifting demographics with population becoming increasingly skewed towards older people.

Figure 2. Population change and demographics



¹ Scotland's Census 2011

4. The biggest challenges

Using a list of common challenges² that hinder island development and sustainability people were asked to attach a level of importance to each.

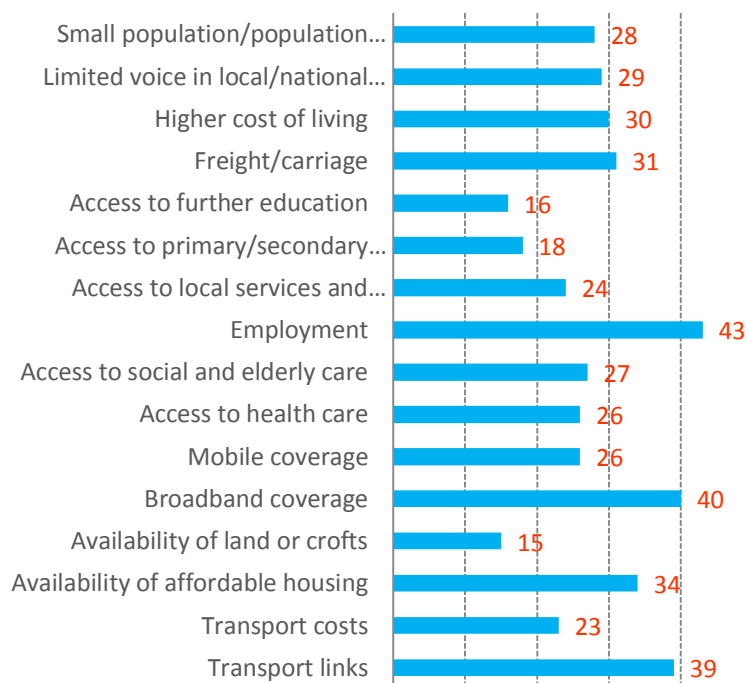


Figure 3.
% listed as most important

Many of these challenges are interconnected and it became clear that they are all considered important. This feedback is closely aligned with the draft Manifesto for Rural Scotland³ which, based on the collective views of a much larger representation of rural communities, includes each of these challenges as needs that must be addressed.

Each island has its own unique circumstances and these are reflected in how the challenges were prioritised:

Figure 4. The top 5 per region in order of priority

| Argyll & Bute | Highland | Eilean Siar | Orkney | Shetland | N Ayrshire |
|---------------|---------------------|-------------|---------------------|----------|------------|
| Transport | Health care | Employment | Broadband | TBC | Housing |
| Broadband | Housing | Broadband | Employment | | Broadband |
| Employment | Employment | Freight | Transport | | Transport |
| Housing | Elderly/Social care | Voice | Small pop | | Employment |
| Freight | Voice | Housing | Elderly/Social care | | Voice |

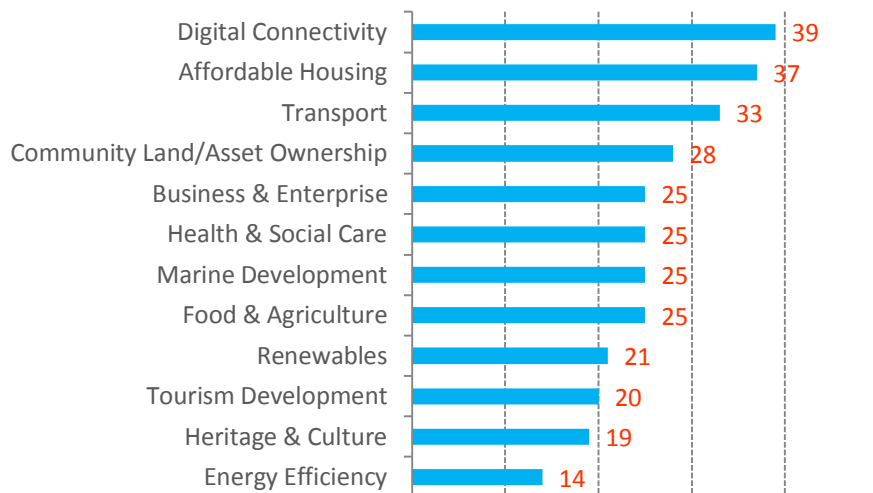
² Based on the 2007 Interreg IIC project [‘Meeting the Challenges’](#)

³ [Manifesto for Rural Scotland](#) by Scottish Rural Action

5. What could make the most difference?

Consideration was given to the opportunities that could make a difference to the sustainability of island communities:

Figure 5. What would make the biggest difference (% listed as most important)?



Amongst the top issues are broadband and transport. These were also highlighted at the recent EU Committee of the Regions Conference in Shetland which S.I.F. attended.

‘One of the key issues of the seminar was connection to high-speed broadband, while transport and an ageing population were also highlighted’⁴.

⁴ Key topics of discussion at a the EU Committee of the Regions Conference ‘Overcoming the Barriers to Economic Development, a Remote Island Perspective’

6. The islands – voice and local leadership

The majority of island communities that took part in the survey have a local plan in place. Some had already made great strides in tackling barriers.

- 47% owned assets and were able to generate some income for local reinvestment.
- 54% listed a lack of funding and/or the burden placed on volunteers as obstacles that hinder their effectiveness and sustainability.
- The survey highlighted that some communities sense that support, investment and decision making is becoming more centralised making it increasingly difficult to develop good jobs, housing, services, infrastructure and enterprise in the remote areas.
- The survey also suggests that communities themselves are often not engaged in the decision making that affects them - responses indicate that only 36% of the communities that took part in the survey have responded to key consultations affecting the islands.

Some of the obstacles

‘Lack of income means we cannot employ labour so everything has to be done by volunteers.’

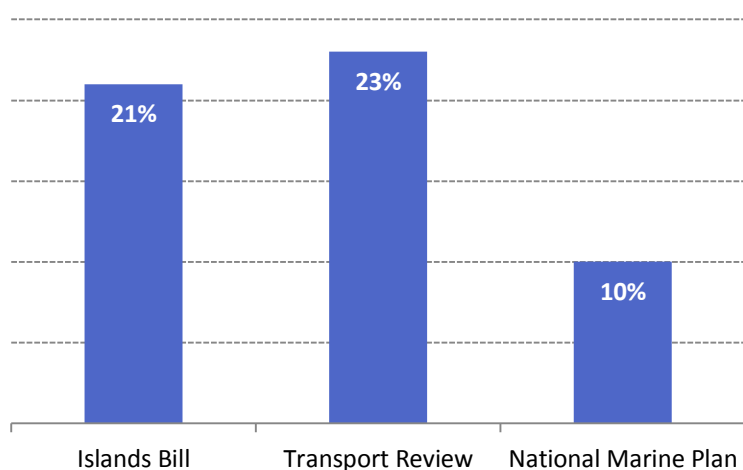
‘Funding and access to expertise to progress our priorities.’

‘Volunteer fatigue, staff support, no secure income at present’

‘Planning and other centralised decision making processes do not allow for the individual island view to be taken fully into consideration’.

‘Rural environments suffer at the expense of regional towns and cities, for example, Inverness’.

Figure 6. Percentage of respondents engaged in recent consultations.



These issues around community empowerment, support and engagement are echoed by communities across Scotland and are highlighted by the Scottish Community Alliance⁵ in its report ‘Local People Leading’.

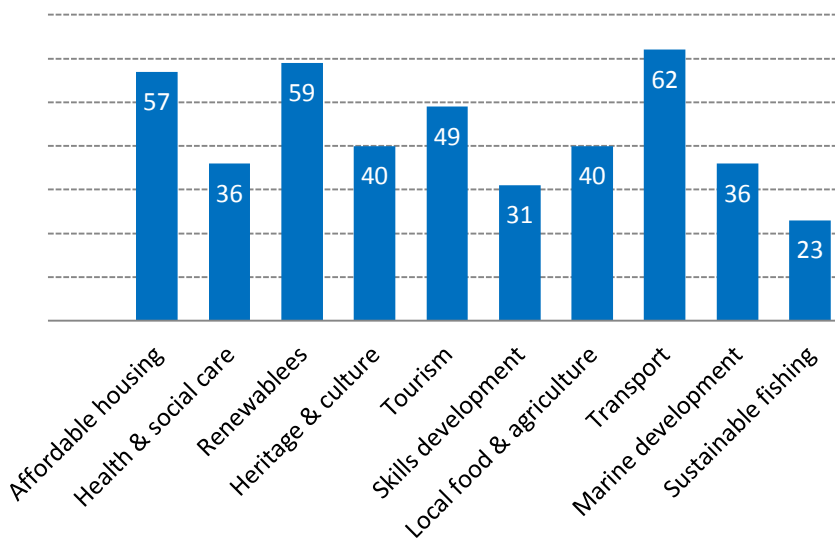
⁵ Scottish Community Alliance is a coalition of 19 community-based networks, including S.I.F.

This remoteness from decision-making is exacerbated by island geography and governance and is felt by small islands across Europe. The European Small Islands Federation (ESIN)⁶ is championing the case for developing new ‘island sustainability indicators’ to rectify the lack of support and investment allocated to small islands as a result of their current ‘invisibility’ at EU level.

7. Working together

The survey indicated a desire for networking events, regular island newsletter, project visits and an annual island event. Topics of interest are prioritised below:

Figure 7. Topics of most interest for networking and information exchange



8. Conclusions

Using the survey as a starting point our aim was to gather the views of island communities themselves about the main issues affecting the islands and how they could be overcome. 72 groups from across 34 individual islands took part and their feedback indicates the following:

- 1 There is an urgent need to find ways of encouraging more young people to live on the islands as well as better ways of looking after an increasingly ageing population.
- 2 A common list of challenges hinder island development and sustainability. The top four are felt to be:

Employment Broadband Transport Affordable Housing

⁶ ESIN aims to help small island communities remain viable through informing and influencing policy and by fostering co-operation between the islands. S.I.F. was one of its founding members in 2001.

3 Some of these challenges are in common with the rest of rural Scotland, some are unique to the islands and some are more keenly felt on the islands due to their unique circumstances: **there is a need to understand the small island situation better and recognise that it is different.**

4 Opportunities reflect the obstacles and the findings call for strategic action on all the big issues, the top three being:

Broadband

Affordable Housing

Transport

5 Island communities themselves are best placed to understand the barriers and solutions and also have the potential to become key drivers in local sustainable development: **there is a need for a stronger voice for island communities, more engagement in decision making and more local governance.**

6 There is an appetite for communities to work together across the islands to share ideas and learn from each other.

9. Next steps

S.I.F. was set up in 2000 by a network of islanders that recognised a need for a collective voice for island issues as well as the potential for island communities to learn from each other. In May 2016 we were awarded a very welcome contribution from the Scottish Government which has greatly increased our capacity.

This survey has been the starting point for developing a programme of activity based on the needs and aspirations of island communities and from it we have identified the following main objectives that we will work towards:

- Promoting innovative sustainable projects and inter-island collaboration.
- Building a representative voice on matters specific to the islands.
- Using that voice to inform and influence policy at all levels of government.
- Connecting island communities to share experience, ideas and expertise.

In the first instance a regular newsletter will be developed along with social media to keep everyone up to date and involved as things progress.

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