Item: 15

Policy and Resources Committee: 16 June 2026

National Islands Plan

Report by Chief Executive.

ORKNEY ISLANDS COUNCIL

1. Overview

1.1. This report presents details in relation to the National Islands Plan, for members' information.

1.2. The Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 provides the statutory basis for island-proofing policy and requires consideration of island communities in decision-making.

1.3. The first National Islands Plan was published in 2019, establishing a framework for national policy in island communities, and included 13 Strategic Objectives and over 130 commitments, covering a broad range of island issues.

1.4. A statutory review of the first Plan was undertaken in 2023 as required by the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018.

1.5. The review involved extensive engagement, including in-person events held in Orkney and other island communities, workshops, and an online consultation portal.

1.6. Feedback highlighted mixed views on progress and a perception that limited impact had been achieved across some objectives.

1.7. Stakeholders called for a more focused, deliverable plan with clearer accountability and stronger national/local alignment.

1.8. The National Islands Plan 2026 has been developed in response to this feedback, reflecting a continued dialogue with island communities and partners.

2. Recommendation

2.1. It is recommended that members of the Committee:

i. Note the contents of the National Islands Plan (2026) and National Islands Plan Implementation Route Map, attached as Appendices 1 and 2 respectively to this report.

3. Key points

3.1. The new National Islands Plan was published in February 2026, replacing the first Plan published in 2019.

3.2. The overarching objective of the new Plan is population retention and attraction across Scotland's islands.

3.3. The number of Strategic Objectives has been reduced from 13 to 7 to create a more focused framework.

3.4. The Plan includes fewer, more targeted commitments with clearer delivery routes and responsibilities.

3.5. A key change is the introduction of an Implementation Route Map setting out timescales and delivery partners.

3.6. There is a stronger emphasis on linking national priorities with local plans and enabling place-based solutions.

3.7. Monitoring arrangements have been strengthened, including annual reporting and use of the Scottish Islands Survey and data dashboard.

3.8. In an Orkney context, the following themes are relevant:

- Ferry-linked islands face ongoing challenges related to depopulation, service access and economic sustainability.
- Connectivity remaining a critical issue, including ferry reliability, air links and digital infrastructure across Orkney.
- Housing availability and affordability are identified as key barriers to population retention and economic growth in Orkney.
- Orkney has strong opportunities in sectors such as renewable energy, marine industries and tourism, which the Plan seeks to support.
- Community empowerment, local planning, and partnership working with Orkney Islands Council are central to delivering outcomes locally.

4. Next steps

4.1. Officers will continue to review the National Islands Plan in detail to identify key implications for Orkney policy and service delivery.

4.2. Further discussions will be held with Scottish Government and partner organisations on delivery expectations and opportunities.

4.3. Ongoing monitoring arrangements will be established to track implementation and outcomes locally.

4.4. Future reports will be brought forward to provide updates on progress and recommended actions.

4.5. A seminar with Elected Members will be organised to update on the above, to consider the implications of the Plan in an Orkney context, and how this work can best be supported.

For Further Information please contact:
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Implications of Report

1. **Financial –** None arising directly from the report recommendations.
2. **Legal -** None
3. **Corporate Governance -** None
4. **Human Resources -** None
5. **Equalities –** The Plan references tackling inequalities including through Community Wealth Building and continuing reducing health inequalities as set out in the Service Renewal Framework (2025).
6. **Island Communities Impact –** The Plan seeks to improve outcomes for island communities in a number of ways, including that public authorities must consider island needs, strengthen island resilience, sustaining populations, and addressing unique challenges facing these communities.
7. **Links to Council Plan –** The Plan makes clear the Government has worked closely with local authorities to strengthen connections between the National Islands Plan and local planning. The document sets out that it seeks to develop a national framework that enables local solutions.
8. **Links to Local Outcomes Improvement Plan –** None.
9. **Environmental and Climate Risk –** The Plan includes a section on Climate, Nature and Energy, tying together the work of strategics and plans already in place such as the draft Climate Change Plan, Coastal Change Adaptation Guidance, and the Flood Resilience Strategy.
10. **Risk –** None.
11. **Procurement –** None.
12. **Health and Safety –** None.
13. **Property and Assets –** None.
14. **Information Technology –** None.

15. **Cost of Living –** The Plan seeks to improve cost of living outcomes by embedding island needs into policy and services reduces barriers, boosts incomes, and improves access to support while promoting fairness.

List of Background Papers

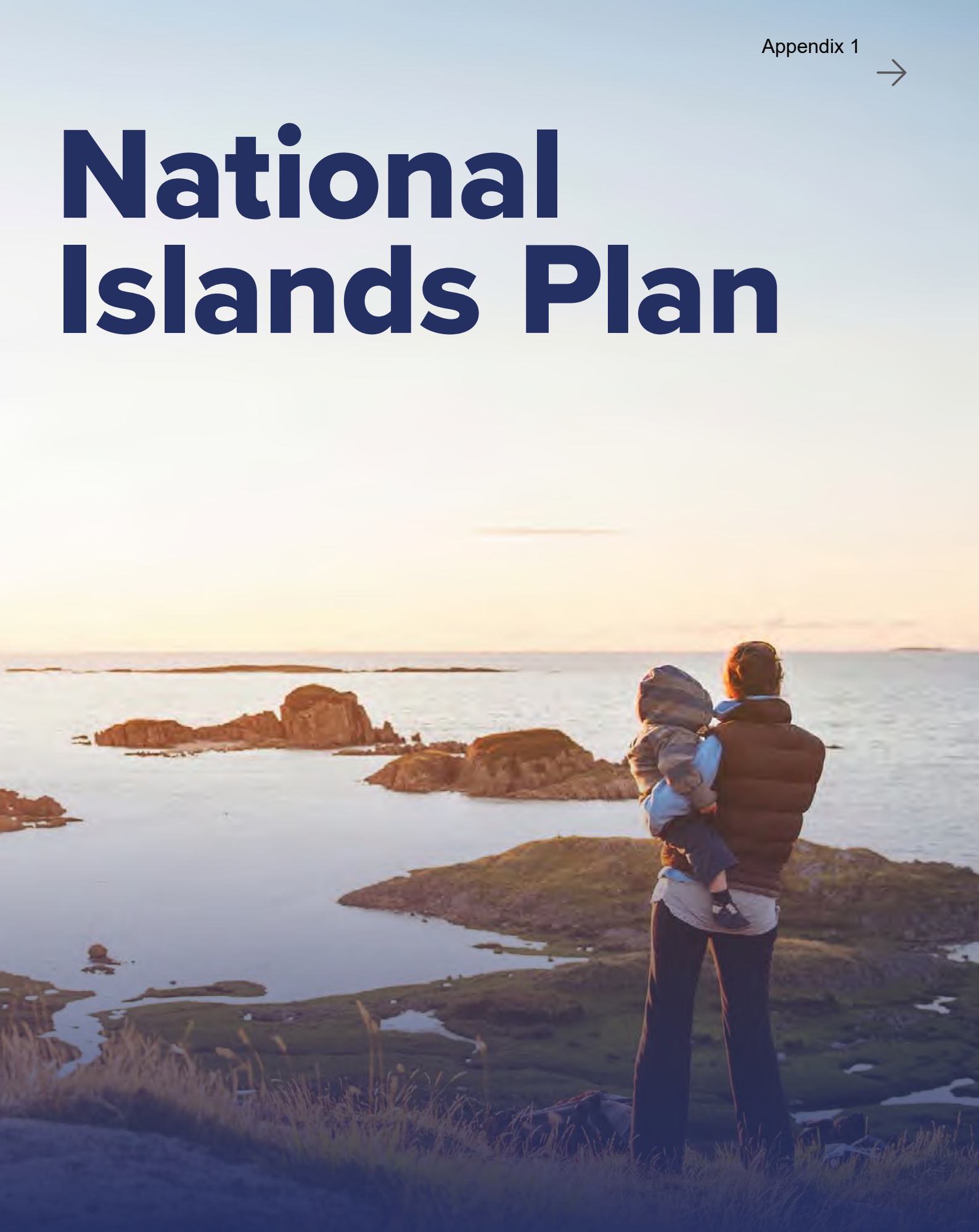
None.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – National Islands Plan (2026).

Appendix 2 – National Islands Plan – Implementation Route Map.

National Islands Plan



2026

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Ministerial Foreword

Islands are central to our identity as a nation and a core part of Scotland's international image. With their diverse economies, deep-rooted heritage and inspiring natural beauty, islands play a vital role in realising our vision of Scotland as a successful country in which to live, work and study.

Island communities boast a remarkable concentration of talent, innovation and resilience. Resourcefulness and self-reliance are core threads in the fabric that bonds communities to their islands. The Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 recognises that our islands face distinct circumstances and requires public authorities to consider the needs of island communities when exercising their functions.

The first National Islands Plan, published in 2019, established a framework for national policy and investment in support of island communities' ambitions. Implementation progressed against a background of major challenges including the COVID-19 pandemic, the wide-ranging effects of an unwelcome Brexit, and the cost-of-living crisis. The resilience that islanders have shown in the face of these obstacles cannot be overstated. Nor, however, should we ever take it for granted.

Significant cross-government investment accompanied the delivery of the first National Islands Plan and bolstered our response to those additional pressures. Yet the review of the Plan made clear that more needs to be done. We wholeheartedly accept this feedback and have listened carefully to concerns and proposals put forward.

> "Population retention and attraction is the key and overarching objective of this new Plan."

The input we received from island communities and organisations has been central to shaping this second National Islands Plan. I am incredibly grateful to all those individuals and groups who have given their time and shared their ideas with us.

Developed in close partnership with local authorities and public agencies, the actions in this Plan inject further impetus into the delivery of policies, services and investment that equip island communities to pursue their own priorities. The Plan recognises that significant challenges remain, while also embracing the transformational opportunities for economic and social development on our islands.

Population retention and attraction is the key and overarching objective of this new Plan. This sets a clear vision for its implementation and underlines the Scottish Government's unreserved view that thriving island communities and economies are essential to Scotland's present and future success.

A new milestone in our longstanding dialogue with island communities, this Plan restates the Scottish Government's commitment to working with and for islanders, and provides a clear programme of actions to build ever more resilient, sustainable and prosperous islands.

Mairi Gougeon MSP
Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands

Innis

Pàdraig MacAoidh / Peter Mackay – Scotland's Makar

Gus guth làn faoileagmhor a thoirt dha na h-eileanan-sa –
na clèibh de dh'innis-mharannan 's stacan uaibhridh

na clachan-staire agus drochaidean cuimhne,
na tasgaidhean facail, pràisichean agus hieroglyphan gneiss,

na gleocan geòlasach, bàtaichean sgeireach agus raointean gluasadach,
na h-imleagan-sa, na puingean-deiridh-sa, na h-iomallan-fairge gun chrìoch,

na nid sgairbh, na h-uirighean-sa, garaidhean agus spòran air fleod,
na pòcanan adhair, na cuachan breò agus na comharran-stiùiridh

nan seasamh gu diongalta an aghaidh nan sruthan, ag ath-aithris
uisge, bùrn is sàl dhan a' ghaoith – bhiodh feum agaibh èisteachd

ris an t-sluaisreadh aig an t-shoormal ann an geodha
ri gugail peedie na curracaige a' sgiathadh atween wadders

agus ris a h-uile duine a tha eòlach air an iomadh ainm ac'
agus a chleachdas iad mar chairt-iùil airson faighinn hame

To give full, gull-throated voice to these islands –
these woven creel archipelagos and proud stacs,

stepping stones to themselves, word-stores,
crucibles and memory bridges, these hieroglyphs of gneiss,

geologic clocks, rocky lifeboats and omphaloi,
sand-shifting landing strips, these end points and infinite

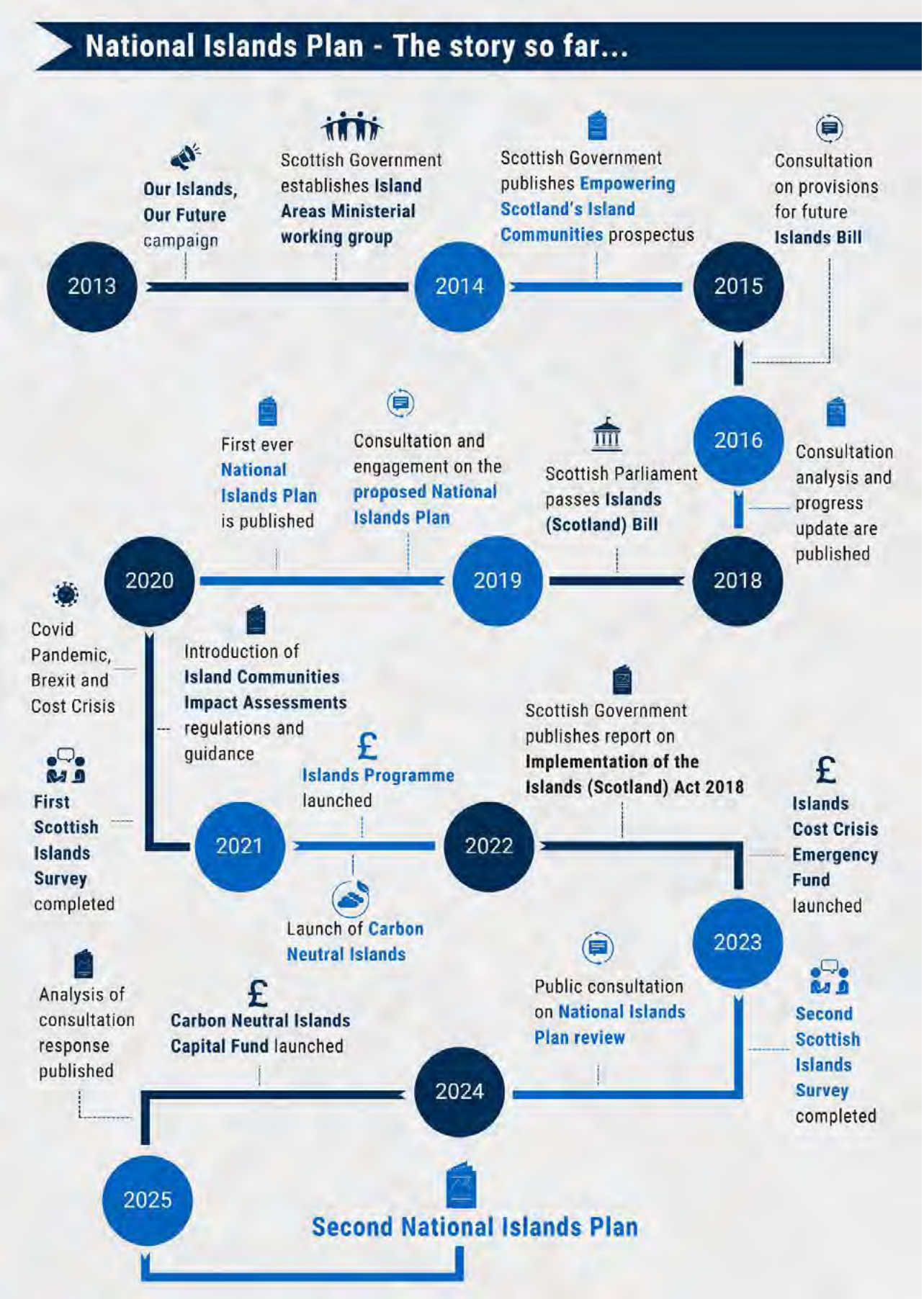
coastlines, cormorant ledges, holts and hovers,
floating spores, pockets of air, bioluminescent nests

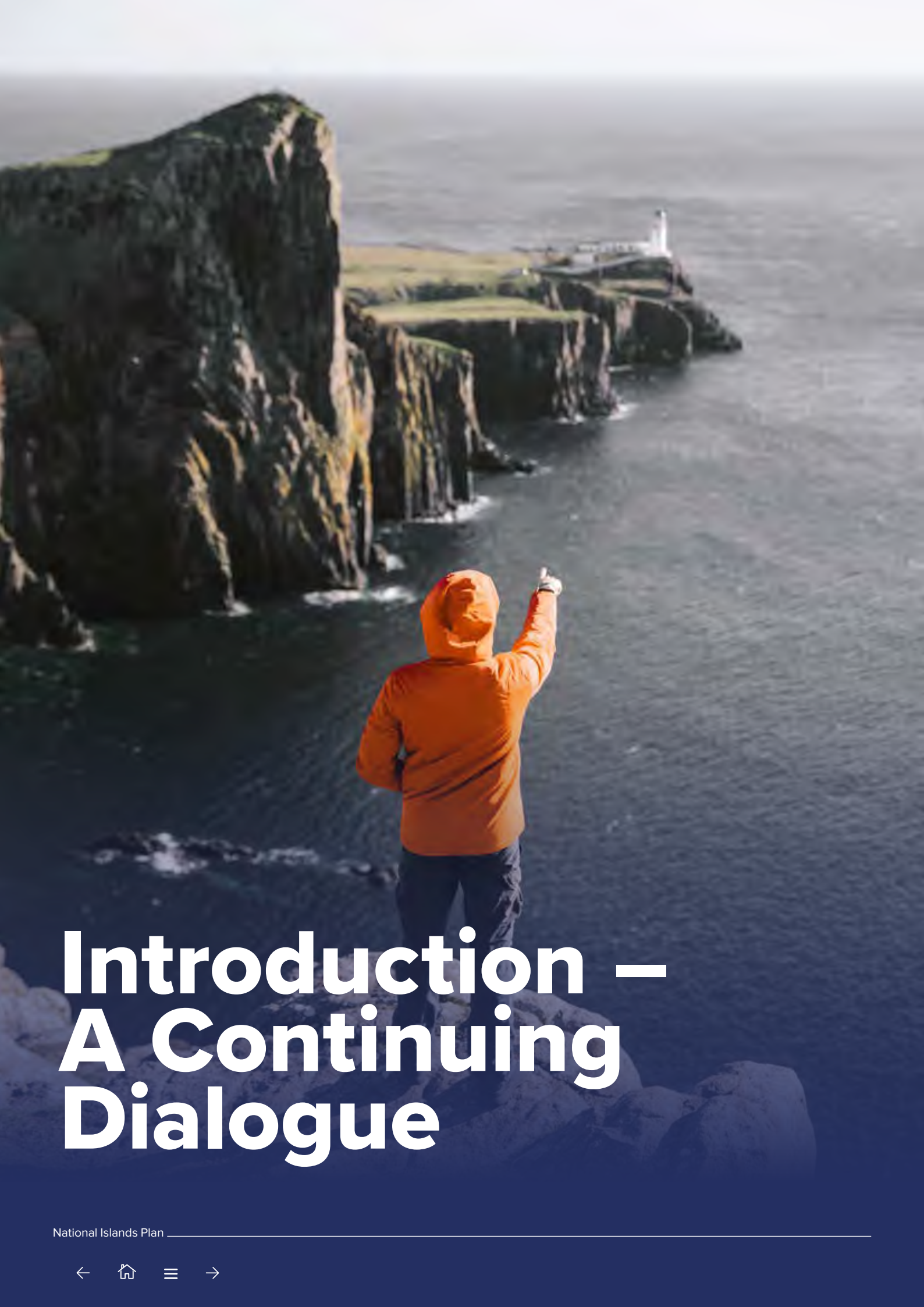
and landmarks each braced against their own currents,
their every fresh reiteration of water tilted to the winds –

you must listen to the sluaisreadh at the shoormal,
to the peedie calls of the curracag atween wadders,

and to all those who tend their many names
and depend on them to navigate their ways hame

Innis Gaelic: n. island; sheltered valley protected by a wood; choice place (Islay). Frequently anglicised as 'inch'.
v. tell, recount, relate
Scots: n. lodgings, quarters; a lodging-place; a person's residence or dwelling-place; a town-residence; an innhouse


National Islands Plan - The story so far...
2013
Our Islands, Our Future campaign
2014
Scottish Government establishes Island Areas Ministerial working group
2015
Scottish Government publishes Empowering Scotland's Island Communities prospectus
Consultation on provisions for future Islands Bill
2016
Consultation analysis and progress update are published
2018
Scottish Parliament passes Islands (Scotland) Bill
2019
First ever National Islands Plan is published
Consultation and engagement on the proposed National Islands Plan
2020
Covid Pandemic, Brexit and Cost Crisis
Introduction of Island Communities Impact Assessments regulations and guidance
2021
First Scottish Islands Survey completed
Islands Programme launched
Launch of Carbon Neutral Islands
2022
Scottish Government publishes report on Implementation of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018
Islands Cost Crisis Emergency Fund launched
2023
Public consultation on National Islands Plan review
Second Scottish Islands Survey completed
2024
Analysis of consultation response published
Carbon Neutral Islands Capital Fund launched
2025
Second National Islands Plan



Introduction – A Continuing Dialogue

Introduction – A Continuing Dialogue

The publication of Scotland's first National Islands Plan marked a significant milestone in the policy dialogue between the Scottish Government and island communities.

Delivering on one of the main provisions of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, the Plan placed island communities at the forefront of national policy-making and promoted greater cross-government coordination of policies and investments affecting their lives.

Extensive engagement with communities and local authorities informed the structure and content of the first Plan, which included 13 Strategic Objectives and over 130 individual commitments. Since 2021, Annual Reports have kept the Scottish Parliament and the public informed of progress with its implementation.

As required by the Islands Act, a full review was carried out in 2023. A public consultation comprising in-person events, virtual workshops, and a dedicated online portal gave everyone with an interest in the Plan the opportunity to comment on its impact and effectiveness. An independent report summarising the main findings was published in April 2024.

The review confirmed that, while progress has been made, significant challenges remain. This second National Islands Plan responds to consultation feedback and renews our dialogue with communities and local government in support of island ambitions. It builds on the human rights-based approach at the heart of the first Plan and reflects the recommendations of the Scottish Human Rights Commission[1] to strengthen the realisation of rights across island and rural areas – particularly through direct engagement with islanders and a more flexible, localised approach to delivery.

Through this Plan, we are reaffirming our commitment to further embed Island Communities Impact Assessments (ICIAs) into policy development and decision-making across government. We will continue to work with relevant authorities to ensure that ICIAs are applied consistently and transparently, helping to shape policies that reflect the realities of island life and promote a deeper understanding of island circumstances.

This Plan also aligns closely with the Scottish Government's four overarching priorities – tackling child poverty, growing the economy, accelerating climate action and improving public services – ensuring that island needs and opportunities are clearly represented in national delivery frameworks.

Direct engagement with islanders and their lived experiences has again been central to our approach. We held in-person events across all island areas, meeting islanders in village halls and community centres, and hosted online sessions to ensure wide participation and representation.

Local authorities have been close, constructive partners throughout the Plan's development. Their advice and contributions, combined with community feedback, have helped shape priorities and actions. We have also worked with a range of public bodies – including Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Crown Estate Scotland, NatureScot and Consumer Scotland – and will maintain this multi-agency approach throughout implementation.

> "Direct engagement with islanders and their lived experiences has again been central to our approach."

Introduction – A Continuing Dialogue

Table 1 - You Asked, We Did – Key Themes

You Asked	We Did
The first National Islands Plan had too many Strategic Objectives and commitments.	We have condensed the number of Strategic Objectives from 13 to seven. This Plan also features fewer commitments compared to the first iteration.
The new Plan should prioritise Strategic Objectives.	While reflecting on shared challenges and opportunities, the Plan acknowledges that every island is unique and that priorities are best set locally. On that basis, we do not propose a top-down prioritisation.
Better and clearer links between national and local.	We have worked closely with local authorities to strengthen connections between the National Islands Plan and local planning. We have given greater emphasis to developing a national framework that enables local solutions.
A clearer monitoring and evaluation framework, with regular opportunities for communities to provide feedback and receive updates.	Information on monitoring, reporting and engaging with stakeholders is provided at page 72. The Plan commits to more regular communication with island communities about progress made with implementation.
More information on who will be responsible for delivering each commitment and timescales for implementation.	The Implementation Route Map published alongside this Plan provides details about delivery timeframes and partners involved in implementing each commitment.
The Plan should not duplicate commitments that are already underway, or which the government has a statutory obligation to deliver.	We have put greater focus on forward-looking actions, targeted interventions and strengthening the island dimension of ongoing initiatives.

Looking ahead, the Plan acts as a bridge between national ambitions and local realities – supporting a fair transition to Net Zero, stronger island economies and sustainable, resilient communities. It responds to island challenges that are intensifying in the context of climate change, demographic imbalance and the cost-of-living, while recognising the innovation, creativity and collective strengths that continue to define island life.

The 2023 public consultation confirmed strong support for a new National Islands Plan with fewer Strategic Objectives and commitments. The first Plan was recognised as comprehensive and ambitious, and respondents praised its success in identifying the key challenges facing islands. However, respondents also noted that its broad scope – covering both ongoing and new initiatives – made it difficult to understand which policies and investments it was directly responsible for delivering. In other words, what difference it made that would not have happened otherwise.

The consultation also underlined that many of the challenges identified in the first Plan persist, highlighting the need for continued and sustained action.

In response, this new Plan adopts a leaner structure, condensing the number of Strategic Objectives from 13 to seven and placing greater emphasis on forward-looking actions where it can add distinct value. In this way, we aim to strengthen its role in delivering positive benefits, while building on policy interventions already underway. While continuing to reflect interdependencies across island-facing policies and investments, this Plan introduces a targeted set of actions that are tangible and directly relevant to our islands' challenges and opportunities.

As set out in the Implementation Route Map, each commitment is accompanied by a delivery timeframe and a list of delivery partners, improving transparency and clarifying responsibilities in line with feedback from the consultation.

Connecting National and Local

We recognise that every island is different, with its own unique mix of opportunities, challenges and aspirations. While providing a refreshed national framework for action applicable to all island areas, this Plan avoids one-size-fits-all solutions and embraces place-based approaches.

We have placed strong emphasis on avoiding prescriptive top-down statements. Instead, the commitments set out in this Plan are designed to provide national-level support for solutions that are developed and delivered locally, in ways that are meaningful and relatable for the communities involved.

For the same reasons, we have not ranked the Strategic Objectives in order of priority. While consultation showed that some challenges and ambitions are shared across multiple areas, we believe a rigid and centralised approach would run contrary to the principle that communities are best placed to establish local priorities.

Consultation feedback also encouraged us to reflect on how the Plan dovetails with, and supports, locally developed plans and strategies. Given the diversity of our islands and local variations in planning approaches, identifying a single overarching mechanism that is fully representative of local arrangements and terminologies has proved challenging. Concerns also emerged about implying a hierarchy between the National Islands Plan and local efforts, which would run against the ethos of this document.

We have instead engaged directly with each council – and will continue to do so throughout implementation – to ensure stronger integration between this Plan and local planning frameworks, particularly through established mechanisms such as community planning partnerships. This will enable greater flexibility in local delivery, supporting a more tailored approach to strengthening the connections between this document and locally developed plans.

In addition, through this Plan we have committed to supporting island communities to participate in planning processes, encouraging a bottom-up approach and empowering them to actively shape their futures through tools such as Local Place Plans and Community Action Plans.

Our Vision

Our Key Objective: Population Retention and Attraction

Population retention and attraction is the overarching objective of this new National Islands Plan.

This statement of intent received strong endorsement from communities, local authorities and public agencies during consultation. It communicates a clear vision, which the actions and investments in this Plan collectively support. By putting population levels centre-stage, we underscore the Scottish Government's determination to sustain the long-term resilience of all our islands.

The analysis provided below summarises the demographic pressures facing Scotland's islands. Beneath the statistics lie stories that numbers cannot fully capture. On smaller islands in particular, people often undertake several community roles. Losing just one person – let alone a whole family – can therefore have significant implications for local services and community resilience.

This Plan is for all who live on, or who may choose to move to, Scotland's islands. It recognises that sustaining vibrant and successful communities depends on contributions from all generations. Older residents play a particularly important role – often on a voluntary basis – in promoting community development, delivering local services, and ensuring their island's voice is heard.

Reflecting consultation feedback, this Plan places additional emphasis on young people and the economically active population, whose presence is critical to achieving more balanced demographic profiles and securing the long-term sustainability of island economies and services. There are encouraging trends to build on. The Scottish Islands Survey 2023 found that 79% of young participants (aged 18-35) intended to remain on their island – up from 71% in 2020. In addition, 41% of respondents had moved to their island for the first time, often citing quality of life and economic opportunity as key reasons.

This Plan does not introduce national targets for population growth on our islands, nor does it set fixed milestones for any specific areas. Each island community should determine its own pace of change. Central to our approach is a commitment to ensuring that islanders can access the services and opportunities they need at every stage of life, making it easier for those who wish to stay. At the same time, we aim to make Scotland's islands even more appealing places to live, work and study for those considering a move or planning to return.

The Addressing Depopulation Action Plan (ADAP, 2024) sets out the Scottish Government's strategic approach to supporting areas affected by population decline. It commits to working with regional and local partners to deliver sustainable, locally led solutions – reflecting the varied demographic needs of communities. Since the publication of the ADAP, a programme of interventions has been introduced across a range of island communities experiencing population decline. Lessons from projects delivered elsewhere in Scotland are also being harnessed and, where relevant, shared with island communities to inform further local initiatives. This National Islands Plan directs further efforts towards achieving the ambitions set out in the ADAP and expressed by island communities.

Demographic Trends on Scotland's Islands

The overall population of Scotland's islands has remained fairly stable over the last 20 years. Census 2022 data show that the number of island residents stood at just under 103,000 – around 2% of Scotland's population. This is slightly below 2011 (103,700) but above 2001 (99,700).

Underneath this relative stability lies a mixed picture and significant variation between and within island areas. Compared with 2011, Na h-Eileanan Siar recorded the largest population decline of all Scottish council areas (-5.5%), while Orkney recorded a 3% increase. In Orkney, population growth was concentrated on the mainland and connected islands, while the Outer Isles lost 5.2% of their residents[2]. Even within the latter, however, differences were marked – for example, the population of Papa Westray grew between 2001 and 2022. These contrasts underline the need for localised, flexible approaches – a key principle of this Plan.

Island populations are also ageing. In 2022, 26% of island residents were aged 65 or over, up from 21% in 2011 and significantly above mainland Scotland (20%). About 28% of residents aged 16+ are retired, compared with 23% nationally.

The proportion of island residents under 16 has continued to fall – from 20% in 2001 and 17% in 2011 to 15% in 2022. Pupil numbers have also declined in all island authorities between 2001 and 2024, with both Argyll and Bute and Na h-Eileanan Siar recording a drop of just under 25%[3].

Looking ahead, projections show continued ageing and loss of working-age population, anticipated to be greater on islands than many other parts of Scotland. All island local authorities are expected to either see population decline or growth below the Scottish average by mid-2032[4], posing risks for local economies and public services.

Fertility rates in island local authorities are slightly higher than Scotland's average[5], but the proportion of residents under 15 is still projected to fall between mid-2022 and mid-2032 (from -13% in Orkney to -21% in Na h-Eileanan Siar). Over the same period, the proportion of residents of pensionable age is set to increase in all island authorities.

With deaths expected to outnumber births in all island local authorities, inward migration will be crucial to sustaining populations. All island councils are projected to see more people moving in than leaving in the period up to 2032, largely driven by migration from elsewhere in the UK.

Our Approach: Community Wealth Building

Community Wealth Building (CWB) will be the key approach guiding the implementation of this National Islands Plan.

During our consultation, communities emphasised the need to strengthen local supply chains, promote fair work, and ensure public investment delivers direct benefits for islanders. These priorities align closely with the five pillars of CWB embedded in the government's economic strategy[6].

Our vision for thriving islands is one where wealth and wellbeing are locally rooted, supply chains are shortened, and economic opportunities and benefits are maximised locally. By increasing the circulation of wealth among island communities, inequalities can be tackled more effectively, and people are offered stronger, local routes out of poverty.

Scottish islands already demonstrate a strong culture of community action and locally led sustainable development. They host a high density of social enterprises – with Na h-Eileanan Siar, Shetland and Orkney boasting the highest numbers per capita in Scotland[7] – and around a quarter of all community-owned assets nationwide are located on islands. Na h-Eileanan Siar alone accounts for 72% of Scotland's community-owned land[8]. The buyouts of Eigg, Gigha and Ulva stand as emblematic examples of this success. Ownership of local assets – whether businesses, land or property – can boost island economies and ensure that profits are reinvested in ways that directly benefit communities.

The Community Wealth Building (Scotland) Bill was passed by the Scottish Parliament in February 2026. Once it comes into force, the Bill will place duties on the Scottish Ministers, local authorities and relevant public bodies to embed CWB as a core element of economic development through the mandatory preparation of a Ministerial CWB Statement and local CWB action plans. Na h-Eileanan Siar and North Ayrshire – with a focus on Arran and Cumbrae – were among the local authority areas whose expertise contributed to the development of the Bill.
Working with local government and public agencies, we will anchor the delivery of this Plan in CWB principles to ensure that decisions, assets and benefits are firmly in the hands of islanders.

Case Study – Lochranza Country Inn

In 2022, the North Arran Community Benefit Society (NACBS) secured a grant award of just under £484,000 from the Scottish Land Fund to acquire the former Lochranza Hotel, which had ceased operations following the COVID-19 pandemic. Through a combination of further private and public funding, NACBS completed the refurbishment of the building, bringing a fully redeveloped asset into the hands of local people.

The Lochranza Country Inn opened its doors in May 2023. It provides hospitality services for visitors and a community space to tackle isolation, supporting local employment and the island supply chain. Surplus profits are reinvested into the Inn or used as contributions to projects benefitting the local community.

How this Plan is Structured

This refreshed National Islands Plan is structured around seven Strategic Objectives that reflect both the evidence we gathered and the priorities that communities told us matter most to them. Each chapter follows a consistent structure:

- an overview of the issue and why it matters for islands;
- key evidence, including both positive trends and persistent challenges;
- a summary of current Scottish Government activity; and
- commitments being taken forward through this Plan. All commitments can be found in the Implementation Route Map outlining timescales and delivery partners.

Population Retention and Attraction

To support people to live, work and thrive on Scotland's islands by facilitating locally led solutions for population retention and attraction.

Connectivity
To deliver reliable, affordable and integrated transport and digital connectivity, enabling social and economic links to, from and between islands.

Housing
To increase the availability of affordable, suitable homes on islands, supporting economic growth, year-round communities, essential services and long-term population sustainability.

Health and Social Care
To improve access to tailored health and care on islands by strengthening local services, embedding digital care where appropriate, and giving island communities more influence over decisions.

Economy, Education and Skills
To grow sustainable island economies through targeted investment, support for local businesses, and education and training opportunities that enable islanders to learn and work locally.

Climate, Nature and Energy
To accelerate the transition to net zero on islands by supporting renewable and nature-based solutions, ensuring local ownership and securing fair returns for island communities while building long-term resilience.

Poverty and Social Justice
To reduce poverty and inequality on islands by addressing higher living costs, tackling fuel challenges, and improving access to services and opportunities.

Empowered Communities and Culture
To strengthen island communities by investing in local leadership, building community capacity, and supporting island cultures, languages and heritage.

Connectivity

Connectivity

Transport and digital connectivity are fundamental to the social, economic and cultural life of Scotland's islands. They help to mitigate the challenges of distance and improve equity of access for islanders.

A combination of ferry services, aviation and fixed links provides transport connectivity to and from Scotland's islands. These services are lifelines for islanders and their economies, supporting two-way access to public services, supplies, jobs and markets, and enabling people to reach facilities not available locally.

A reliable, well-integrated transport system is essential to sustaining and growing island populations. For "islands off islands" – those that rely on multiple travel stages to reach the Scottish mainland – the challenges are even more complex, with higher costs, longer journeys, and fewer alternatives when disruption strikes.

Islanders are known for their resilience and ability to plan ahead. Yet, extended periods of disruption to transport services can have far-reaching impacts. Essential supplies – from food and medicines to fuel and perishable goods – are particularly vulnerable, affecting households, businesses and communities alike. Climate change is expected to bring more frequent and severe weather events. This will place additional pressure on the ability to maintain reliable services in the years ahead. Much of the current transport infrastructure is also ageing and substantial investments are underway to improve resilience and efficiency across networks.

Published in May 2025, the Islands Connectivity Plan (ICP) Strategic Approach sets out the Scottish Government's vision for ferry services that are safe, reliable, affordable and inclusive. Alongside it, the Vessels and Ports Plan provides a long-term investment roadmap for renewing the fleet and upgrading port infrastructure for the Clyde and Hebrides (CHFS) and Northern Isles Ferry Services (NIFS) networks. The Scottish Government's Aviation Statement (2024), meanwhile, recognises the importance of air services in linking island communities to the mainland, opening onward travel opportunities within Scotland, across the UK and internationally.

The transport sections of this Plan build on the commitments outlined in the documents above, fostering greater coordination and driving forward a shared ambition for prosperous, sustainable, and well-connected island communities.

With more public and private services available online, digital connectivity can reduce the need to travel and increase equity of access for island residents. Fast and reliable digital connectivity is also a driver of economic growth, opening new markets to businesses of all sizes and supporting individual opportunities for remote working.

Although responsibility for telecommunications rests with the UK Government, ongoing Scottish Government investments in digital infrastructure have contributed to significant improvements in broadband and mobile coverage across many island areas. This is reflected in the largely positive feedback from respondents to the Scottish Islands Survey 2023[9]. However, gaps and "not-spots" remain, underlining the need for continued effort to extend infrastructure and improve digital access further.

The knowledge, lived experience and priorities of islanders are crucial to delivering effective connectivity – whether by sea, air, road or online.

Ferries

The ICP is the Scottish Government's principal policy document on island transport connectivity, with a priority focus on delivering reliable and resilient ferry services across the CHFS and NIFS networks.

Table 2 offers an overview of planned investments in the renewal of the Government-owned ferry fleet, with additional details available in the Vessels and Ports Plan. Six new major vessels for the CHFS network are in delivery, with the MV Glen Sannox

entering service on the Arran route in January 2025. Through Caledonian Maritime Assets Limited (CMAL), work is also progressing on seven new fully electric small vessels, due to be introduced from 2027 onwards.

For the NIFS network, the procurement of two new freight flex vessels is now underway to replace the MV Helliar and MV Hildasay, enhancing capacity and reliability for both goods and passengers.

Taken together, these investments will replace over a third of the 40 vessels currently serving CHFS and NIFS routes.

This National Islands Plan is underpinned by a firm recognition that each island is unique. It follows that transport connectivity needs also differ from island to island, and can shift over time. Through the ICP, we have committed to completing Community Needs Assessments for every route in the CHFS and NIFS networks. The intention is that they will be refreshed every five years to maintain an up-to-date picture of local transport needs and the options for addressing them.

Island local authorities face similar challenges in renewing their ferry fleets and infrastructure. While developing investment cases and securing funding options is the responsibility of each council, Scottish Ministers have provided targeted support where possible. This has included the establishment of Ferry Taskforces in partnership with Orkney Islands Council and Shetland Islands Council. In 2025-26, both local authorities received a one-off allocation of £10 million to support inter-island connectivity projects, in addition to funding provided through the Local Government Settlement. Separately, Orkney Islands Council was awarded £3 million to pilot two electric ferries and progress the business case for renewing its inter-island fleet.

We will provide advice and practical support to local authorities to help them progress their fleet replacement plans.

Consultation feedback for this Plan was clear: alongside infrastructure upgrades, islanders want a stronger voice in shaping transport services. In particular, respondents called for more island representatives to sit on the boards of public ferry bodies. The Scottish Government supports this, and Ministers have agreed that the process of appointing new board members must place greater emphasis on attracting skilled and experienced applicants from island communities.

The direct award of the new CHFS contract to CalMac, effective from October 2025, provides a unique opportunity to place communities at the centre of service delivery. Under the new contract, the Ferries Community Board – facilitated by CalMac and made up of islanders from across the CHFS network – will play a key role in representing communities and informing strategic decisions.

For the NIFS network, a public consultation on the next contract (NIFS4) closed in October 2025, and its findings will help inform the development of the forthcoming contract. This process reaffirms our continued commitment to the provision of ferry services under the NIFS contract.

We will work with public bodies delivering ferry services and infrastructure to improve and increase the reach of Board appointment campaigns amongst island communities and strengthen residency criteria for future positions. Under the new Clyde and Hebrides Ferry Services contract, we will work with the Ferries Community Board to further increase its role and voice.

Table 2 - Ferry Replacement Programme*

Vessel	Route(s)
MV Isle of Islay	Islay (including Colonsay)
MV Loch Indaal	Islay (including Colonsay)
MV Lochmor	Little Minch
MV Claymore	Little Minch
MV Glen Rosa	Arran
First phase of Small Vessels Replacement Programme (seven vessels)	Colintraive–Rhubodach
	Sconser–Raasay
	Iona–Fionnphort
	Lochaline–Fishnish
	Tarbert-Portavadie
	Tobermory–Kilchoan
	Tayinloan–Gigha
	Largs–Cumbrae**
	Oban–Lismore**
Second phase of Small Vessels Replacement Programme	Barra–Eriskay Berneray–Leverburgh
Lord of the Isles replacement	Mallaig–Lochboisdale
Isle of Mull replacement(s)	Oban-Craignure
Northern Isles Freight Flex - Two vessels	Lerwick-Kirkwall-Aberdeen

** Decisions on deployment plans, cascading and disposal of existing vessels remain under review.*
*** It is expected these routes will be served by vessels redeployed from other parts of the network as a result of new vessels entering into service.*

Connectivity

Accessibility remains a priority across the transport network, going beyond baseline legislative compliance. A new Ferries Accessibility Standard will provide guidance on physical and mental accessibility requirements for ferry services, including vessel and port design. It will also shape the objectives of a new Islands Transport Accessibility Fund, which will support improvements across ferries and aviation infrastructure.

We will publish the Ferries Accessibility Standard in 2026 and open a new Islands Transport Accessibility Fund whose remit will include both ferries and aviation infrastructure.

The introduction of the Road Equivalent Tariff (RET) has made ferry travel more affordable across most of the CHFS network. An evaluation of the rollout of RET reported that average fares fell by around 34% for passengers and 40% for cars, saving ferry travellers around £25 million per year[10].

In line with the ambitions of this Plan, we have already taken tangible steps to support young islanders and their families. From June 2025, we expanded eligibility for the concessionary ferry vouchers scheme so that all island residents aged 16-21 can make four free journeys per year between their island and the Scottish mainland. This change increased the number of eligible island card holders to around 30,000.

In April 2025, we also introduced free inter-island ferry travel for under-22 residents in Orkney, Shetland and Na h-Eileanan Siar, making it easier for young people to access education, training, employment, and social opportunities.

We will monitor and evaluate the uptake and impacts of the new under-22s concessionary ferry travel schemes and consider potential enhancements.

Maritime freight remains the backbone of island supply chains, enabling the movement of goods and services to, from, and between islands. Most regular freight is carried by commercial road vehicles on subsidised ferries, meaning deck space can become constrained during peak periods. Procurement of new vessels has taken these needs into account. In addition, where feasible and affordable, additional sailings are provided to help manage seasonal spikes – for example, during livestock sales.

In 2025-26, we have allocated £4.4 million through Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) to help some island businesses recover from service disruption, with support focusing on sectors that are especially vulnerable – such as tourism and the transport of perishable goods, including seafood.

Looking ahead, the economic opportunities emerging in island areas – from renewable energy projects and the food & drink industry to the expansion of the aquaculture and space sectors – require long-term consideration of maritime freight capacity. In some cases, peaks in demand linked to new developments will exceed the capacity of regular ferry services.
We recognise that subsidised commercial vehicle fares are important for island economies, whose business bases largely comprise small and micro enterprises. At present, these subsidies are available to all businesses, regardless of size, turnover or profitability.

In line with recommendations from the Scottish Parliament's Net Zero, Energy and Transport Committee[11], the ICP commits us to reviewing the future role of subsidised ferry services in providing freight capacity – particularly where they support profitable investment. This review will explore how subsidies can be better targeted to maximise value for money, strengthen the sustainability of services, and ensure that public funding delivers the greatest benefit to island businesses and communities.

We will explore options to support island businesses, including alternatives to the current ferry freight fare subsidies, to identify approaches that offer better value for money and respond more directly to business needs, remaining cognisant of the higher costs of doing business on islands.

Aviation

Air connectivity enables rapid access to healthcare, education and business opportunities, and links islanders to the wider world. For some islands, aviation links can be as critical as ferry services in ensuring communities remain connected and resilient.

The Scottish Government's Aviation Statement sets out actions to improve the efficiency of airport operations and strengthen air services across the Highlands and Islands region. It also commits to exploring the environmental, social and economic benefits of emerging aviation technologies, including hydrogen and electric aircraft, which are expected to be used first on routes in the Highlands and Islands.

While most air services operate on a commercial basis, the Scottish Government continues to subsidise the Glasgow to Tiree and Barra routes, recognising their essential role for local communities. Local authorities provide separate funding for specific routes within their areas through Public Service Obligations. The Scottish Government also continues to deliver the Air Discount Scheme (ADS), providing significantly reduced fares for residents of Orkney, Shetland, Na h-Eileanan Siar, Colonsay, Islay, and Jura. In 2024-25, over £13.5 million was invested in the scheme.

Findings from the 2023 Scottish Islands Survey show that concerns remain over air fares for both inter-islands routes and mainland connections. The Aviation Statement commits to reviewing the ADS to ensure it is fair, effective and offers better value for money.
Further Scottish Government investment in 2025-26 is helping to make air travel more accessible. This includes funding for a third aircraft in Orkney and the deployment of a larger aircraft on the Stornoway–Benbecula route to address healthcare transport pressures.

We will work with the UK Government to implement a Highlands and Islands exemption to the Air Departure Tax that protects connectivity and complies with the UK Government's subsidy control legislation. We will engage with island communities and stakeholders to inform further policy development as we progress towards implementation.

Fixed Links

The Scottish Government recognises the transformative role that fixed links – tunnels, bridges and causeways – can play in improving island connectivity. By removing the constraints of weather, increasing capacity, and reducing travel times, fixed links can deliver lasting benefits for communities, businesses, and visitors alike.

Within the CHFS and NIFS networks, the second Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR2) has recommended further assessments in relation to three potential links:

- Sound of Harris – linking the Uists and Harris/Lewis

- Sound of Barra – linking Barra and the Uists
- Mull and the Scottish mainland

Working closely with island communities, local authorities and partners, we will take forward detailed appraisals for the three potential fixed links identified in STPR2.

Public engagements for this new National Islands Plan have shown that views on new fixed links vary. While some see them as transformative opportunities, others prefer to prioritise investment in existing transport modes. The perspective of islanders will therefore remain central to guiding our work in this area.

Potential fixed links outside the CHFS and NIFS networks fall under the responsibility of local authorities. For example, Shetland Islands Council's Inter-Island Transport Connectivity Programme is considering the viability of options for new connections to Bressay, Unst, Whalsay and Yell within their Network Strategy business case.

The Scottish Government's position is one of pragmatic support. We recognise the significant upfront costs involved but also the benefits that could be delivered through increased fixed links infrastructure.

We will support local authorities' exploration of financing models and promote investment opportunities in fixed links projects.

On-Island Travel and Integration

Public engagement for this Plan highlighted that on-island public transport remains limited in many areas. This can leave residents reliant on private vehicles and limit younger islanders' access to social events and job opportunities[12].

Although the picture varies between islands, and recognising that it is for local transport authorities to identify need, overall bus usage remains below the Scottish average, and integration between different transport modes continues to be flagged as an area for improvement[13].

Transport Scotland's Bus Infrastructure Fund provides direct awards to local authorities to improve the quality and accessibility of bus services, including by supporting integration with other modes of transport. Under a new tiered model, island local authorities are allocated a top-up in recognition of the unique demographic and geographic challenges they face.

Offering a similar island "premium", Transport Scotland's Active Travel Infrastructure Fund (ATIF) supports projects that make walking, wheeling and cycling easier for everyday journeys. In 2024-25, for example, ATIF awarded Orkney Islands Council £200,000 for the Weyland Bay Coastal Path project in Kirkwall, creating a new segregated off-road footway and cycle path.

Connectivity

We will support partners to deliver sustainable infrastructure elements of the Stornoway, Tarbert (Harris), Lochmaddy, Lochboisdale, Castlebay and Kirkwall Active Travel Masterplans, with a focus on where these align with supporting integrated journeys at ferry terminals. We will also support partners to deliver sustainable transport masterplans for Bowmore and Tobermory.

We will work with Orkney Islands Council and Historic Environment Scotland to complete the Stenness Movement Study (Maeshowe – Stones of Stenness – Brodgar corridor) as part of the Orkney World Heritage Site Programme within the Islands Growth Deal. This will support the development of a heritage-sensitive sustainable travel plan, with insights and learning shared with other island communities.

Better integration of timetables, ticketing and fares remains a key priority. We are working with partners to strengthen multi-modal connections at ferry terminals and to improve smart and integrated ticketing.

In late 2024, we launched a new Traveline Scotland website and app, offering enhanced information on fares, tickets, carbon emissions, and timetables. Work is underway with ferry operators to further develop this service, including improved passenger facilities and real-time location data to support journey planning. In the same year, ferry concessions in Orkney and Shetland moved from paper vouchers to a smart platform, making tickets easier to access and eliminating the inconvenience of lost or damaged passes. Work is now underway to extend this improvement to Na h-Eileanan Siar.

Together, these investments and initiatives will make it easier for islanders to plan journeys, encourage more people to choose public transport and active travel, and help reduce reliance on private vehicles.

We will deliver smart, interoperable ticketing and better travel data for island passengers, including support for multi-modal and concessionary travel, in partnership with the National Smart Ticketing Advisory Board.

Electric Vehicles

Scotland has one of the most comprehensive electric vehicle (EV) charging networks in the UK. Many islands have benefited from this expansion, with community groups also playing an important role in installing chargers as part of wider decarbonisation efforts.

In August 2025, we announced an additional £3 million to help councils in Argyll and Bute, Orkney, Shetland and Na h-Eileanan Siar work with the private sector to further expand their public EV charging networks. Recognising that private investment can be harder to secure in areas with lower traffic volumes and higher grid connection costs, a further £4.5 million has been made available through the Rural and Island Infrastructure Fund to support rural and island businesses, landowners and charge point operators.

The growing pipeline of renewable energy projects hosted – and in some cases owned – by island communities also offers opportunities to support further expansion of EV charging infrastructure.

We will support the expansion of the public EV charging networks, providing reliable, accessible infrastructure in the right places for visitors and residents.

Digital Connectivity

Today, the majority of premises in all island local authorities have access to fast broadband, with figures ranging from 84% in Orkney to just under 100% in North Ayrshire for access to fixed superfast broadband[14]. By contrast, in 2014 only 4% of premises in Argyll and Bute had access, and there was no coverage at all in Orkney, Shetland or Na h-Eileanan Siar[15].

Much of this progress has been delivered through Scottish Government programmes – from the legacy Digital Scotland Superfast Broadband (DSSB) rollout to the current Reaching 100% (R100) programme. The Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme (SBVS) complements R100 by offering subsidies of up to £5,000 for premises not included in commercial or R100 contract build plans. As of the end of November 2025, over 8,000 connections have been delivered across 42 islands through a combination of R100 contracts and SBVS support.

To date, the R100 programme has laid 16 subsea cables for a combined length of around 224 kilometres. They will enable over 12,000 premises on 15 islands[16] to be connected to full fibre broadband.

Alongside this, the Scottish Government is playing a leading role in delivering Project Gigabit procurements in Scotland, using UK Government funding. This creates opportunities to align R100 and Project Gigabit delivery, maximising efficiency and coverage for island communities.

Despite these gains, challenges remain, and some island premises continue to experience slow or unreliable internet connection. In the Scottish Islands Survey 2023, residents of Orkney's and Shetland's Outer Islands were among the least likely to be satisfied with their internet service.

We will carry out a mapping exercise to monitor broadband delivery, identify gaps in gigabit-capable coverage, and inform discussions with industry and UK Government on future digital connectivity investments for islands.

We will aim to align delivery of our Reaching 100% (R100) contracts with Project Gigabit contracts to maximise island coverage. In Spring 2026, we will announce the outcome of the regional Project Gigabit procurement to further extend gigabit-capable broadband coverage to over 13,000 eligible premises across Orkney and Shetland.

The Scottish Government has strengthened island mobile coverage through the award-winning Scottish 4G Infill programme (S4GI), which has delivered 17 new masts on 11 islands – including Bruray (Skerries), North Uist and Stronsay. Work is ongoing to increase the number of mobile network operators using S4GI sites, giving island residents and businesses greater choice and resilience in their service providers.

The programme has also provided a head start for the UK Government's Shared Rural Network initiative, which aims to extend mobile coverage even further into rural and island areas. Despite these improvements, further expansion is required, and existing mobile infrastructure on islands can experience capacity pressures due to increased customer demand – for example, during peak visitor seasons.

Case Study – S4GI Delivery in Ardlussa (Jura)

The 2024 evaluation of the Scottish 4G Infill Programme found that improved connectivity boosted community wellbeing through greater connectedness, safety, and resilience.

Delivering this infrastructure is often logistically challenging. The erection of a new mast in Ardlussa (Jura) required the construction team to navigate fragile roads and create a new access track to the site. Together with materials shipped from Islay, contractors used local resources, reducing the carbon footprint of the project and benefiting the island's economy.

The enhanced coverage has enabled the local GP practice to adopt a modern digital phone system, making patient contact more reliable. Crucially, the mast now provides coverage at the helicopter landing site used for emergency transfers to mainland hospitals – previously a communications blackspot – allowing the practice to stay in direct contact with ambulance control and track movements in real time.

We will take forward a programme of trials to support our understanding of viable technologies and commercial models that have the ability to improve mobile coverage in unserved and underserved areas. This will include trialling the deployment of small cells as a method of addressing coverage gaps.

Improved infrastructure alone is not enough. To benefit all islanders, enhanced connectivity must be matched by investment in digital literacy, helping people who are less confident with technology to build the skills they need. By increasing digital confidence, we can unlock new economic opportunities, improve access to public services, and reduce social isolation.

We will roll out digital skills training in island communities, beginning with a pilot tailored on the farming and crofting sectors to improve confidence in using the rural payments portal.

Housing

Housing

Throughout the engagements that have informed the development of this Plan, access to affordable housing has emerged as one of the most deeply felt priorities among island communities, especially younger residents[17]. This is consistent with the results of the 2023 Scottish Islands Survey, which highlighted concerns around the availability, affordability and variety of housing on islands. It is also one of the key themes highlighted by the Scottish Human Rights Commission report on life in the Highlands and Islands[18].

Well-planned housing provision is a foundation for our objective to promote population retention and attraction on Scotland's islands.

The Scottish Government works closely with local authorities in support of their statutory requirements, including the development of Local Housing Strategies (LHS), and we have produced guidance encouraging broad community engagement to ensure the best outcomes when creating or improving places.

We fully recognise the impact that housing pressures can have on island communities, many of whom are deeply concerned about their present and future resilience. The national housing emergency declared by the Scottish Government in May 2024 reflects and includes the challenges experienced by many of our islands.

Our Rural and Islands Housing Action Plan (RIHAP, 2023) recognises that delivering homes on islands is often more complex and costly than in other parts of Scotland and highlights the generational impact that even a small number of homes of the right kind, in the right places can have in supporting long-term sustainability. Supporting the delivery of more homes in rural and island areas is also one of the key objectives of the Housing Emergency Action Plan (HEAP, 2025).

The RIHAP underpins the Scottish Government's ambition to ensure at least 10% of its 110,000 affordable housing target is delivered in rural and island communities by 2032. Our ambition has been supported by place-based investments and wide-ranging collaboration with island partners – from local authorities and Registered Social Landlords to development trusts. Between April 2016 and March 2025, we have invested in the delivery of 1,448 affordable homes across island communities.

While building new homes remains crucial, making the best use of the existing housing stock can also play a major role in addressing pressures. We are working with partners to bring more empty properties back into use, and have taken measures to help local authorities strike the right balance between second homes, short-term lets and permanent housing.

Housing investments can generate significant multiplier effects, with demand set to grow further as our islands take a driving role in the expansion of economic sectors such as renewable energy and aquaculture. Through this National Islands Plan, we will build on ongoing efforts to improve access to affordable housing on islands, injecting further momentum into the pursuit of the objectives set out in the RIHAP, HEAP and our long-term Housing to 2040 Strategy. This will give residents greater choice to stay, and encourage others to move to or return to their island. It will also help businesses recruit and retain staff, while assisting key workers in finding good and secure housing or accommodation.

Housing

Key Island Housing Statistics

59,411 – Total number of dwellings on Scottish islands, which represents 2% of all dwellings in Scotland[19].

£180,000 – Median residential property price in 2024-25, with prices ranging from a median of £138,000 in Shetland Outer Islands to £240,000 for Highland Islands[20].

+30% – Increase in median house prices on islands between 2018-2023, compared to +23% over the same period in mainland Scotland[21].

1,295 – Affordable homes delivered on islands from April 2016 to March 2024 with £146 million support from the Scottish Government's Affordable Housing Supply Programme.

17% – Percentage of Scotland's second homes located on islands.

4,041 – Total number of vacant dwellings.

Local Housing Strategies and Housing Need and Demand Assessments

Scotland's local authorities are required to develop a LHS every five years to set out their priorities and plans for the delivery of housing and related services. Consultation is a central component in this process, with local authorities expected to engage widely with communities and partners to inform content and outcomes for their LHS.

As a statutory document, the LHS should be developed in line with Scottish Government guidance, ensuring the specific needs of diverse communities are properly reflected.

The Housing Need and Demand Assessment (HNDA) forms a key part of the LHS process and supports local authorities with gathering robust, locally-relevant evidence – including location, type, size and tenures required to address present and future housing needs. Island stakeholders have highlighted concerns that HNDAs do not provide sufficient granularity to capture location-specific requirements.

HNDA guidance recognises that data relating to island areas may present issues due to smaller population sizes. In response, it enables additional flexibility in the use of locally-sourced evidence. However, concerns remain about the extent to which the needs of individual islands – or locations within an island – are considered through the housing strategy process.

The Scottish Government will publish updated guidance for local authorities in relation to both LHS and HNDAs.

Through refreshed Local Housing Strategy guidance for local authorities, we will introduce robust requirements about the distinct housing needs of island communities. In addition, refreshed guidance on Housing Need and Demand Assessments will include strengthened focus on localised housing needs and working in partnership with local communities.

Delivering More Homes

The Affordable Housing Supply Programme (AHSP) is the Scottish Government's primary mechanism for delivering affordable homes. It is aligned with our Housing to 2040 Strategy and has "the right homes in the right places" as one of its underpinning principles. The AHSP comprises homes for social rent, Mid-Market Rent and Low-cost Home Ownership.

Housing

Homes can take various forms including new builds, renovation projects, conversions, and off-the shelf purchases of both new and existing properties.

To complement the broader AHSP and provide targeted support for small-scale developments in rural and island areas, in 2016 we established the demand-led Rural and Islands Housing Fund (RIHF). The Fund has an existing budget of up to £30 million and is open to eligible community organisations, development trusts, private landowners and developers. The 2025-26 Programme for Government announced the extension of the RIHF to new applications until March 2028. Through this Plan, we are reaffirming our commitment to the Fund, increasing investment to up to £37 million.

Between April 2016 and March 2025, the Scottish Government invested over £172.9 million through the AHSP to deliver 1,448 affordable homes across island areas. Between April 2016 and March 2025, 97 homes were built under the RIHF, representing 37% of all properties funded through that programme.

Island community organisations and other prospective applicants to the RIHF have highlighted challenges with pre-development costs – those preliminary expenditures incurred to evaluate the feasibility of a site or project prior to obtaining the necessary permissions. The RIHF initially provided a capped funding contribution of £10,000 per project, later increased to up to £15,000 per project in 2021. Through this Plan, we now increase this support further, to up to £20,000 per project.

An additional £25 million from the AHSP budget has been allocated between April 2023 and March 2028 to the Rural Affordable Homes for Key Workers Fund, aimed at tackling housing challenges that affect the recruitment of key workers in rural and island communities. The Fund enables local authorities and registered social landlords to purchase properties, with each authority defining key workers according to local priorities. To date, 41 homes have been approved through the Fund, 22 of which are on islands. Ministers have written to all local authorities encouraging further projects where there is identified need.

We will support the delivery of affordable homes across island communities by increasing available investment through the Rural and Island Housing Fund to £37 million to March 2028 and by raising feasibility support to up to £20,000 per project.

We will encourage communities to come forward to local authorities and Registered Social Landlords with project proposals for the Rural Affordable Homes for Key Workers Fund where opportunities are identified.

The HEAP includes a commitment to investing up to £4.9 billion in affordable homes across Scotland between April 2026 and March 2030, demonstrating the Scottish Government's continued determination to achieve our 110,000 affordable homes target by 2032. Our multi-year funding commitment will help to boost sector confidence, leverage private investment and support increased delivery momentum, including for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).

In addition, in September 2025 Scottish Ministers wrote to planning authorities to emphasise the importance of proportionality in the planning system for SME housebuilders. Going forward, we will consult on measures to accelerate build out of housing sites, inviting views on potential fiscal and legislative measures to increase volume of delivery and support SMEs.

Through the 2025-26 Programme for Government, we committed to implementing the Housing Investment Taskforce's recommendations to strengthen investors' confidence and promote new mixed partnerships in support of affordable housing projects. This includes working with the Scottish National Investment Bank to attract

private capital into housing developments, with the Scottish Government undertaking market testing to gauge demand for support with infrastructure costs. We have also committed to exempting Build to Rent and Mid-Market Rent properties from Rent Control provisions, while providing local authorities and Registered Social Landlords with funding certainty on a multi-year basis.

Subject to parliamentary approval, we will exempt all island developments from the proposed Scottish Building Safety Levy.

We will work to increase the volume of private funding enabling the delivery of housing developments on islands, supporting the role of SME housebuilders. This will include close partnerships with developers, public bodies and the Scottish National Investment Bank.

We will work with partners, including the Scottish National Investment Bank, to develop a pipeline of investment opportunities supporting the delivery of more homes on islands and build delivery capacity. This will include consideration of the role of multi-site delivery structures.

Case Study – Eday Partnership, Orkney

Eday Partnership acquired eight acres of land with several buildings, including two empty houses, aiming to develop affordable rented housing. Due to poor conditions and high restoration costs, the Board opted to demolish the houses and build two modern, energy-efficient bungalows designed to suit the environment and take advantage of the views. Eday Partnership were awarded £320,000 through the Scottish Government's RIHF in summer 2023. Financial support from Orkney Islands Council, Highlands and Islands Enterprise as well as a loan and the Partnership's own resources completed the funding package. The new homes were completed in May 2025.

Separately, with support from the Scottish Land Fund, Eday Partnership acquired a two-bedroom house with outbuildings and land. A full refurbishment is underway to create a three-bedroom home, with additional support from the RIHF. Completion is expected by spring 2026, with the property also offered for long-term affordable rent.

Second Homes, Empty Homes and Short-Term Lets

Although islands account for 2% of Scotland's total dwellings, they contain 17% of the nation's second homes[22]. Analyses at data zone level suggest that the proportion of second homes ranges widely between islands, from less than 4% in much of Shetland Mainland to peaks of over 20% on Coll, Tiree, Colonsay, Jura and parts of Bute[23].

A high concentration of second homes can reduce the availability of permanent housing and inflate prices through additional demand, making it harder – especially for younger people or those with limited means – to find the homes they need. We have also heard, however, that second homes and short-term lets can be important for the local economy and especially the hospitality sector.

Although there are numerous and sometimes complex factors that can lead to a property remaining vacant, empty homes often have the effect of increasing pressures and eroding affordability. The percentage of long-term empty dwellings in island areas is generally higher than the Scottish average, with a peak of 8% on Shetland's Outer Islands[24].

We have equipped local authorities with additional tools and powers to maximise an effective use of the existing housing stock and strike a balance that supports communities' needs and aspirations. This includes discretionary powers for local authorities to set council tax premiums on second homes and the ability to designate short-term let control areas. Through the Housing (Scotland) Act 2025, we have delivered on the 2025-26 Programme for Government commitment to remove the cap on the level of council tax premium that can be applied to second and long-term empty homes, meaning local authorities will have the power to charge more than double the standard rate of council tax.

At a national level, we have increased the rate of the Additional Dwelling Supplement from 6% to 8%, helping first time buyers and home movers compete with second home buyers and buy-to-let investors.

Our investment of £3.7 million in the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership has returned almost 13,000 homes back into use as safe and secure housing since 2010. Building on this success, we are investing a record £2 million through the Partnership to help local authorities reduce the numbers of privately owned long-term empty homes.

The Scottish Government is also working with lenders and rural housing bodies to encourage greater and more consistent use of rural housing burdens, which retain properties within local communities through a right of pre-emption.

We will engage with island local authorities to monitor the implementation of short-term let regulations and review initiatives to reduce the number of empty homes, identifying opportunities to share good practice.

We will provide match funding through the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership to support Empty Homes Officer roles within Orkney Islands Council and the Highland Council. We will explore similar opportunities with other island local authorities.

We will deliver additional funding for the continuation of the Argyll & Bute Empty Homes and Key Worker Housing project as part of a financial package for local initiatives aimed at returning empty homes into use.

Subject to parliamentary approval, we will remove the 100% limit on the level of council tax premium that can be applied to second and long-term empty homes.

Planning and Land

We recognise the resourcing challenges faced by planning authorities and understand the importance of strong performance in statutory planning processes to address the housing emergency and unlock wider economic opportunities. To assist, Scottish Ministers have established a National Planning Hub tasked with providing surge capacity and helping authorities deliver planning determinations more efficiently.

Work is underway with all island local authorities to understand the kind of support they require, with a view to strengthening delivery capacity and realising development opportunities that reflect local needs. For instance, we have allocated funding for a flood risk assessment and data collection to support investment and housing development in Kirkwall.

The National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) provides explicit and positive support for the delivery of more high-quality, affordable and sustainable homes in rural and island areas.

In consultation with planning authorities and building standards verifiers, we will explore the development of island home templates that meet the needs of island communities.

Working with partners, including public bodies, landowners and the Scottish National Investment Bank, we will explore opportunities to unlock land to support the delivery of more homes on islands.

Health and Social Care

Health and Social Care

Islanders tend to display high levels of life satisfaction[25] and enjoy good health outcomes, with Orkney recording the highest healthy life expectancies in Scotland in 2021-2023[26].

However, this positive picture does not uniformly apply across all sections of our island communities. Census 2022 data show that one in four island residents live with a long-term illness, around one in ten report a physical disability, and similar numbers suffer from mental health conditions. These figures highlight the scale of need and the importance of building a flexible and adaptable system that is cognisant of the unique circumstances of our islands.

Satisfaction with access to health services is comparatively high on islands. A substantial majority of islanders agree that they can easily access GPs, dentists and pharmacies[27]. There are however notable differences – for instance, between Mainland and Outer Isles within both Orkney and Shetland. In addition, communities have underlined concerns about levels of on-island support for older people, including home care and care homes.

Persistent and well-documented challenges – including workforce shortages, ageing populations, and infrastructure limitations – continue to affect equitable service delivery. As set out in Scotland's Population Health Framework (2025), prevention remains fundamental to improving health outcomes and reducing future demand. Achieving better outcomes also depends on addressing the wider determinants of health such as housing, employment, education, and environment – all themes covered in this Plan.

Islanders have consistently voiced the need for services that are locally responsive, digitally enabled, and designed to reduce travel. These priorities have been reflected in policy planning across government, Boards and partnerships, and are now embedded within this National Islands Plan.

Each commitment is framed to deliver tangible improvements while supporting long-term transformation. Collectively, actions featuring in this chapter aim to reduce inequalities, strengthen local delivery models, and ensure that island communities can access high-quality services wherever they live, and whatever their needs.

Access to Services and Operational Improvement

For island communities, access to health care is as much about connection as it is about provision. From targeted improvements in health-related transport to innovative digital tools, we are working to remove the practical barriers that can stand between islanders and timely care.

The Operational Improvement Plan (OIP, 2025) sets out a series of practical, place-based actions to improve access to health and social care. While the OIP applies to all NHS Health Boards, several of its commitments have particular relevance for island communities, where geographic and workforce challenges are more acute. These actions focus on improving local service availability, reducing travel, and supporting digital innovation, with a particular emphasis on enhancing care for older adults and those with complex or long-term conditions.

We are committed to supporting the development of virtual models of care that are designed with and for island communities. This includes expanding the use of Near Me video consultations, point-of-care diagnostics, and remote monitoring technologies to enable safe, effective care at or close to home.

We are not proposing a simple adaptation of mainland services but rather a fundamental redesign of how care is accessed and delivered in island settings. By investing in digital infrastructure, workforce capability, and integrated pathways, we can support a virtual system of care that meets the needs of islanders, regardless of geography.

Health and Social Care

By early 2026, we will provide funding to HITRANS to develop a Health and Transport Action Plan (HTAP) for the Highlands and Islands, including demand assessments and structured engagement between transport providers and Health Boards.

We will work with NHS Health Boards covering islands to identify a transport lead to coordinate delivery under the new HTAP, ensuring local needs are reflected and coordinated across health and transport systems.

We will support the expansion of Hospital at Home services in island communities through upskilling staff, point-of-care testing, and remote monitoring. This will reduce the need for travel, maintain local economies, support ageing populations, and improve access to urgent and unscheduled care.

We will ensure island communities benefit from digital prescribing solutions. This will improve medication safety, access, and management for older people and those with multiple conditions, supporting continuity of care and reducing reliance on physical travel for repeat prescriptions.

We will ensure that the action plan accompanying the new Long-Term Conditions Framework has a specific focus on improving equality of access to care and support for island communities.

Islands in the Service Renewal Framework

The Service Renewal Framework (SRF, 2025) sets out a national direction for transforming health and social care services, with a focus on improving sustainability, reducing health inequalities, and enabling more person-centred care.

Prevention is particularly vital in island settings, where access to services can be more limited and the impact of avoidable ill health is more acute. We are embedding preventative approaches across all aspects of planning and delivery, including supporting community-led wellbeing initiatives, improving access to screening programmes, and strengthening links between health services and local assets that promote physical, mental, and social wellbeing.

In addition, the SRF provides a framework for tailored engagement and governance, including support for Single Authority Models discussions (see page 67) and the rollout of the Getting It Right for Everyone (GIRFE) approach in island Health and Social Care Partnerships.

The commitments set out in this section reflect opportunities to adapt and apply renewal priorities in ways that respond to island contexts. Together, these actions aim to strengthen local delivery, support innovation, and ensure that island communities are actively shaping the transformation of health and social care services in ways that reflect their needs and aspirations.

We will work with island Health Boards and their partners to define core services and delivery models that ensure equitable access for island populations. This includes care delivered in communities rather than requiring travel off-island.

We will pilot remote diagnostic technologies in at least two island communities by the end of 2026, supporting earlier diagnosis and reducing the need for travel.

As we develop the Primary Care Route Map during 2026, we will consider the feasibility of island-specific workforce incentives.

In early 2026, we will support tailored rollout of the Getting It Right for Everyone (GIRFE) approach in island Health and Social Care Partnerships, assisting staff with training and adaptation.

Addressing Delayed Discharges

Reducing delayed discharges is a priority across Scotland's health and social care system. Our Home First approach, launched in September 2025 through the *No Place Like Home* campaign, prioritises patients being discharged to home or a homely setting as soon as clinically possible. Its implementation is supported through a £100 million allocation.

While the underlying causes vary by region, island communities often face additional pressures due to workforce shortages, limited step-down care options, and housing constraints. These factors can make it more difficult to support timely discharge from hospital and maintain effective flow across health and social care services.

We will work with education and workforce partners to pilot "Earn as You Learn" (EAYL) digital training for Allied Health Professionals (AHP) in island communities. This will support the development of a sustainable pipeline of qualified AHPs and reduce reliance on agency staffing.

Dentistry

Island residents remain generally satisfied with their access to dental services. However, concerns remain in areas such as Argyll islands, Orkney's Outer Isles and Shetland's Outer Isles[28]. In these communities, a routine dental appointment can involve a ferry crossing, a long road journey, or even an overnight stay – adding cost, time, and stress for patients.

Scotland's national shortage of NHS dentists is felt most acutely in rural and island areas, where recruitment and retention remain challenging. Our 2025-26 Programme for Government commits to targeted action to strengthen the NHS dental workforce, backed by a £3 million investment. This includes increasing student dental places by 7% to secure a future pipeline of dentists, and working with NHS Health Boards to develop refined financial incentives that reflect the realities of island life – from travel and housing costs to professional isolation.

Over the course of 2026, we will monitor the impact of revised incentives on NHS dental service uptake in island communities, with a specific focus on improving access to general dental services (high street dentistry). In addition, we will explore alternative models of care and workforce incentives to further support the role of the Public Dental Service (PDS) in island areas, especially for patients with complex needs.

In early 2026, we will convene an advisory group – including community representatives – to explore alternative models of dental service provision in island areas. The group will consider options beyond traditional high street and Public Dental Service models, including alternative ownership structures to support financial sustainability.

Mental Health

Scotland's islands benefit from strong community spirit and close networks. However, these same tight-knit communities can also experience challenges such as isolation, stigma and limited access to specialist services. Data from the 2022 Census show that almost one in ten people across our islands live with a mental health condition, with Orkney and Shetland recording rates that are above the national average. Mental wellbeing scores are slightly lower on islands than in Scotland as a whole, especially among younger residents[29].

We are committed to improving mental health across island communities, with a stronger focus on prevention and early intervention before individuals reach a point of crisis. This approach is emphasised within our Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy and Delivery Plan (2023), which recognises that a highly effective mental health system must address all levels of need, from improving mental wellbeing and strengthening support in communities, to tackling mental health stigma and ensuring specialist services are available whenever needed.

Since 2020, a £160 million investment has provided community-based support for children, young people and adults across Scotland, including over 970 adult-focused projects in rural and island areas. Looking ahead, £15 million will be allocated every year to local authorities to support services for children and young people, with an additional £15 million available in 2026-27 for adult-focused projects. Island authorities will be given flexibility to design and deliver support that is specifically tailored to the unique needs of their communities.

Since 2021, we have also provided £500,000 to Samaritans Scotland to deliver intensive suicide prevention work in the West Highlands and Skye – areas with higher suicide rates – including community training and lone worker support. We also continue to collaborate closely with the National Rural and Islands Mental Health Forum, which brings together lived experience and local expertise to identify barriers and share innovative practice.

Through the Scottish Government's Mental Health Unscheduled Care Network, we have completed a National Review of Psychiatric Emergency Plans (PEPs) which considered issues impacting the delivery of emergency psychiatric care and treatment in rural and island communities. National PEP guidance is being developed to improve consistency while taking into account the need for local flexibility. This work will build on the progress already made with implementing the award-winning Enhanced Mental Health Pathway, which allows Police Scotland and Scottish Ambulance Service call centres to direct mental health-related calls to the 111 Mental Health Hub and the Distress Brief Intervention Programme. This provides timely, compassionate support to people in distress who come into contact with frontline services in all areas of Scotland.

We will create new mental wellbeing resources tailored for island communities and make them available on the Mind-to-Mind website. This will include culturally relevant materials, such as additional resources in Gaelic, to support inclusive access and engagement.

We will deliver mental health training in partnership with young people in island communities, with the aim of creating a network of mental health champions. This initiative will help reduce stigma, increase peer support, and build community resilience.

Cross-Government Action

Delivering sustainable health and social care in island communities requires coordinated action across government portfolios. The commitments in this section reflect an ambition to align infrastructure investment, workforce development, and economic planning with health and care needs in ways that deliver added value for island populations.

Earlier in this chapter, we commit to developing a Health and Transport Action Plan (HTAP) to improve coordination and integration of transport and health services. Future investment and planning decisions – whether in housing, renewables, or workforce – will need to consider transport as a key enabler of equitable access to care, particularly in multi-island settings.

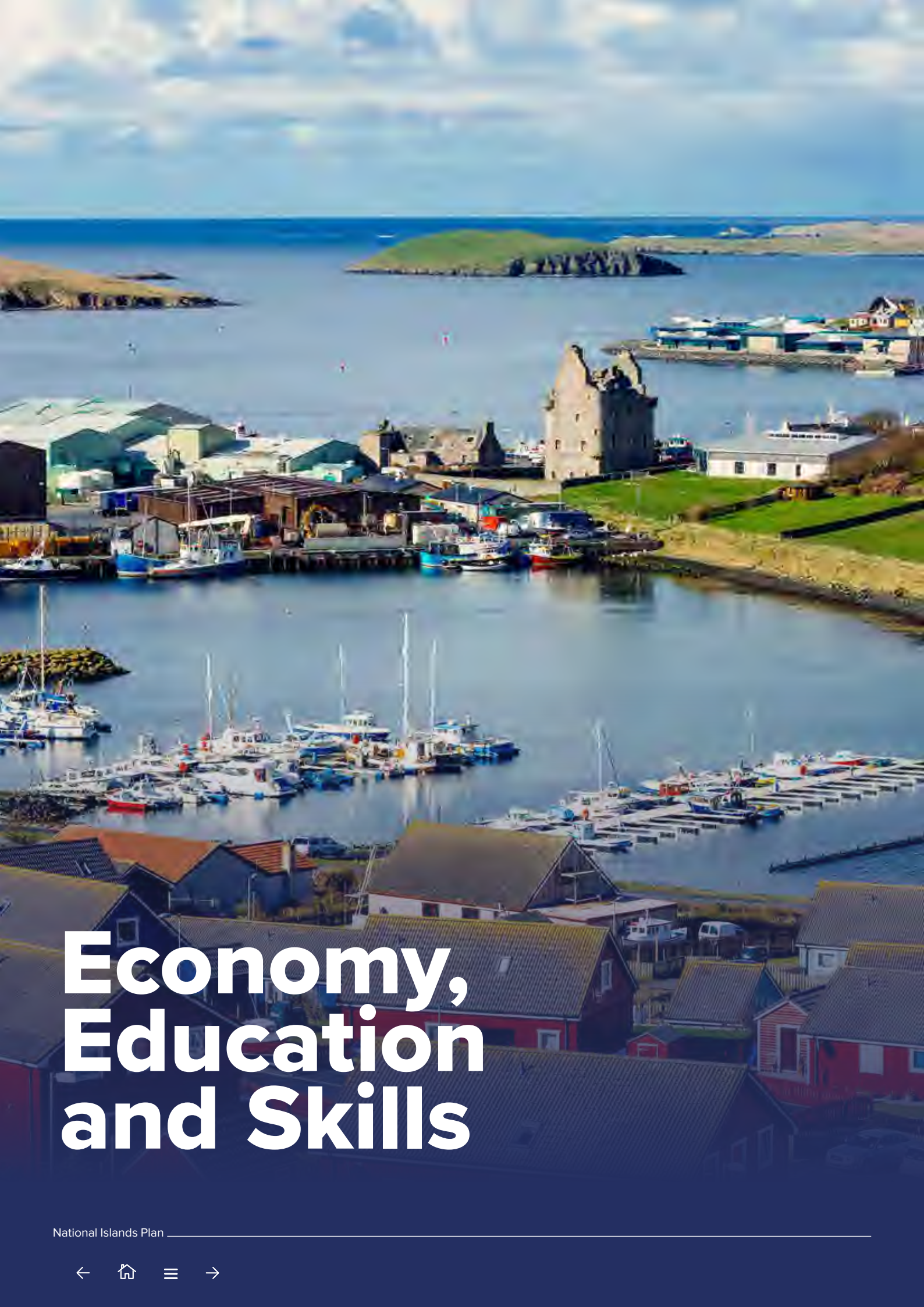
This includes repurposing disused assets, such as care homes, for service delivery or staff accommodation. It also includes improving access to funded learning pathways for working-age adults. These actions are intended to support long-term resilience, strengthen local capacity, and enable more integrated service models.

Housing and childcare are also frequently cited as barriers to recruitment and retention in island areas. Health and social care staff may be unable to take up job offers due to a lack of affordable housing or access to reliable childcare.

Further development and delivery of these commitments will require close collaboration across government, and ongoing engagement with island Health Boards, local authorities and community stakeholders to ensure alignment with local priorities and ensure the solutions identified are deliverable and effective.

Over the course of this Plan, we will identify opportunities where new infrastructure investment – for instance, in renewables and housing – can deliver added value for health and social care. This includes exploring the repurposing of disused assets to support workforce accommodation or future service provision.

We will work across government portfolios to improve access to funded learning pathways for working-age adults in island communities, particularly those entering support worker roles. This includes addressing barriers related to cohort size, funding eligibility, and remote learning infrastructure.



Economy, Education and Skills

Economy, Education and Skills

Our island economies are becoming increasingly diverse. Traditional sectors such as agriculture[30] and fisheries continue to account for a higher share of private businesses and local employment compared with Scotland as a whole, remaining deeply intertwined with island heritage. Alongside them, the public sector remains one of the largest employers in island areas[31]. Meanwhile, a vibrant visitor economy and fast-growing industries such as renewable energy, space and aquaculture are becoming central drivers of economic growth and inward investment.

In 2023, our islands contributed £3 billion to Scotland's Gross Value Added (GVA)[32]. Between 2010 and 2025, both the number and share of high-growth businesses increased across all island local authorities, albeit at varying rates[33]. Our islands' entrepreneurial spirit is reflected in the large number of small and micro enterprises that form the backbone of their business base. High levels of self-employment – partly driven by the prevalence of farmers and crofters operating their own business – are also a defining feature of island economies.

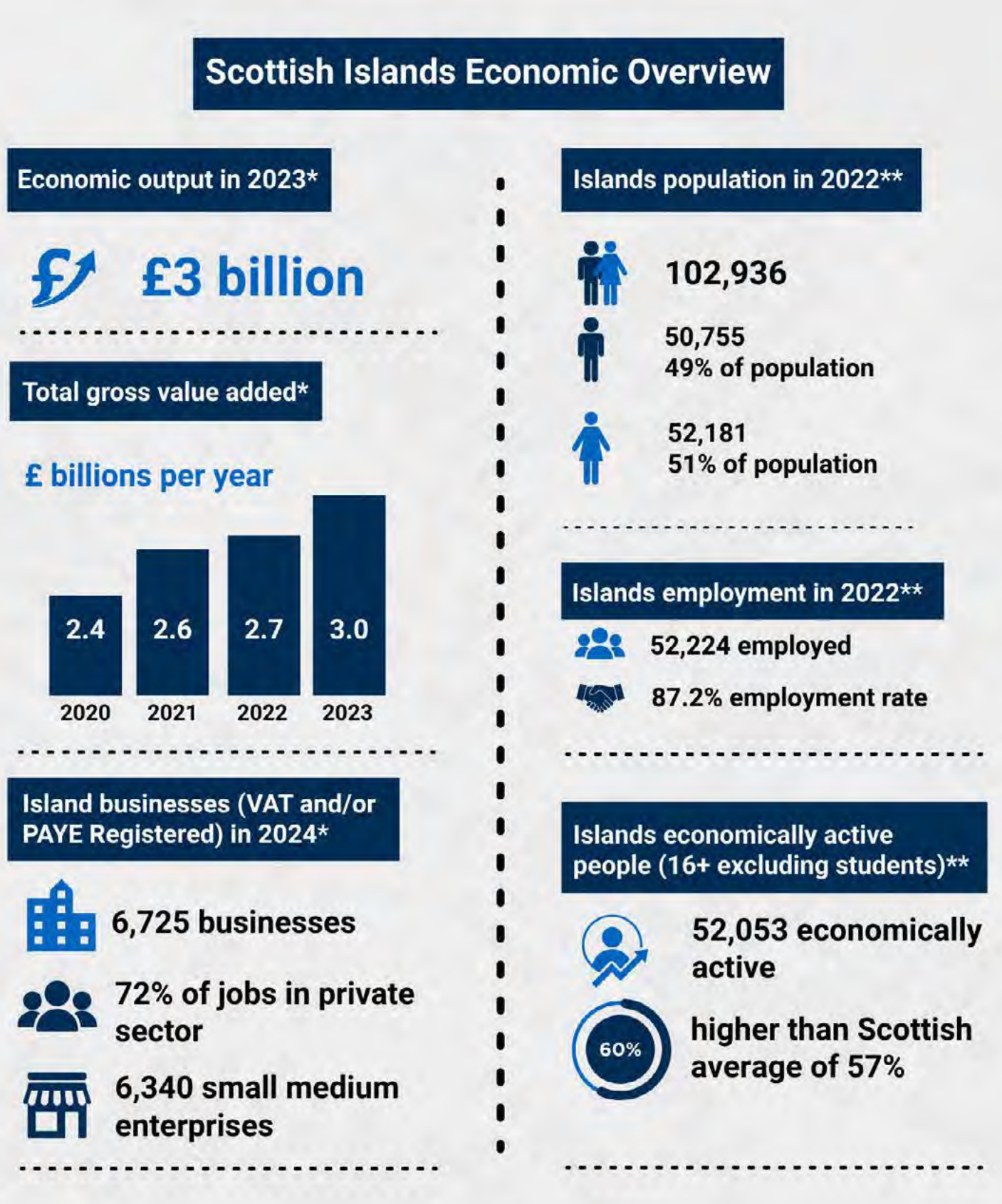
The Scottish Islands Survey 2023 recorded a strong rise in the number of respondents who agreed that business activity is growing on their island[34]. It also highlighted a clear appetite for greater support to help businesses develop and thrive.

Sustainable growth and employment opportunities are prerequisites for our overarching population retention and attraction goal. At the same time, shrinking working-age cohorts constrain growth, making it harder for businesses to recruit and for communities to find people with the right skills. For that reason, this Plan brings together economy, education and skills under a single Strategic Objective.

Our aim is to ensure that island communities have access to high-quality education, can pursue rewarding careers locally, and have the opportunity to expand their skills to meet the needs of an economy that is increasingly diverse, digital and innovative.

Case Study – Staffin Harbour (Skye)

Scottish Government investments – including over £409,000 through the Islands Programme and over £1 million via the Regeneration Capital Grant Fund (RCGF) – have enabled Staffin Community Trust to advance the development of harbour infrastructure and business premises in the north-east of Skye. This area has faced challenges such as depopulation and a lack of year-round employment opportunities. Today, community-owned Staffin Harbour supports 16 jobs and is home to nine businesses, spanning from aquaculture and boat engineering, to Gaelic youth outdoor activities and bike hire. The newly developed onshore area has become a vital asset for the island, with the recent acquisition of a telehandler enhancing boat hauling and storage services. A Harbour Facilities Building is currently under construction – once complete, it will provide retail space and washroom facilities, further strengthening the project's contribution to community wealth building.


Scottish Islands Economic Overview
Economic output in 2023*
£3 billion
Total gross value added*
£ billions per year
2.4
2.6
2.7
3.0
2020
2021
2022
2023
Island businesses (VAT and/or PAYE Registered) in 2024*
6,725 businesses
72% of jobs in private sector
6,340 small medium enterprises
Islands population in 2022**
102,936
50,755
49% of population
52,181
51% of population
Islands employment in 2022**
52,224 employed
87.2% employment rate
Islands economically active people (16+ excluding students)**
52,053 economically active
60%
higher than Scottish average of 57%

Sources[35]

Agriculture and Crofting

With more than half of Scotland's crofts located on islands, the future of crofting is deeply intertwined with the future of our islands. Crofting is much more than food production – it preserves island culture, contributes to managing fragile landscapes and has significant potential to enhance biodiversity. In addition, a crofter's statutory duty to be ordinarily resident within 32 kilometres of their croft is a significant contributor to population retention and attraction.

Every year, we provide over £40 million to crofting businesses through funding mechanisms such as the Crofting Agricultural Grant Scheme (CAGS), the Croft House Grant (CHG), Less Favoured Area Support Scheme, Basic Payment Scheme and Farm Advisory Service[36]. Between 2015 and January 2026, over £21 million in CAGS funding has been awarded to 3,990 island croft businesses. Since 2007, £20.7 million in CHG funding has been awarded to 926 island recipients to support the development or improvement of croft homes.

Effective succession planning is key to building a robust future for crofting. The Scottish Land Matching Service (SLMS) facilitates connections between landowners without a successor, those looking to wind down, new entrants and those seeking to expand. Since 2023, through a collaboration with the Crofting Commission, the SLMS has featured a dedicated crofting resource.

Every year, there are over 500 new entrants to crofting. In the year between October 2023 and 2024, for instance, 560 new entrants were recorded. Of these, 287 were island-based. The Crofting Commission has also focussed on its duties enforcement, prioritising the residency duty, which will support island population retention. While this is welcome progress, we know additional efforts are required.

We will support a campaign across island parishes to provide information on croft succession planning, gather views on key areas of concern for crofters and highlight the work of the Scottish Land Matching Service.

There are around 1,000 common grazings across Scotland, 689 of which are located on islands. Of these, however, 314 only had a committee in office as of January 2026.

At the time of publication, the Crofting and Scottish Land Court Bill is making its way through the Scottish Parliament. Among other provisions, it aims to strengthen the role of grazing committees and encourage crofters and their communities to have a greater say over how common grazing land is used. This Plan shares the ambition of maximising the potential of common grazings, including for biodiversity restoration and climate action.

We will develop new training resources for island crofters to support active management of common grazings and encourage the establishment of new grazings committees.

We recognise the important role that crofting and small producers can play in improving access to local food, especially as communities and businesses seek to become more self-sufficient and climate-conscious. However, crofters and other producers often face significant challenges, compounded by harsher island climates. Investing in infrastructure such as polytunnels and hybrid greenhouses supports year-round, climate-resilient production and strengthens the productivity of crofting and small-scale agriculture.

Focusing on horticulture, we will establish and support a network of island food producers to strengthen local food resilience and retail opportunities.

Women are essential to the long-term sustainability of island agriculture. Welcoming new entrants and expanding the skills of those already working in the sector is critical to building business resilience and inclusivity.

Building on progress made to date, this Plan will take targeted action to tackle the structural and practical barriers faced by women and girls in island agriculture and crofting, ensuring they have equal opportunity to lead, participate and thrive.

We will support new training opportunities co-designed with island women who are interested in pursuing a career in agriculture and deliver enhanced support to encourage and empower women to become trainers in the agricultural sector on islands.

Local abattoirs play an essential role in supporting the viability of agriculture and crofting. However, small island abattoirs are under increasing pressure due to rising operational costs, a shortage of skilled workers and competition from larger mainland processors. Securing the future of island abattoirs is not just about preserving a service – it is about supporting resilient island economies, shortening food chains and enabling crofters and farmers to add value close to home.

We will provide targeted support that facilitates small producer access to abattoir services on our islands.

Marine Economy

The marine economy continues to provide significant opportunities for employment and economic growth among island communities, both directly and by supporting a range of other local industries and supply chains. In 2023, for example, the marine sector accounted for 16% of Shetland's approximate Gross Value Added (aGVA) with fishing alone contributing over £88 million[37].

Our Blue Economy Vision for Scotland (2022) sets out the Scottish Government's long-term ambition of ensuring a sustainable use of marine assets that helps us tackle the twin crises of climate change and biodiversity loss while continuing to create prosperity, jobs and wellbeing. Since 2021, our Marine Fund Scotland has awarded £5.8 million to 63 island-based projects that align with that ambition.

A new National Marine Plan (NMP2) is currently under development. It will provide an updated planning framework to further sustainable development in Scotland's seas and reduce conflict arising from increased competition over marine space and resources. Our islands are vital to the fisheries sector in Scotland, which in 2023 recorded £652 million in landings and supported over 7,000 jobs in fishing and processing[38]. Over a third of all Scottish vessels were registered in island districts as of December 2024[39].

Certain inshore fisheries in Shetland (out to six nautical miles) are managed by the Shetland Shellfish Management Organisation under the Shetland Islands Regulated Fishery (Scotland) Order 2012. The Order enables application of local restrictions over and above the UK vessel licensing scheme.

In 2023-24, we carried out a public consultation to seek views on how the Scottish Government should allocate the portion of sea fish quota known as Additional Quota. Reflecting on its results, we have committed to exploring in greater detail how communities' role in managing Additional Quota could be strengthened, delivering greater benefits close to where fishing activity happens. This is not a simple process and requires careful consideration as to the implications – including of a legal nature – of delegating management responsibilities. However, we recognise communities' aspirations and fully understand the community wealth building potential of diversifying Additional Quota allocations.

We will undertake a feasibility study to inform discussions on increasing communities' role in directly managing quota stocks, including options to run a pilot project in an island area.

In 2023, the aquaculture sector contributed £468 million to Scotland's GVA[40], with our islands playing a significant role in the success of these industries. The overall value of Atlantic salmon farmed in Na h-Eileanan Siar, Orkney and Shetland was worth over £723 million in 2024, well over half of Scotland's total[41]. In addition, in 2024 Shetland produced 87.5% of Scotland's mussels for a value of over £10.7 million[42].

There is substantial potential to grow the sector further in a way that is sustainable and roots opportunities locally on our islands. An efficient, transparent and well-resourced consenting scheme is key to unlocking additional investments. In 2024-25, we piloted a new pre-application process in four sites within the Shetland Islands Council and Highland Council areas. Pilots focused on ensuring that constraints and opportunities are identified at an early stage in the consenting process, with a view to increasing confidence among both developers and local communities. An independent evaluation was published in July 2025 and work is now underway to address its recommendations, widening testing of the pilot process in other local authority areas.

We are also working to clarify the consenting process for aquaculture developments between 3-12 nautical miles, keeping pace with technological innovations that enable operations further offshore and recognising the potential growth opportunities for island and marine economies.

Following the introduction of planning controls supporting local democracy and decisions in relation to aquaculture developments between 3-12 nautical miles, a public consultation on the regulation of fish farm deposits between 3-12 nautical miles ran from September – December 2025. Our response to the consultation was published in February 2026 and we are now working to enact proposals to identify SEPA as the responsible regulator for fish farm discharges between 3-12 nautical miles, and clarify the application of existing exemptions on marine licence requirements for fish and shellfish farms.

We will work with public and private sector partners to ensure an efficient approach towards the fish farm consenting processes, remove duplication and enable a pathway for aquaculture development from 3 to 12 nautical miles.

We will engage with island communities, local authorities and businesses to inform the development of good practice principles for community benefits for aquaculture developments.

Tourism, Events and Hospitality

Our islands are a core part of Scotland's tourism offer and international appeal. Visitor spend helps to grow local economies, create jobs and enhance the cultural vibrancy of our island communities. In 2024, there were over 260,000 overnight stays in Orkney and Shetland alone, with a total visitor spend of over £128 million[43].

Together with VisitScotland and HIE, we are working with island businesses and communities to pursue further opportunities for growth, in a way that is sustainable and attuned to local circumstances and capacity. From July 2024 to June 2025 , we have provided more than £3.7 million in support of tourism initiatives on islands, primarily through place-based programmes managed by HIE.

The Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund has provided £8 million in support of 48 island-based projects since 2018, helping to leverage £7.2 million in extra funding. In addition, £1.5 million has been invested to support 55 events across islands since 2019, including the Shetland Tall Ships Races in 2023, the Orkney Island Games in 2025 and recurring events such as the Tiree Music Festival and HebCelt.

We know that each island destination faces unique opportunities and challenges relating to connectivity, accommodation pressures and environmental concerns. It is vital that island communities have the capacity, skills and infrastructure to maximise the benefits of tourism and drive sustainable growth.

We will deliver tailored training programmes to grow skills and build capacity for island communities to steward sustainable tourism in ways that reflect their values and ensure that the economic, social and environmental benefits are retained locally.

Scottish island ports are among the most popular cruise ship destinations in the UK, with Orkney and Shetland welcoming over 213,000[44] and 138,000[45] passengers in 2024 respectively. A consultation on the potential introduction of a Cruise Ship Levy closed earlier this year. As part of this, we invited feedback on a Point of Entry Levy – an alternative approach proposed by islanders. Engagement with island communities will continue to be central as we consider next steps.

Investment

Our islands hold vast potential for economic investment. The Regional Transformational Opportunities in the Highlands and Islands report (2025) identified several clusters of high-growth opportunity in island areas, from Shetland to Islay. If fully realised, these opportunities could generate up to £32.5 billion in investments and more than 30,000 additional jobs in Orkney, Shetland and Na h-Eileanan Siar alone, with further growth expected on other islands. While these figures are based on modelling assumptions, they demonstrate the scale of opportunity if the right conditions are in place.

Economy, Education and Skills

The Scottish Government is working with councils, development agencies and other local partners to attract investment into island areas. Our Infrastructure Investment Strategy 2027-2037 sets out the strategic direction for public investment over the next decade, including targets to increase investment in priority infrastructure across Scotland. This will include work with Shetland Islands Council, Orkney Islands Council and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar to agree a mixed-model funding package for social and economic infrastructure. We expect this Accelerator Model to unlock hundreds of millions of pounds of investment across the three areas, supporting projects aligned with local priorities and the ambitions of this National Islands Plan.

While public funding plays an important role in delivering infrastructure and services among our island communities, it alone cannot deliver our economic ambitions. Attracting and leveraging private investment, including global capital, is crucial.

We are committed to a balanced and inclusive approach that supports economic development, and delivers lasting outcomes for island communities. Achieving this depends on parallel progress in housing, childcare, transport and skills, so that communities have the capacity and connectivity needed to seize new opportunities.

Working with public and private partners, we will incorporate investment opportunities from across the islands into our national project pipeline and showcase "investment ready" projects through the Invest Scotland online portal. We will also explore opportunities to bundle projects together to attract private investment on islands.

The devolution of Crown Estate assets has created an opportunity to increase investments in our islands. With their vast coastlines and rich marine resources, islands are among the largest beneficiaries of net revenues from Scottish Crown Estate marine assets out to 12 nautical miles. These are allocated to councils to support projects that benefit communities in their areas. In 2024-25 alone, contributions to island local authorities totalled over £9.8 million, up from £8.9 million in 2023-24[46].

Regional Growth Deals

Since the publication of the first National Islands Plan, the Ayrshire Growth Deal (2020), the Islands Growth Deal (2023) and the Argyll and Bute Rural Growth Deal (2025) have been signed and entered delivery. Each Growth Deal has been developed with regional stakeholders to drive sustainable economic growth based on local priorities. Over the lifetime of the Deals, the Scottish Government will invest a combined total of over £67 million in island-based projects. In the coming years, notable milestones will include the opening of the flagship visitor centre at Calanais, the renovation of Rothesay Pavilion, new housing for workers on Mull, the development of the Dales Voe ultra-deep water port and a marine tourism investment programme for both Arran and Cumbrae.

In addition, net revenues deliver direct benefits to community organisations. Crown Estate Scotland's (CES) Sustainable Communities Fund supports local regeneration and sustainable development across the Scottish Crown Estate. Since 2020, the Fund has awarded over £564,000 in grants to 20 island-based projects.

The marine assets managed by CES underpin some of our most important island industries. CES's offshore wind option agreements include requirements to produce and update Supply Chain Development Statements to understand projects' ambitions and commitments to the Scottish supply chain. Through these actions and future initiatives, we can ensure islands continue to play a central role in Scotland's renewable and marine sectors, with lasting benefits for local communities.

We will explore opportunities to improve how net revenues from the Scottish Crown Estate support community infrastructure on islands.

Crown Estate Scotland will engage offshore wind developers on their commitments to island supply chains and consider opportunities to invest in island ports.

Childcare

Improving the provision of childcare can have a particularly significant impact on our islands' economic performance and resilience. It contributes to population retention and attraction, supports parents – and especially women – into employment and training, and improves families' wellbeing. Access to reliable childcare is especially vital on islands, where many people balance multiple economic and social roles.

The Scottish Islands Survey 2023 highlighted challenges in accessing childcare across island areas. Only one third of respondents agreed that early learning and childcare services met their working needs, and almost two in five said they were unable to access a registered childminder. Since 2021, the Scottish Government has provided nearly £1 billion per year to Local Authorities across Scotland to offer 1140 hours of free Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) to all eligible children. Scotland is the only part of the UK that already offers 30 hours per week in term time of funded ELC to all three- and four-year-olds and around a quarter of two-year-olds regardless of whether their parents are working or not. We appreciate, however, that the 1140 support is only available to those who can access a registered childcare provider on their island.

In our School Age Childcare Delivery Framework (2023), we committed to developing and testing solutions that support the sustainability of essential school age childcare services within rural and island communities. The 2025-26 Programme for Government included a commitment to expanding childcare provision further, particularly for families most at risk of living in poverty. In line with these commitments, our Early Adopter Communities project is working with partners in Shetland to create reliable year-round school age childcare options – including breakfast clubs, after school provision and holiday activities. The project includes efforts to bring existing activities together through improved transport links and is exploring new recruitment methods to attract and retain staff in combined early years and school age childcare roles. The learning is giving us greater insight into what is required to establish and sustain childcare services in island areas, linked to demand.

Through a joint initiative with the Scottish Football Association, the Extra Time Programme supports football clubs and trusts across Scotland to deliver free wraparound activity sessions during the school day and full-day holiday clubs, targeted at primary school children from low-income families. We have committed to working with island local authorities to understand how we deliver 'Extra Time' services in a way that is relevant and effective for their communities, particularly where there may not be an established football club in the area.

Backed by £1.6 million in 2025-26, a programme of childminder recruitment and retention is now underway in partnership with the Scottish

Childminding Association. It covers 28 local authority areas including Argyll and Bute, Highland, Orkney and Shetland. The programme offers a £750 start-up grant to new childminding businesses as well as practical support to facilitate the retention of existing workforce, with the latter strand open to all the above local authorities as well as Comhairle nan Eilean Siar.

We will convene a roundtable with key partners to utilise evidence gathered by Highlands and Islands Enterprise on the challenges and potential solutions to delivering childcare services in island and rural communities. This will seek to agree practical recommendations for action that will be taken forward through key strategic groups such as the Convention of the Highlands and Islands, and the Islands Strategic Group.

In 2026, we will launch a consultation and introduce the necessary legislative changes to create a new definition for School Age Childcare within the regulatory framework. This would enable a review of workforce qualifications, supporting services to attract a more diverse workforce to address recruitment and retention challenge in island areas.

Education

Demographic shifts are reshaping the school-age cohort. As noted earlier in this Plan, all island local authorities face a downward trend in pupil numbers. While several communities record healthy – sometimes increasing – rolls, there are many others who are concerned for the future of their local schools.

The sustainability of primary and secondary education in island communities is also fundamentally dependent on the ability to recruit and retain teachers. While recruitment challenges exist across Scotland, these are often amplified in island settings, leading to long-term vacancies, repeated advertising cycles and reliance on temporary solutions.

We have developed a range of initiatives to encourage candidates to take up posts in rural and island areas. These include the Preference Waiver Payment, which offers £6,000 for primary and £8,000 for secondary probationary teachers in exchange for flexibility in placement location. In addition, teachers can be eligible for both the Remote Schools Allowance (up to £3,819 annually) and the Distant Islands Allowance (£2,859 annually).

This Plan will sustain efforts to strengthen longer-term teacher workforce planning to deliver place-based solutions that secure the future of education on our islands.

Through the Education and Childcare Assurance Board, we will work in partnership with COSLA to build considerations of our islands educational context into a wider workforce strategy.

As part of a review of the Teacher Induction Scheme, we will consider additional measures and changes to encourage more graduate teachers to undertake probation in island locations.

On many islands, schools serve not only as centres of learning but also as community anchors, providing extracurricular activities, hosting events and creating a sense of place that is critical to community cohesion. While school management remains a local authority responsibility, the Scottish Government continues to have a presumption against the closure of rural schools, many of which are also island schools.

Our Learning Estate Investment Programme (LEIP) supports our ambition to provide essential school infrastructure to our island communities. As part of our £2 billion investment through LEIP, we have committed to delivering projects in

Shetland, Orkney, Mull and Skye in collaboration with relevant local authorities.

In addition, our 2025-26 Programme for Government underlined our continued commitment to progressing work on the Barra and Vatersay Community Campus.

Through the Learning Estate Investment Programme, school infrastructure projects will be delivered in Brae, Broadford, Kirkwall and Mull before the end of 2029. Working with COSLA, local authorities and Scottish Futures Trust we will explore how we can deliver further improvements in the school estate across island areas.

Schools also serve as crucial links between education and employment. The Scottish Government-funded Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) Employer Network is very active on islands, supporting young islanders in secondary schools to engage with local employers and learn about local career opportunities. Via DYW, for instance, Shetland Islands Council and NHS Shetland recently engaged with Anderson High School pupils to showcase careers in the health and social care sectors.

Of course, education does not end with secondary schools. Further and higher education institutions such as the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI), Robert Gordon University and Heriot-Watt University all maintain a physical presence on our islands, with their campuses anchoring high-value jobs locally and attracting students and staff into communities.

Through a combination of Islands Growth Deal (£1.5 million) and Islands Programme funding, we have invested £1.75 million into a new Technology and Innovation Centre at UHI's North, West, and Hebrides' Stornoway campus. Support has also enabled the provision of a range of mobile equipment that can be transported to other venues across Na h-Eileanan Siar.

Led by UHI and working with Robert Gordon University and Heriot-Watt University, the TalEntEd Islands programme is supported by £4.4 million of Scottish Government funding to unlock economic opportunities, foster net zero skills and drive innovation in Orkney, Shetland and Na h-Eileanan Siar.

Together with universities and colleges across the wider sector, these institutions are equipping islands with the skills and talent needed to harness opportunities for sustainable development and community wealth building.

We will pilot an island scholarship scheme for postgraduate students to address skills shortages in locally-identified priority sectors.

We will work with further and higher education institutions to attract international students and staff to our islands, including through the joint implementation of the Destination Scotland campaign, and to ensure that delivery of our International Education Strategy fully reflects the opportunities within island communities.

Skills and Workforce

Accessible opportunities for adults to retrain, upskill, or pursue vocational and professional development are essential to help island communities remain adaptable and competitive. As we transition to a low-carbon economy and seek to harness the unique potential of our islands, the development and attraction of a skilled workforce will be a defining factor in our success.

Working with Skills Development Scotland (SDS), we continue to make a broad range of support and the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) available to all islands via initiatives such as the Careers Information, Advice and Guidance (CIAG) service, apprenticeship programmes, and redundancy support.

With the forecast reduction in the number of people of working age impacting the availability of labour across island areas, workforce planning and attraction initiatives will be vital to complement efforts to retain population. Workforce North is a collaborative effort that brings together regional partners – including SDS, HIE, and UHI – to align skills planning with the social and economic priorities of the Highlands and Islands. Support is tailored to meet the specific needs of each local authority and deliver workforce strategies that address issues such as limited access to training and the impact of seasonal employment.

A coordinated approach between the public, private and education sectors is needed to address future workforce demand, design skill-development programmes, and amplify national and local campaigns that promote career opportunities on islands.

We will work with island local authorities to convene localised workforce engagements that bring together employers, investors and public agencies to agree actions that address local skills shortages. This could include proposals for shared public-private investments, including through the Workforce North initiative.

The end of free movement following the UK's exit from the European Union has had significant impacts on our islands, with labour shortages affecting both the private and public sectors. While immigration powers are reserved to the UK Government, we have developed tangible reform proposals to address Scotland's specific population and skills needs. These include the proposed Rural Visa Pilot, designed to offer targeted migration solutions for rural and island areas experiencing acute skills shortages in key sectors.

In 2024, we launched Scotland's Migration Service, providing free, impartial advice to help people better understand and use the existing immigration system. The service supports migrants and assists employers seeking to recruit and retain an international workforce. It is also available to inward investors establishing or expanding businesses in Scotland. Free one-to-one advice sessions with immigration lawyers are available for those who would benefit from personalised support.

We will work with partners to promote Scotland's Migration Service to island employers and investors, highlighting its support for those who wish to undertake international recruitment and retention activities.

Climate, Nature and Energy

Climate, Nature and Energy

Island communities are on the frontline of the climate and nature crises. Rising seas, flooding, and increasingly frequent storms are among the most visible effects of a changing climate, with growing risks for island infrastructure, supply chains and heritage. Rich island habitats are also under pressure, with implications for biodiversity, wellbeing and local economies. At the same time, islands are innovating and seizing opportunities in the transition to net zero. From renewable energy and nature-based solutions to community-led adaptation, islands are well placed to pioneer climate action and to secure long-term benefits from the shift to a greener economy.

Tackling climate change at its source is vital. But equally urgent is the need to support island communities to adapt to the realities already unfolding. Islanders bring deep local knowledge and a tradition of practical, place-based solutions – from peatland restoration and sustainable land use to circular economy initiatives. Supporting these efforts is essential to protect communities and strengthen their resilience.

The transition to net zero must be just and fair. Costs and benefits must be shared equitably, ensuring that the shift to clean energy addresses rather than deepens existing inequalities. Island communities are already showing leadership and, with the right investment, can continue to pursue innovation that benefits the whole of Scotland.

Our draft Climate Change Plan (CCP) sets out how we intend to meet Scotland's carbon budgets up to 2040 and contribute to our legal commitment to reaching net zero by 2045. It includes a new five-year carbon budgeting framework and features targeted actions to support our island communities in recognition of their distinct needs, challenges and opportunities.

As well as cutting emissions, green energy projects can deliver transformational economic value for islands. Communities hosting this infrastructure must see tangible benefits in their daily lives and must be offered avenues to build local wealth. Community-owned renewables are becoming more common on our islands, producing clean power and revenues that can be reinvested locally to strengthen wealth and wellbeing.

This Plan seeks to ensure that the transition to net zero delivers clear benefits for island communities, with local ownership and fair returns at the heart of green, nature-based and circular solutions.

Climate Adaptation

Rapid adaptation is essential to safeguard the wellbeing of people, places and livelihoods across our islands.

The Scottish National Adaptation Plan 2024-2029 (SNAP3) emphasises local leadership, with a specific focus on communities facing the most immediate and severe impacts. A key mechanism in the delivery of SNAP3, "Climate Ready" regional partnerships enable place-based collaboration between public bodies, communities and businesses. In 2025-26, we committed an additional £550,000 to establish new partnerships, strengthen existing ones and deliver locally identified projects.

We will work with local government and a broad range of other partners to expand the network of "Climate Ready" partnerships in all island areas, with an initial focus on Na h-Eileanan Siar and Argyll and Bute in 2026.

Recognising islands' and coastal communities' increasing exposure to climate change hazards, we published Coastal Change Adaptation Guidance (2023) and allocated funding to support local initiatives including the development of a Coastal Change Adaptation Plan for Tiree and climate impact assessments for Laggan Bay on Islay. Scotland's first Flood Resilience Strategy (2024) is informing efforts to create flood resilient communities. Our £38.8 million investment in the Millport Coastal Flood Protection Scheme demonstrates our commitment to working with island communities to deliver effective flood mitigation.

Case Study – Outer Hebrides Climate Hub

Since its launch in November 2023, the Outer Hebrides Climate Hub has brought together 237 members – including community groups, businesses and private individuals – to encourage a joint and place-based approach to climate action and adaptation. Funded by the Scottish Government, the Hub promotes climate awareness and offers training to accelerate decarbonisation and increase sustainability across Na h-Eileanan Siar, identifying solutions that are relevant to local businesses and communities.

Promoted by the Hub, Our Climate Story is a digital mapping tool allowing islanders to upload photos, stories and short films that capture the tangible impact of climate change on their local places. The portal is helping to shape climate policy on the islands by recording residents' experiences and giving them agency while serving as a channel to share ideas for action. Through the Ideas into Action fund, the Hub supports community-led projects encouraging climate-friendly behaviours. This contributes to rooting solutions locally, empowering residents to drive forward actions that protect their islands' wellbeing and resilience.

While there is a risk that individuals of all ages may feel powerless in the face of such vast challenges, young islanders have told us clearly that they feel anxious about the future of their communities.

Scotland's Children's Parliament found that lack of transparent communication on the climate emergency can intensify feelings of isolation and advocated increased literacy on the tangible steps that people can take to reduce their climate impact[47]. There is an opportunity to test this approach in partnership with young islanders, developing lessons that can be shared with their peers elsewhere in Scotland to break down fears and help them feel a valued part of the solution.

We will pilot a "Climate Tips for Teachers" resource for island communities to foster open conversations about climate, reduce eco-distress and empower young islanders to act.

Biodiversity and Biosecurity

Islands play host to a unique blend of habitats and species. This natural wealth is much more than a simple backdrop to island life – it underpins climate resilience, food security and sustainable economies. Protecting and restoring nature is therefore central to island futures.

Our Scottish Biodiversity Strategy to 2045 (2024) reflects our longstanding commitment to protecting and effectively managing at least 30% of our land and seas for nature by 2030 (30 by 30). Current coverage varies across island regions, from 30% in Na h-Eileanan Siar to 13% in Shetland[48]. On land, we are advancing the Nature30 approach – an opt-in model that recognises land managers and communities for stewarding nature-rich areas. We are also working with local authorities to build Nature Networks that connect protected and nature-rich areas enhancing the resilience of habitats, species and landscapes.

Marine Protected Areas already cover 37% of Scotland's seas, supporting ecosystem health and the industries that depend on it. The designation of Scapa Flow (in Orkney) and the Queen of Sweden (in Shetland) as Historic Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) are among the latest additions to the network. We will launch a public consultation in relation to fisheries management measures for inshore MPAs and eleven priority marine features. Any potential impacts on islands identified as a result of proposed measures will be carefully considered through this process.

We will launch a programme of targeted engagements by NatureScot to identify and implement Nature30 opportunities that increase coverage of land managed for nature in a way that works for island landowners and communities. This work will have an initial focus on crofted land.

We will work with local authorities, regional partnerships and communities to encourage the development of Nature Networks that reflect the specific circumstances of each island community.

Our islands are also among the most important places for wildlife in Europe, including iconic marine species and world-renowned seabird populations. Due to a lack of natural competitors and predators, the impact of invasive non-native species (INNS) can be devastating for island ecosystems. INNS can also pose a threat to vulnerable livestock and damage crops, causing losses for farmers and crofters. Through increased funding, we support local wildlife management schemes and native species that are under threat. The Biosecurity for Scotland initiative, for instance, brings together communities, organisations and businesses to protect important seabird islands from predators such as mink and black rats.

Some communities have shared concerns about invasive plants such as rhododendron, Japanese knotweed and giant rhubarb which have caused harm to island ecosystems. Tangible actions are already underway to tackle these invasive species. On Raasay, for example, the Scottish Government's Carbon Neutral Islands Project has supported activity to remove rhododendron from high priority areas.

We aim to publish our new INNS Action Plan in March 2026, this will build on existing approaches, encourage community cooperation and strengthen biosecurity through targeted actions.

We will commission research to develop a comprehensive understanding of current and future threats to island biosecurity. This will inform more targeted actions and engagements to protect island environments and communities.

Peatland

Many islands are home to extensive blanket bog and wetlands. Healthy peatlands can store carbon, support biodiversity and reduce flood risks. However, if they are not managed efficiently, these benefits are lost. With around 70% of our peatlands degraded, they currently account for around 15% of Scotland's total emissions.

Through our world leading Peatland ACTION programme[49], we have contributed to a total of around 90,000 hectares of restored peatland since 1990, including 4,498 hectares on islands. In the draft CCP. we included a proposal to expand and extend our programme to restore 400,000 hectares by 2040, reflecting an increase in our ambition. Protecting, managing and restoring degraded peatlands is a vital part of mitigating and adapting to the climate and nature emergencies.

Peat has been a source of energy security for some island communities for generations and we recognise its continuing importance for domestic

heating. Through Scotland's Peatland Standard, we will share best practice to minimise impacts where peat cutting continues for domestic use.

Peatland ACTION provides guidance, funding and technical support for community-led restoration, with island-based officers building local capacity. As well as creating environmental benefits and reducing emissions, peatland restoration can deliver economic benefits to land-based businesses – for instance, through carbon credits, improved resilience, and diversifying land use – as well as supporting the creation of skilled local jobs.

We will develop a public information campaign and deliver training for island communities to raise awareness of the environmental and economic benefits of peatland restoration, including for farming, crofting and other land-based businesses. Working with crofters and other stakeholders, we will also support restoration projects on Scottish Ministers' Crofting Estates and develop solutions to encourage peatland restoration in other island crofting areas, with a particular focus on common grazings.

Forestry

Forestry cover is limited on most islands[50], but interest is rising in managing existing woods and creating new woodlands to help combat the climate and nature crises, strengthen local economies and help improve people's health and wellbeing.

The Scottish Government has taken tangible steps to enable communities, land managers and crofters to undertake woodland projects. We support the Community Woodlands Association to provide independent advice, and have updated the Woodland Carbon Code to help crofters benefit from carbon credits. We have also delivered grant funding for woodland creation in the Northern Isles and Na h-Eileanan Siar, where establishing trees can be more expensive. Through the Croft Woodland Project, which covers all Scottish islands, we have supported significant increases in woodland planting by crofters and smallholders.

We will foster investment in island woodland projects that support a just transition and build community wealth.

Circular Economy

A circular economy leads to a more efficient use of resources and reduced carbon emissions. It addresses reliance on off-island supply chains, provides local employment opportunities and lowers the cost of goods.

Our Circular Economy and Waste Route Map to 2030 (2024) and draft Circular Economy Strategy for Scotland recognise island challenges – including limited reuse/recycling infrastructure, higher transport costs, and inconsistencies in waste collection services. Close collaboration with island communities will be critical to maximise the impact of the Route Map and the Strategy. It is not a standing start: grassroots projects already include initiatives such as construction material reuse, tool libraries and community repair hubs[51]. The Route Map includes an action to review the rural exemption for food-waste recycling and the co-design of a statutory code of practice for household recycling. This will reflect diverse geographies, housing stocks and recycling

infrastructure across Scotland. A similar review process is planned for commercial recycling requirements and waste service provision.

Fly-tipping can have a disproportionate impact on islands. The National Litter and Flytipping Strategy (2023), commits to stronger enforcement measures and encourages collaborative working with landowners, local authorities and communities. Sitting alongside it, the Marine Litter Strategy for Scotland (2022) includes an action to improve monitoring of beach litter on islands.

We will work with island communities, local authorities and businesses to co-design local circular economy solutions that align with the aims of Scotland's Circular Economy and Waste Route Map as well as the forthcoming Circular Economy Strategy.

Renewable Energy and Community Benefits

Islands are leading the way in renewable energy generation – from large-scale developments to community-led projects. The Regional Transformational Opportunities in the Highlands and Islands report (2025) highlighted a rich pipeline of green energy projects in island areas with potential to grow working-age populations.

We have invested in enabling port infrastructure, including £33.7 million for the now-completed deep-water terminal in Stornoway, with an additional £10 million from HIE. As part of our commitment to investing up to £500 million over five years to support the infrastructure and manufacturing facilities that are critical to growing the offshore wind sector, we have also provided £5 million for the Scapa Deep Water Quay and over £1.1 million for the Ultra Deep Water Quay at Lerwick Harbour, as well as £3.4 million to improve access to the Arnish Industrial Complex and £1.8 million for Stornoway Port's proposed new Deep Water South project.

We know that limited grid capacity is restricting some islands from bringing new renewable electricity generation online, resulting in constraints for both local development and further decarbonisation of island infrastructure. While electricity is a reserved matter, the Scottish Government will continue to advocate for grid upgrades in support of island communities' needs and ambitions.

With the National Energy System Operator (NESO), island local authorities, Ofgem, and SSEN, we are working to deliver essential transmission links. This includes the new 600 MW link from Shetland to mainland Scotland to enable Lerwick Power Station to move to standby mode.

Island diesel power stations remain critical for security of supply in the event of national grid faults or for grid support. We are working with network companies to reduce reliance on fossil back-up and remove unabated diesel/heavy-oil plants. These stations are temporarily exempt from air-quality rules, but Scottish Ministers will need to review the exemptions before they lapse in 2033 (planned outages) and 2039 (unplanned). Over time, diesel back-up will be replaced with stronger grid connections and renewable technologies. Islands are already trialling low carbon fuels. On Eday, for example, surplus tidal and community wind power is used to generate hydrogen, which is then stored and taken to Kirkwall to run a fuel cell capable of providing clean, dispatchable power.

Island communities have told us that benefits from renewable projects can be slow to materialise, while energy costs remain high and fuel poverty above Scotland's average. This points to the need for earlier, more inclusive approaches to ensuring communities share in the value of the energy transition.

Community Benefits Schemes are a well-established and integral part of onshore renewable energy developments in Scotland. They are however voluntary arrangements that sit independent of our planning and consenting systems. Our consultation on Community

Benefits from Net Zero Energy Development, alongside independent research and stakeholder engagement, is informing refreshed Good Practice Principles for Community Benefits, which are expected for publication in 2026 and will deliver long-term, meaningful outcomes for communities.

Case Study – The Dancing Ladies of Gigha

The Isle of Gigha was put on the market in 2001. With support from the Scottish Land Fund and HIE, the Isle of Gigha Heritage Trust (IGHT) completed a community buyout in March 2002. Gigha also hosts Scotland's first community-owned grid connected wind turbine development. Known as the "Dancing Ladies" and operated by Gigha Renewable Energy Limited, a subsidiary company of IGHT, the three turbines' output equates to the majority of the island's electricity demand. The energy produced by the Dancing Ladies is exported and sold to the grid, generating significant net revenue for the island. Profits have been reinvested locally to support community wealth building projects spanning from housing improvements and tourism infrastructure to active travel initiatives and heritage conservation. Since the buyout, Gigha's population has almost doubled and has seen an increased school roll that allows the community to look to the future with confidence.

While the power to mandate community benefits lies with the UK Government, we continue to press for a fairer deal for Scotland's communities. We have called for mandatory community benefit schemes for mature onshore technologies, a robust voluntary framework for emerging technologies and a fair approach to offshore wind to ensure a level playing field across Great Britain.

We will refresh the Scottish Government's Good Practice Principles for Community Benefits, so that these arrangements deliver sustainable, meaningful impacts and meet the needs of communities.

Community-owned renewables are increasingly common across the islands, reducing emissions and creating re-investable local revenue. Through our Community and Renewable Energy Scheme (CARES), we have invested around £10.8 million across 208 projects on Scotland's islands. In 2023, for instance, Eigg Electric received funding to install three new wind turbines and upgrade its electricity microgrid. In 2025-26, through a combination of Scottish Government and GB Energy funding, the Community Energy Generation Growth Fund will provide up to £8 million to boost community energy.

Carbon Neutral Islands: More Than a Climate Project

Launched in 2022, the Carbon Neutral Islands (CNI) project is supporting six islands – Barra, Cumbrae, Hoy, Islay, Raasay and Yell – to reach carbon neutrality by 2040 and develop a community-led model for climate resilience and local wealth-building. A Community Development Officer is embedded within the local community on each island. This ensures that priorities are shaped by local voices and that delivery remains community focused.

What Changed

Islands have already made impressive progress. Energy efficiency and housing retrofit activity has accelerated, adaptation work has been scoped, skills and local capacity have grown, and community organisations are better placed to access funding. On Cumbrae, for example, rooftop solar capacity has increased fourfold; Raasay has driven nature restoration efforts whilst filling seasonal employment gaps; and on Islay work has been undertaken to improve the energy efficiency of community spaces and domestic housing.

Funding the Initiative

CNI is supported through competitive capital funding rounds complemented by more flexible direct allocations. This approach has allowed smaller, high-impact interventions (such as local food growing projects) to run alongside larger scale decarbonisation efforts (such as community-owned renewable energy arrays). In addition to continued resource funding for local anchor organisations and key partners, £3.9 million capital has been allocated to deliver community-led projects.

What We Have Learned

- Local leadership delivers faster – decisions taken on-island shorten the gap between ideas and delivery.
- A mixed model, including both capital and resource funding, enables community driven action and larger scale ambitions.
- Co-benefits matter – projects designed for net zero also support jobs, skills, health and community wealth.

Looking Ahead

The CNI project will support the delivery of key elements of this National Islands Plan, contributing to commitments across Strategic Objectives. We will continue to drive delivery of the project, sharing tools and knowledge with other islands across Scotland and supporting our CNI communities to access climate finance for long-term investment in decarbonisation.

Heating and Energy Efficiency

Decarbonising homes and buildings is essential to meeting climate and fuel-poverty goals. Island homes are disproportionately off the gas grid and have poorer energy efficiency profiles. Higher retrofit costs and limited heating options drive up bills and deepen fuel poverty. However, improvements are already underway. Almost half of respondents to the Scottish Islands Survey 2023 report installing additional insulation and 14% have fitted a heat pump.

Funding schemes supporting energy saving improvements across Scotland are designed to reflect the higher costs and fuel-poverty rates faced by island communities. The Warmer Homes Scotland (WHS) programme uses a National Customer Price so that eligible customers get the same level of improvement wherever they live. The supply chain of WHS installers includes nine island-based SMEs. Similarly, the Home Energy Scotland Grant and Loan scheme includes an island uplift and, through our Area Based Schemes (ABS), we have awarded over £110 million to island authorities since 2013.

We will work with island communities and local authorities to help homeowners and businesses reduce their building emissions.

Island consumers who rely on heating oil, LPG and solid fuels – markets not regulated by Ofgem – face extra barriers, including transport surcharges, minimum order quantities and upfront payment requirements.

We will undertake engagement with island communities, fuel suppliers and the UK Government to discuss means of mitigating the challenges facing island consumers who use alternative fuels for heating, including options to develop credit facilities.

Poverty, Cost-of-Living and Social Justice

Poverty, Cost-of-Living and Social Justice

Poverty carries unique socio-economic impacts, weakening social cohesion and embedding disadvantages in local communities. Distinct island challenges – including geographic isolation, higher cost-of-living, constrained employment opportunities and sometimes challenging access to public services – intersect to shape patterns of inequality.

According to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) 2020, islands are generally less deprived than other parts of the country. However, SIMD's strength lies in identifying concentrations of poverty and detecting pockets of deprivation in more sparsely populated areas requires a more nuanced approach. Considering island areas separately allows for a fairer assessment of poverty, reflecting their unique cost-of-living pressures and highlighting patterns of hardship that may be obscured in broader regional and national data.

The picture is, indeed, complex. Deprivation on islands is often less visible but can be deeply felt. The percentage of respondents to the Scottish Island Survey 2023 reporting that their household is managing well financially is lower than that of Scotland as a whole, with younger islanders more likely to report financial pressures.

Established in December 2022, the Islands Cost Crisis Emergency Fund has provided £4.4 million to the six island local authorities to support vulnerable households exposed to cost-of-living pressures. The Fund has offered flexibility for authorities to tailor support to local needs, helping islanders manage difficult choices between heating, eating, and other essentials.

Island communities have long faced a high-cost economy and the cost-of-living crisis has intensified these pressures further, exposing structural vulnerabilities in island economies and services. Yet island communities have long shown resilience and creativity. With the right support, they can continue to overcome barriers, reduce poverty, and improve wellbeing.

Social Security

Ensuring that every eligible individual in Scotland can access the social security support they are entitled to is both a legal duty and a fundamental priority for the Scottish Government. Our Benefit Take-Up Strategy (2021) remains central to our efforts to reduce barriers to accessing entitlements. Despite significant progress, we know that some people are still missing out. Challenges in accessing support are often compounded in island communities, where geography, connectivity, and concerns around confidentiality can further restrict access to support.

The Seldom Heard Groups Action Plan (2025) sets out a focused 12-month programme to improve engagement and access for those most likely to be excluded. The Plan will also inform the development of the next Benefit Take-Up Strategy, due by October 2026.

By embedding the needs and lived experiences of island communities into policy design and service delivery, we can reduce barriers, increase household incomes, and improve our ability to reach the people that social security is intended to support. This approach aligns with our broader commitment to fairness, inclusion, and human rights.

We will ensure that barriers to take-up that impact island communities are considered as part of the development of the next Benefit Take-Up Strategy, due by October 2026.

Social Security Scotland plans to undertake additional analysis on the experiences of island communities compared to other parts of Scotland, setting out notable differences in social research publications to inform future delivery.

Child Poverty

Child poverty is generally less prevalent on islands compared to the rest of Scotland[52]. However, islands display a distinct poverty profile: nearly three quarters of low-income families include at least one working person, compared to 6 in 10 in other areas, reflecting the rise of in-work poverty from 2015 to 2023[53].

Eradicating child poverty is the foremost of the Scottish Government's four interconnected priorities and we are committed to taking targeted action in island settings, focusing on unique solutions rooted in these communities.

Through the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017, we have set legal targets to significantly reduce the number of children living in poverty by 2030. We have already put in place a range of sustained and joined-up measures that tackle the three main drivers of poverty: income from employment, cost-of-living and income from social security. This includes implementing the Scottish Child Payment, expanding access to childcare and investing in devolved employability services.

While a strong national framework is essential, meaningful progress on tackling child poverty depends on tailoring interventions to the unique circumstances of local communities.

Under the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017, local authorities and relevant Health Boards are required to prepare joint annual reports to set out the actions they have taken, and intend to take, to tackle child poverty within their areas. The Scottish Government works alongside other national partners to support local child poverty leads, including through knowledge-sharing and advice on Local Child Poverty Action Reports. Through the Child Poverty Practice Accelerator Fund, we are also providing financial support to test new local approaches to tackling the root causes of child poverty.

Fairer Futures Partnerships (FFPs) bring local and national partners together to build more integrated, responsive services that support families to move out of poverty. FFPs are operating in 16 local authority areas in Scotland. The 2025-26 Programme for Government included a commitment to establishing a new FFP in Shetland – this has now been initiated, building on the work of their Anchor Early Action Project. We have also added Adopt and Adapt to our FFP approach, funding local authorities such as Highland, Orkney Islands Council and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar to engage with the learning programme and embed its insights in their child poverty work.

Similarly, the Whole Family Support (WFS) approach is being implemented by local authorities across Scotland, with North Ayrshire one of the "early-adopter" areas. Our approach focuses on removing barriers at a national level to enable local partners to have greater flexibility to meet the needs of low-income families.

We are continuing to act on the findings of our Rural and Islands Child Poverty research (2022) and have published a report (2025) to further enhance our understanding of the changing nature and context of poverty in rural and island areas. We will build on this learning to ensure the unique circumstances of island communities are reflected in the third and final Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan, due by end of March 2026.

We will ensure the learning and insights from the Shetland Fairer Futures Partnership and the Whole Family Support approach are shared with other island areas, improving our understanding of what measures are effective in tackling child poverty among island communities.

We will review the guidance on the development of Local Child Poverty Action Reports and consider how to best reflect the distinct challenges facing island communities.

Case Study – Shetland's Anchor Early Action Project

Launched by the Shetland Community Planning Partnership in 2018, the Anchor Early Action Project aimed to tackle child poverty in the context of the islands' high cost-of-living. The project emphasised family-led problem solving, shifting the focus from crisis response to early intervention. Over its duration, 67 families benefited from personalised and stigma-free support. Evaluation highlighted the importance of authentic engagement and the project's positive impact on families' confidence and ability to pursue change. Learning from the project, which concluded in 2023, informed the establishment of the Anchor for Families Team, embedded across Shetland schools and supported through the Scottish Government's Whole Family Wellbeing Funding.

Fuel Poverty

Since the first National Islands Plan was published in 2019, island households and businesses have faced acute pressure from rising fuel prices. Combined with harsher climates and limited fuel choices, high energy costs are driving fuel poverty rates, with almost half of respondents to the Scottish Islands Survey 2023 reporting that their home sometimes feels uncomfortably cold in winter[54].

Many island households remain off the gas grid – this includes all dwellings in Orkney and Shetland and 89% of dwellings in Na h-Eileanan Siar[55]. With electricity considerably more expensive than mains gas per kilowatt-hour, islanders can face higher energy bills than elsewhere in Scotland.

Fuel poverty extends well beyond heating costs. Financial hardship can force many families to spend a disproportionate share of their income on energy, leaving less for essentials such as food, transport, and clothing. This trade-off erodes financial stability, limit local spending power, and weakens island economies.

Following the publication of our Fuel Poverty Strategy (2021), we have continued to take action in pursuit of our statutory targets, as set out in our first fuel poverty periodic report (2025). The independent Scottish Fuel Poverty Advisory Panel subsequently published their statutory response and offered recommendations on future action, which we are now considering as part of our work to review the Fuel Poverty Strategy by December 2026.

While we are proud of the actions and investments that we have delivered to tackle fuel poverty, it is evident that high energy prices must be addressed, and the fundamental fiscal and policy levers to make a real difference lie with the UK Government. The Scottish House Condition Survey (2023) estimated that 34% (or around 861,000) of all households were in fuel poverty. Internal modelling indicates that, had fuel prices remained at 2019 levels, the efforts we are making in

Scotland would have seen a decrease of around 389,000 households in fuel poverty.

In their final report, our Social Tariff Working Group recommended that eligibility should be calculated based on a sophisticated set of metrics – including rurality – and that it should be applied to all fuel types. We believe that a social tariff mechanism is the best way to ensure that energy consumers are protected against high costs and that their household energy needs become more affordable and more sustainable in the longer-term, reducing the likelihood of building up energy debt. Our analysis finds that around 660,000 households could see estimated fuel bills cut by an average of £700 under Scottish Government proposals for targeted discounts, with the number of households in fuel poverty reduced by around 135,000. We have repeatedly called on both the previous and current UK Government to introduce this critical policy.

We will engage with the UK Government on energy market reforms, advocating for greater clarity on the implications for bill-payers and encouraging the development of a support package to tackle fuel poverty.

We will explore the possibility of using local authority level data to investigate the impact of an energy social tariff on island communities.

Disability and Accessibility

Our vision for Scotland is one where all disabled people are fully supported to participate in society, exercise their rights and thrive within their communities. The Scottish Government's Disability Equality Plan (2025) focuses on three priority areas: providing financial support for disabled households, improving mental health and supporting disabled people's full inclusion and participation in their communities. In 2025-26, £3 million has been allocated to support the Plan.

The Disability Equality Plan is grounded in the social model of disability, which recognises that individuals are not "disabled" by impairments, but rather by the societal, structural, and attitudinal barriers that they face. Among island communities, some of these challenges are magnified by geography – including longer travel distances, more limited access to specialist services, and fewer local opportunities for employment, training and education.

The Disability Equality Plan commits to working inclusively with rural and island communities to ensure local needs and voices inform the design and delivery of services. This will include pursuing community-led opportunities to share learning and influence the development of wider policies for rural and island areas, ensuring they work for disabled people – giving them freedom, dignity and choice over their lives.

We will establish a dedicated working group bringing together Disabled People's Organisations, island local authorities, and community representatives to gain a comprehensive understanding of the barriers faced by disabled people living on islands.

Island Consumers

Island communities face greater vulnerability to changes in essential services and utilities, with smaller markets and more limited consumer choices compared to other parts of the country. Any reduction in the frequency and availability of these services can have disproportionate socio-economic impacts, undermining community wellbeing and sustainability.

Challenges surrounding the switch-off of the Radio Teleswitch Service (RTS) – which is industry led and wholly reserved to the UK Government – offer an ongoing example of the importance of factoring island realities into the design and delivery of service changes. RTS meters are

common in homes that rely on electric heating systems and are more often found in areas off the gas grid, including many of our islands. Without replacement meters in place, households and businesses risk being left without a functioning supply or facing higher bills. Yet, many islanders find it hard to arrange replacements.

The Scottish Government has been working with Ofgem, the UK Government and industry through the RTS Taskforce. There is still a significant number of meters to be replaced in Scotland, and we are calling on renewed effort on the part of the industry.

We will support island-based energy consumers to access help and advice on energy costs, metering and decarbonisation by working with advice bodies to develop services that are tailored to their needs.

Similarly, many island communities rely on post offices as vital hubs for essential services such as parcel delivery, bill payments and banking. We continue to press the UK Government to protect island post offices, recognising that viable alternatives are not readily available. Some islanders are also faced with higher costs for sending parcels than communities on Scotland's mainland, and may not be able to access the same post and delivery services, limiting access to goods and placing further pressures on household budgets and local businesses.

Despite being included in UK-wide delivery speed targets, Shetland, Orkney, and Na h-Eileanan Siar are not covered by the Postcode Area-level delivery speed standards for First Class mail that Royal Mail is required to meet. Such exclusion leaves these communities without the same level of service protection as the rest of the UK. Research by Consumer Scotland found that 72% of consumers in the Highlands and Islands had been charged additional fees when ordering parcels online[56].

Informed by Consumer Scotland's research and recommendations, we will engage with UK Government, Royal Mail, Post Office, Ofcom, and parcel delivery companies to ensure island communities and businesses can access essential services, including banking and equitable postal and delivery services.

Resilience and Preparedness

Living with the realities of geography and harsh weather has fostered a strong culture of preparedness and adaptability within island communities. Yet, in times of prolonged disruption, islands can still face acute challenges. Island supply chains can be fragile and heavily reliant on ferry and aviation links, which can be impacted by weather conditions, mechanical failures and other unforeseen events. Digital connectivity infrastructure is also vulnerable to weather events and damage caused by human activity, requiring rapid responses – in often challenging conditions – to minimise disruption and restore services.

While there are robust resilience arrangements in place across Scotland, there remains scope to strengthen them further and make them even more cognisant of island communities' circumstances – particularly in relation to food, energy and digital connectivity.

We will work with local authorities and other key stakeholders to capture and apply learning from disruption affecting island communities, helping to strengthen preparedness and response planning, including in relation to digital infrastructure and food resilience.

Empowered Communities and Culture

Empowered Communities and Culture

Achieving the ambitions of this Plan depends on close collaboration across all levels of government. By working together, and by supporting island communities in ways that reflect their distinct ambitions and strengths, local authorities and national bodies are best placed to deliver meaningful change. This is in line with the recommendation made by the Scottish Human Rights Commission, who underlined the importance of policies that are adaptable to the specific needs of islands and rural areas[57].

Evidence shows that thriving island communities are those where local people are empowered to take action – from running community assets to shaping local services. Strong community organisations build resilience, help retain and attract new islanders by creating confidence in the future, and contribute directly to national objectives on wellbeing, net zero and inclusive growth.

Our goal is simple: to enable islands to thrive on their own terms. Delivering this vision requires robust frameworks for legislation, consultation and planning, ensuring that the voices of islanders are embedded in decision-making at every stage.

Communities have told us that empowerment must be accompanied by practical and sustained investments that build capacity among local organisations and support the delivery of locally led projects. Adequate resourcing and skills development are essential to move from vision to delivery.

Promoting and protecting islands' heritage is intrinsic to our commitment to community empowerment. Many participants in the consultation that shaped this Plan told us their sense of belonging is closely linked to the traditions and culture of their island. Heritage is not a relic of the past but a living resource that strengthens social cohesion, builds intergenerational bonds and stimulates economic growth. Our vision is for islanders to be empowered to shape their own priorities, build their futures, and protect what makes their communities unique.

Local Government

In developing this Plan, we have sought advice from local government partners and engaged directly with islanders. Publication does not mean we have reached our destination – we will continue to engage and consult throughout the implementation phase to ensure that policies and investments are grounded in lived experience.

While the Scottish Government sets the statutory framework and provides targeted investment, local authorities are closest to communities and best placed to design services and solutions that meet local needs.

One of the key provisions of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 is the potential transfer of additional powers to island local authorities. This mechanism is designed to strengthen autonomy and create even greater scope for tailoring services to the specific needs of island areas. To date, no Additional Powers Requests have been submitted.

We will actively support island local authorities to explore, pursue and implement additional powers, where these can strengthen local decision-making and deliver better outcomes for island communities.

The Islands Programme

Established in 2021-2022, the Scottish Government's Islands Programme has delivered capital investments in locally-developed critical infrastructure projects whose deliverables align with the Strategic Objectives of the National Islands Plan. To date, the Islands Programme has made 88 grant awards in support of 55 separate islands, for a combined total of £19.7 million. Projects supported by the scheme range from a new nursery in Kirkwall and the expansion of the Tigh-a-Rhuda Care Home on Tiree, to the redevelopment of the former Eriskay school and the reopening of the Fair Isle Bird Observatory.

Local authority	Number of awards	Total funding (rounded)	Islands
Argyll and Bute	19	£3.1 m	13
Comhairle	21	£4.3 m	11
Highland	17	£2.8 m	6
North Ayrshire	11	£3.5 m	2
Orkney	10	£3.8 m	20
Shetland	10	£2.2 m	3
TOTAL	88	£19.7 m	55

In parallel, we are exploring new governance models designed to reflect the unique circumstances of island communities and to bring decisions closer to home. We are supporting local government and health and social care partners in Orkney, Na h-Eileanan Siar and Argyll and Bute to develop options for place-specific Single Authority Models (SAMs) that reflect the demographic and geographic realities of island areas.

SAMs offer the opportunity to strengthen and streamline governance in ways that reflect local circumstances. Streamlined governance in smaller authority areas can free up resources for vital front-line activity and encourage a decisive shift to more community-based services that meet need before crisis point is reached. New arrangements will be locally determined through inclusive engagement with communities and relevant workforces. We have already awarded £0.9 million across the three participating councils to support their work with local partners and develop alternative place-based models.

We will publish detailed plans and timelines for implementation of Single Authority Models in Orkney, Na h-Eileanan Siar and Argyll and Bute by the end of this Parliament. Early implementation will focus on deeper integration across key services in local government and health and social care, with potential for new governance arrangements to encompass a broader suite of functions.

Island Communities Impact Assessments and Consultations

The introduction of Island Communities Impact Assessments (ICIAs) in 2021 marked a significant milestone in creating fairer and more inclusive policy-making for our islands. For the first time, 71 public authorities across Scotland are legally required to consider how their decisions might affect island communities. ICIAs have raised awareness across government and public bodies

of the distinct challenges islanders face, and have helped shape more responsive, place-based policies that better reflect the realities of island life.

However, we know – and communities have told us clearly – that more work is needed. ICIAs are a relatively new tool and, like any new process, are still embedding across the public sector. Some communities have expressed concern that the process has not yet delivered on its full potential, highlighting the need to strengthen consistency, quality and impact.

We are committed to improving the effectiveness of ICIAs – supporting public authorities to apply them consistently and meaningfully. Used systematically with other impact assessments (such as the Business and Regulatory, Consumer Duty and Fairer Scotland Duty assessments), ICIAs can strengthen consideration of how policies will have particular impacts for island businesses or consumers, or disadvantaged groups within island communities. By building capacity and improving practice, we aim to ensure that ICIAs lead to more transparent decisions and greater confidence among island communities.

We will identify practical improvements and set out clear, targeted actions to support consistent and robust application of ICIAs across all relevant areas, and work with public authorities and island communities to embed them more systematically in policy development and decision-making. This will include commissioning advice from island organisations to identify best practice in community engagement, with a particular focus on involving young people.

Local Data and Planning

The first National Islands Plan recognised the critical importance of addressing data gaps and gathering robust, island-level data to inform targeted interventions and measure impact. Since then, Scottish Islands Surveys conducted in 2020 and 2023 have generated rich insights into the socio-economic circumstances of islanders and their perceptions of island life.

Alongside other data sources, survey findings have shaped regular updates to the Scottish Islands Data Dashboard – a public-facing tool that tracks key trends across Scotland's islands and supports evidence-based decision-making, including for ICIAs. An updated Scottish Islands Data Overview (2025) summarises the latest available statistical data.

In 2023, we introduced the Scottish Island Regions geography, grouping Scotland's islands into nine regions. This framework provides a consistent basis for structuring datasets and collecting new data. It also enables more meaningful comparisons between island groups and with the rest of Scotland.

While these developments mark important progress, challenges remain. Disaggregating island-specific data from larger datasets is complex, and collecting detailed data for individual islands can be resource-intensive. Communities have also expressed a clear interest in bottom-up approaches, taking the lead in gathering data about their own islands. Such approaches can help close data gaps, inform local planning, and enhance the evidence base that supports funding applications.

We will conduct a new iteration of the Scottish Islands Survey in 2026-27.

We will support community-led approaches to gathering island-level data to improve local understanding of trends and aid local planning. This will include a demonstrator project, with learning shared with other island communities.

While favouring the development of a new National Islands Plan, respondents to the 2023 consultation called for a stronger focus on – and support for – local and community-led planning.

Local Place Plans (LPPs) are community-led spatial plans that allow community bodies to set out their aspirations for the development and use of land. Introduced under the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019, they give communities a clear voice in the development plan system. Guidance highlights that LPPs can be short, visual and accessible documents setting out the community body's priorities and proposals – they do not need to be complex. Once registered with theplanning authority, LPPs must be taken into account when preparing the next Local Development Plan. They provide communities with a practical way to shape the future of their islands and to communicate their aspirations and ideas to public authorities. By contrast, Community Action Plans (CAPs) are typically used to coordinate collaboration between local groups or guide investment and funding applications. While they do not usually include spatial design or mapping, CAPs help communities formalise their objectives across a range of themes.

We want to empower local communities with a strong understanding of the planning system, for instance in relation to renewable developments.

We will establish a training programme for island communities, so they are empowered to participate in planning processes, including through the development of Local Place Plans and Community Action Plans.

Community Capacity and Ownership

The third sector plays an invaluable role on our islands, with staff often taking on multiple responsibilities to bring positive change to their communities. However, demographic challenges pose sustainability risks as the pool of volunteers and future leaders shrinks, increasing the burden on fewer individuals to keep services running and deliver projects that generate wealth and wellbeing. Funding is also a challenge, with many organisations relying on short-term arrangements that make longer-term planning difficult, particularly as rapidly increasing costs erode project feasibility.

Through our engagements, communities have been clear that their ability to create and retain wealth for their islands – turning plans into action – is dependent on first having the necessary capacity.

Our Strengthening Communities Programme (SCP) helps community (anchor) organisations build that capacity. Support is tailored to the needs of organisations and can include developing governance and financial capability to deliver more ambitious projects, which – in turn – increase their ability to self-generate income. In partnership with HIE, the SCP has worked with organisations across island areas, enabling them to pursue economic, social and environmental opportunities that create wealth and wellbeing within their communities. Further improving the transparency of land ownership and giving communities greater say over how land is used is a fundamental component in our journey towards empowering islands to thrive. Access to land is essential to give people places to live, encourage regenerative development and boost community identity.

In addition, the Scottish Government continues to invest in the Community-Led Local Development (CLLD) programme, which operates across every island in Scotland. Delivered in partnership with Local Action Groups (LAGs) and Youth LAGs, the programme supports community-designed solutions to island challenges. These volunteer-led

groups decide how funding is allocated based on local priorities, ensuring decisions remain with those who know their areas best. Since 2022, CLLD has invested more than £5 million in 416 community-driven projects across our islands.

Scotland has a proud history of land reform since devolution but we continue to have one of the most concentrated patterns of land ownership in the world, including on our islands. The Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2025 takes steps to ensure that land is transferred and used in ways that are aligned with local needs, including measures to reform tenant farming. It also expands opportunities for community land ownership by requiring large landholders to engage on and publish mandatory Land Management Plans, and give advance notice of sales. There is a requirement for the Act to be reviewed by the Scottish Land Commission who must evaluate the impact and effect of the land reform measures on islands and island communities. Scottish Ministers will be required to respond to that review stating what actions they intend to take as a result of the findings.

The Scottish Government is also reviewing Community Rights to Buy, with a view to making it easier for communities to exercise them. Among other measures, the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 allows communities to register a community interest in land or buildings, securing first right of refusal should the landowner decide to put the land up for sale. To date, there have been 14 such applications from island communities. Six of these have led to the successful purchase of assets for a combined total of 6,800 acres of land. Engagement is underway with island communities to ensure their views contribute to informing the review process.

The Scottish Land Fund has provided financial support to communities pursuing asset ownership, either through negotiation or by using the Land Reform legislation. Since 2021, the Fund has awarded over £14 million to projects located within the six island local authorities. In 2025-26, we have made another £7.1 million available through the Fund.

Culture, Arts and Heritage

For centuries, Scotland's islands have been exemplars of artistic expression across the visual arts, music and more. To this day, cultural activity remains a cornerstone of island life – from established institutions to grassroots initiatives. The Scottish Islands Survey 2023 found that 65% of respondents had attended a culturally specific festival in the previous 12 months, compared with 5% of people across Scotland[58].

Our islands play a key role in realising the vision set out in our Culture Strategy for Scotland (2022) – one where culture is valued and protected, both shaping and shaped by society, with its transformative potential experienced by everyone.

In 2025-26, we increased support to the culture sector by over £50 million compared to 2023-24. This has enabled Creative Scotland to deliver its Multi-Year Funding programme, strengthening the sector's foundations and allowing it to focus on what it does best: creating innovative and exciting work. Through this programme, Creative Scotland is supporting 15 island-based organisations with investments of £12.4 million over the 2025-26 to 2027-28 period. Seven of these organisations will receive multi-year funding from Creative Scotland for the first time.

Island festivals are outstanding examples of cultural events that provide vital platforms for artists to showcase their work while supporting local economies and businesses. Multi-year funding is helping festivals such as HebCelt, Orkney's St Magnus International Festival, Skye-based SEALL as well as events supported by Fèisean nan Gàidheal.

Artists from Scotland's islands are also central to collaborations and commissions with festivals across the country, including Celtic Connections and the Scottish International Storytelling Festival. The Made in Scotland initiative – backed by the Scottish Government's Festivals EXPO Fund – has enabled numerous island-based artists to showcase their work at the Edinburgh Festival

Fringe, offering vital exposure and creating opportunities for international touring.

The *Even Here, Even Now* project, developed through the Scottish Government's Culture Collective Fund, celebrates the quality and distinctiveness of creative work produced on the islands, rooted in the preservation and development of traditional skills and intangible cultural heritage. Bringing together artists living in Shetland, Orkney and Na h-Eileanan Siar, the project provides a support network that fosters connections and creates opportunities to showcase island artists' work both locally and nationally.

We will support the continuation and expansion of the *Even Here, Even Now* project to include all island areas, promoting island culture, heritage and languages.

Efforts to record and preserve our islands' history and heritage have been undertaken across all scales – from the designation of St Kilda and the Heart of Neolithic Orkney as UNESCO World Heritage sites, to grassroots research into the lived experience of islanders over generations. Our islands are also home to a remarkable number of museums and heritage centres, each playing a vital role in preserving and celebrating local culture. Often curated by communities, these centres act as custodians of island histories and attract cultural tourism.

Across Scotland's islands, young people are finding new and creative ways to connect with their community heritage. They are reinterpreting traditions in ways that resonate with their lives, ensuring local heritage evolves and remains relevant for future generations.

We will support young islanders to celebrate and grow their islands' heritage, both locally, across Scotland and on the international stage.

Languages

Scotland's islands boast a rich tapestry of languages and dialects, deeply woven into their identity. These languages carry centuries of tradition, storytelling and place-based knowledge, fostering a strong sense of belonging. Beyond their cultural value, they are also powerful drivers of economic growth – supporting jobs and attracting visitors.

Data from Scotland's Census 2022 show that 21% of island residents reported some Gaelic skills. The highest proportion anywhere in Scotland was recorded in Na h-Eileanan Siar, where 57% of respondents had some proficiency. Islands in the Highlands (35%) and Argyll (21%) areas also recorded substantially higher levels of Gaelic ability than the national average.

In 2022, Scottish Ministers convened a Short Life Working Group to identify actions that could strengthen the links between Gaelic use and economic growth. The Group's report features 45 recommendations, almost all of which the Scottish Government has accepted. In line with the Group's advice, this Plan recognises the importance of harnessing the economic contribution that Gaelic makes to some island communities.

Gaelic hubs are key links between language revitalisation and economic regeneration. Ranging from Gaelic businesses such as Stornoway's An Taigh Cèilidh to community spaces provided by organisations like the Staffin Community Trust on Skye, these hubs have been a key target of government investment. They play a dual role: delivering public services and strengthening wider socio-economic wellbeing.

The success of Sabhal Mòr Ostaig is a powerful example of the link between community regeneration and language revival. As part of the Scottish Languages Act 2025, we have committed to reviewing the status of Sabhal Mòr Ostaig to identify ways to secure its continued growth and development.

The support for Scots also has a profound island dimension. Orkney and Shetland reported the highest proportion of Scots speakers in the country, with Orcadian and Shetlandic remaining deeply cherished components of local heritage and culture. Alongside Gaelic, the Scottish Languages Act 2025 grants Scots official status within Scotland. It also places a duty on Scottish Ministers to produce a Scots Language Strategy and to encourage the use of Scots within the school curriculum. Recognition of Scots must reflect the diversity of its dialects – in implementing the Act, specific recognition will be given to Orcadian and Shetlandic, with community views sought on the most effective ways to support them.

We will support the establishment of a network of Gaelic development officers. This will aid the creation of new Gaelic hubs, encourage inter-island collaboration on language development and highlight socio-economic opportunities connected to the use of Gaelic.

We will expand Gaelic medium education (GME) provision on islands from early years to secondary levels, including through increased support for GME teachers and the establishment of a new GME secondary school.

We will ensure the implementation of the National Islands Plan supports the development of guidance concerning Areas of Linguistic Significance. This will include enhancing the gathering of language data through future iterations of the Scottish Islands Survey.

We will work with local authorities that include traditional Gaelic areas to assess the economic contribution of Gaelic and Gaelic broadcasting to their island communities. We will identify lessons that can support local language promotion and community regeneration in other island areas, for instance in relation to Orcadian and Shetlandic.

Scotland's Census 2022 shows that 2,700 island residents use British Sign Language (BSL), with the largest group in Shetland (3.5% of the population aged over 3).

Our BSL National Plan 2023-2029 promotes equal access, opportunity and inclusion for the BSL community. The availability of BSL classes for deaf and hard of hearing people is often raised as a concern, together with appropriate training for teachers, social workers and healthcare professionals. To address these issues, the Scottish Government funds Contact Scotland BSL, which allows users to communicate remotely with services and people via a BSL interpreter. We know that barriers facing BSL users can be even more pronounced in island communities, where training and learning opportunities are less readily available.

We will ensure that the delivery of the BSL National Plan is responsive to the barriers faced by users in island communities.

Monitoring Delivery of the National Islands Plan

A robust and transparent monitoring process will be key to ensuring the effective delivery of this National Islands Plan.

The Implementation Route Map sets out delivery timeframes and partners involved in implementing each commitment. Throughout the Plan, we have also aimed to articulate the rationale behind each action and its intended impact – both in advancing the relevant Strategic Objective and in supporting the Plan's overarching population goals.

The Scottish Islands Data Dashboard will remain the principal source of evidence for the implementation of the Plan, linking to relevant research and publications. We will refresh its structure to mirror the content and Strategic Objectives of this new Plan. This update will focus on clarity of presentation while maintaining comprehensive underlying data, making it easier to identify both positive progress and challenges.

We will also conduct a new iteration of the Scottish Islands Survey to better understand the evolving needs and experiences of island communities.

As required by the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, we will continue to submit Annual Reports to the Scottish Parliament, setting out the tangible actions taken to deliver the commitments in this Plan and our progress against its Strategic Objectives. Going forward, Annual Reports will include more detailed information on Island Communities Impact Assessments (ICIAs) completed by the Scottish Government, and on the engagements undertaken to gather island communities' views during the development of policies, strategies and services. Reports will continue to be published on the Scottish Government website.

Following publication of the Plan and within the first three years of implementation, we will work with stakeholders to develop an outcomes framework to clarify and help prioritise how activities and investments will achieve intended objectives. This will inform any adjustments to the Plan for the remainder of its lifespan and the early stages of preparation for the next iteration.

Feedback from the consultation process highlighted the importance of creating more regular and accessible opportunities for communities to influence the implementation of the National Islands Plan. Once Annual Reports have been laid before Parliament, we will deliver a programme of public engagement to raise awareness of their content and invite input to future priorities. These engagements will include both in-person events and annual *Islands Conversation* webinars, providing a platform to share progress, celebrate achievements and gather views. This approach will ensure that island communities remain involved throughout implementation, fostering an open and collaborative review cycle.

We will also review the Terms of Reference of the Islands Strategic Group, which brings together Scottish Ministers and Leaders of the six island local authorities, to strengthen its role as a forum for monitoring and, where necessary, adjusting the implementation of the Plan.

In line with the provisions of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, a full review of this Plan will be carried out within five years of publication.

Endnotes

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Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba

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Appendix 2

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National Islands Plan Implementation Route Map

Annex A – Implementation Route Map

The Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 requires the Scottish Government to review the existing National Islands Plan within five years. Therefore, the delivery timescale of the commitments within this Plan are split over the short-term (within one to two years), medium term (within one to four years), and long term (within one to five years). This Implementation Route Map lists the commitments under each Strategic Objective, documenting timescales and delivery partners. We will work and engage with delivery partners – as well as the business community, third sector and other local organisations where relevant – to ensure the successful implementation of these commitments.

Connectivity

No.	Commitment	Timescale	Delivery Partners
1.	We will provide advice and practical support to local authorities to help them progress their fleet replacement plans.	Long	Local authorities
2.	We will work with public bodies delivering ferry services and infrastructure to improve and increase the reach of Board appointment campaigns amongst island communities and strengthen residency criteria for future positions. Under the new Clyde and Hebrides Ferry Services contract, we will work with the Ferries Community Board to further increase its role and voice.	Long	CalMac CMAL
3.	We will publish the Ferries Accessibility Standard in 2026 and open a new Islands Transport Accessibility Fund whose remit will include both ferries and aviation infrastructure.	Short	CalMac NorthLink
4.	We will monitor and evaluate the uptake and impacts of the new under-22s concessionary ferry travel schemes and consider potential enhancements.	Long	Young Islanders Network Ferries Community Board Operators Local authorities Regional Transport Partnerships
5.	We will explore options to support island businesses, including alternatives to the current ferry freight fare subsidies, to identify approaches that offer better value for money and respond more directly to business needs, remaining cognisant of the higher costs of doing business on islands.	Long	
6.	We will work with the UK Government to implement a Highlands and Islands exemption to the Air Departure Tax that protects connectivity and	Medium	UK Government

	complies with the UK Government's subsidy control legislation. We will engage with island communities and stakeholders to inform further policy development as we progress towards implementation.		
7.	Working closely with island communities, local authorities and partners, we will take forward detailed appraisals for the three potential fixed links identified in STPR2.	Long	Local authorities
8.	We will support local authorities' exploration of financing models and promote investment opportunities in fixed links projects.	Long	Local authorities Scottish Futures Trust Scottish National Investment Bank Highlands and Islands Enterprise
9.	We will support partners to deliver sustainable infrastructure elements of the Stornoway, Tarbert (Harris), Lochmaddy, Lochboisdale, Castlebay and Kirkwall Active Travel Masterplans, with a focus on where these align with supporting integrated journeys at ferry terminals. We will also support partners to deliver sustainable transport masterplans for Bowmore and Tobermory.	Long	Local authorities HITRANS
10.	We will work with Orkney Islands Council and Historic Environment Scotland to complete the Stenness Movement Study (Maeshowe – Stones of Stenness – Brodgar corridor) as part of the Orkney World Heritage Site Programme within the Islands Growth Deal. This will support the development of a heritage-sensitive sustainable travel plan, with insights and learning shared with other island communities.	Medium	Orkney Islands Council Historic Environment Scotland
11.	We will deliver smart, interoperable ticketing and better travel data for island passengers, including support for multi-modal and concessionary travel, in partnership with the National Smart Ticketing Advisory Board.	Long	National Smart Ticketing Advisory Board Traveline Scotland Local authorities Ferry operators Regional Transport Partnerships
12.	We will support the expansion of the public EV charging networks, providing reliable, accessible infrastructure in the right places for visitors and residents.	Long	Local authorities Regional Transport Partnerships Charge point operators
13.	We will carry out a mapping exercise to monitor broadband delivery, identify gaps in gigabit-capable coverage, and inform discussions with	Long	UK Government Providers

	industry and UK Government on future digital connectivity investments for islands.		
14.	We will aim to align delivery of our Reaching 100% (R100) contracts with Project Gigabit contracts to maximise island coverage. In Spring 2026, we will announce the outcome of the regional Project Gigabit procurement to further extend gigabit-capable broadband coverage to over 13,000 eligible premises across Orkney and Shetland.	Medium	
15.	We will take forward a programme of trials to support our understanding of viable technologies and commercial models that have the ability to improve mobile coverage in unserved and underserved areas. This will include trialling the deployment of small cells as a method of addressing coverage gaps.	Long	Scottish Futures Trust Mobile operators
16.	We will roll out digital skills training in island communities, beginning with a pilot tailored on the farming and crofting sectors to improve confidence in using the rural payments portal.	Medium	Community Clicks Version 1

Housing

No.	Commitment	Timescale	Delivery Partners
1.	Through refreshed Local Housing Strategy guidance for local authorities, we will introduce robust requirements about the distinct housing needs of island communities. In addition, refreshed guidance on Housing Need and Demand Assessments will include strengthened focus on localised housing needs and working in partnership with local communities.	Short	Local authorities Scottish Housing Network
2.	We will support the delivery of affordable homes across island communities by increasing available investment through the Rural and Island Housing Fund to £37 million to March 2028 and by raising feasibility support to up to £20,000 per project.	Short	
3.	We will encourage communities to come forward to local authorities and Registered Social Landlords with project proposals for the Rural Affordable Homes for Key Workers Fund where opportunities are identified.	Short	Local authorities Registered Social Landlords Communities Housing Trust

4.	Subject to parliamentary approval, we will exempt all island developments from the proposed Scottish Building Safety Levy.	Short	
5.	We will work to increase the volume of private funding enabling the delivery of housing developments on islands, supporting the role of SME housebuilders. This will include close partnerships with developers, public bodies and the Scottish National Investment Bank.	Long	Scottish National Investment Bank
6.	We will work with partners, including the Scottish National Investment Bank, to develop a pipeline of investment opportunities, support the delivery of more homes on islands and build delivery capacity. This will include consideration of the role of multi-site delivery structures.	Long	Scottish National Investment Bank
7.	We will engage with island local authorities to monitor the implementation of short-term let regulations and review initiatives to reduce the number of empty homes, identifying opportunities to share good practice.	Short	Local authorities
8.	We will provide match funding through the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership to support Empty Homes Officer roles within Orkney Islands Council and the Highland Council. We will explore similar opportunities with other island local authorities.	Short	Local authorities Scottish Empty Homes Partnership
9.	We will deliver additional funding for the continuation of the Argyll & Bute Empty Homes and Key Worker Housing project as part of a financial package for local initiatives aimed at returning empty homes into use.	Short	Local authorities Scottish Empty Home Partnership Third sector partners
10.	Subject to parliamentary approval, we will remove the 100% limit on the level of council tax premium that can be applied to second and long-term empty homes.	Short	
11.	In consultation with planning authorities and building standards verifiers, we will explore the development of island home templates that meet the needs of island communities.	Medium	Scottish Islands Federation Local authorities Building Standards Verifiers
12.	Working with partners, including public bodies, landowners and the Scottish National Investment Bank, we will explore opportunities to unlock land to support the delivery of more homes on islands.	Long	Scottish National Investment Bank Scottish Land and Estates Senior Public Sector Landowners Group Crofting Commission

Health and Social Care

No.	Commitment	Timescale	Delivery Partners
1.	By early 2026, we will provide funding to HITRANS to develop a Health and Transport Action Plan (HTAP) for the Highlands and Islands, including demand assessments and structured engagement between transport providers and Health Boards.	Short	Regional Transport Partnerships NHS Boards Local authorities
2.	We will work with NHS Health Boards covering islands to identify a transport lead to coordinate delivery under the new HTAP, ensuring local needs are reflected and coordinated across health and transport systems.	Short	NHS Boards
3.	We will support the expansion of Hospital at Home services in island communities through upskilling staff, point-of-care testing, and remote monitoring. This will reduce the need for travel, maintain local economies, support ageing populations, and improve access to urgent and unscheduled care.	Short	NHS Boards
4.	We will ensure island communities benefit from digital prescribing solutions. This will improve medication safety, access, and management for older people and those with multiple conditions, supporting continuity of care and reducing reliance on physical travel for repeat prescriptions.	Long	NHS Boards
5.	We will ensure that the action plan accompanying the new Long-Term Conditions Framework has a specific focus on improving equality of access to care and support for island communities.	Medium	NHS Boards Third sector organisations
6.	We will work with island Health Boards and their partners to define core services and delivery models that ensure equitable access for island populations. This includes care delivered in communities rather than requiring travel off-island.	Medium	NHS Boards
7.	We will pilot remote diagnostic technologies in at least two island communities by the end of 2026, supporting earlier diagnosis and reducing the need for travel.	Short	NHS Boards
8.	As we develop the Primary Care Route Map during 2026, we will consider the feasibility of island-specific workforce incentives.	Short	

9.	In early 2026, we will support tailored rollout of the Getting It Right for Everyone (GIRFE) approach in island Health and Social Care Partnerships, assisting staff with training and adaptation.	Medium	Health and Social Care Partnerships
10.	We will work with education and workforce partners to pilot “Earn as You Learn” (EAYL) digital training for Allied Health Professionals (AHP) in island communities. This will support the development of a sustainable pipeline of qualified AHPs and reduce reliance on agency staffing.	Medium	
11.	Over the course of 2026, we will monitor the impact of revised incentives on NHS dental service uptake in island communities, with a specific focus on improving access to general dental services (high street dentistry). In addition, we will explore alternative models of care and workforce incentives to further support the role of the Public Dental Service (PDS) in island areas, especially for patients with complex needs.	Medium	NHS National Service Scotland NHS Boards British Dental Association Scotland
12.	In early 2026, we will convene an advisory group – including community representatives – to explore alternative models of dental service provision in island areas. The group will consider options beyond traditional high street and Public Dental Service models, including alternative ownership structures to support financial sustainability.	Short	NHS NSS (NHS Delivery) NHS Boards Health and Social Care Partnerships British Dental Association Scotland
13.	We will create new mental wellbeing resources tailored for island communities and make them available on the Mind-to-Mind website. This will include culturally relevant materials, such as additional resources in Gaelic, to support inclusive access and engagement.	Short	NHS 24 Healthcare Improvement Scotland Gaelic language partners NHS Boards
14.	We will deliver mental health training in partnership with young people in island communities, with the aim of creating a network of mental health champions. This initiative will help reduce stigma, increase peer support, and build community resilience.	Short	Change Mental Health Young Islanders Network Third sector organisations Local schools
15.	Over the course of this Plan, we will identify opportunities where new infrastructure investment – for instance, in renewables and housing – can deliver added value for health and social care. This includes exploring the repurposing of disused assets to support workforce accommodation or future service provision.	Long	
16.	We will work across government portfolios to improve access to funded learning pathways for working-age adults in island communities,	Long	

	particularly those entering support worker roles. This includes addressing barriers related to cohort size, funding eligibility, and remote learning infrastructure.		

Economy, Education and Skills

No.	Commitment	Timescale	Delivery Partners
1.	We will support a campaign across island parishes to provide information on croft succession planning, gather views on key areas of concern for crofters and highlight the work of the Scottish Land Matching Service.	Short	Crofting Commission
2.	We will develop new training resources for island crofters to support active management of common grazings and encourage the establishment of new grazings committees.	Short	Crofting Commission
3.	Focusing on horticulture, we will establish and support a network of island food producers to strengthen local food resilience and retail opportunities.	Long	Scotland Food and Drink Nourish Scotland Scottish Islands Federation
4.	We will support new training opportunities co-designed with island women who are interested in pursuing a career in agriculture and deliver enhanced support to encourage and empower women to become trainers in the agricultural sector on islands.	Short	Lantra Scotland Scottish Crofting Federation Grass-Ceiling Women in Agriculture Group Scotland Scottish Association of Young Farmers Clubs
5.	We will provide targeted support that facilitates small producer access to abattoir services on our islands.	Short	Highlands and Islands Enterprise Quality Meat Scotland
6.	We will undertake a feasibility study to inform discussions on increasing communities' role in directly managing quota stocks, including options to run a pilot project in an island area.	Medium	Local authorities
7.	We will work with public and private sector partners to ensure an efficient approach towards the fish farm consenting processes, remove duplication and enable a pathway for aquaculture development from 3 to 12 nautical miles.	Medium	Local authorities Crown Estate Scotland Highlands and Islands Enterprise Scottish Environment Protection Agency NatureScot Fish Health Inspectorate

			Salmon Scotland
8.	We will engage with island communities, local authorities and businesses to inform the development of good practice principles for community benefits for aquaculture developments.	Medium	Local authorities Crown Estate Scotland Highlands and Islands Enterprise Salmon Scotland
9.	We will deliver tailored training programmes to grow skills and build capacity for island communities to steward sustainable tourism in ways that reflect their values and ensure that the economic, social and environmental benefits are retained locally.	Medium	Highlands and Islands Enterprise
10.	Working with public and private partners, we will incorporate investment opportunities from across the islands into our national project pipeline and showcase 'investment ready' projects through the Invest Scotland online portal. We will also explore opportunities to bundle projects together to attract private investment on islands.	Long	Highlands and Islands Enterprise Local Authorities
11.	We will explore opportunities to improve how net revenues from the Scottish Crown Estate support community infrastructure on islands.	Medium	Local authorities Crown Estate Scotland COSLA
12.	Crown Estate Scotland will engage offshore wind developers on their commitments to island supply chains and consider opportunities to invest in island ports.	Long	Crown Estate Scotland
13.	We will convene a roundtable with key partners to utilise evidence gathered by Highlands and Islands Enterprise on the challenges and potential solutions to delivering childcare services in island and rural communities. This will seek to agree practical recommendations for action that will be taken forward through key strategic groups such as the Convention of the Highlands and Islands, and the Islands Strategic Group.	Short	Local authorities Highlands and Islands Enterprise Care and Learning Alliance Regulators
14.	In 2026, we will launch a consultation and introduce the necessary legislative changes to create a new definition for School Age Childcare within the regulatory framework. This would enable a review of workforce qualifications, supporting services to attract a more diverse workforce to address recruitment and retention challenge in island areas.	Short	Care Inspectorate Scottish Social Services Council Scottish Out of School Care Network

15.	Through the Education and Childcare Assurance Board, we will work in partnership with COSLA to build considerations of our islands educational context into a wider workforce strategy.	Medium	Education Scotland Local authorities
16.	As part of a review of the Teacher Induction Scheme, we will consider additional measures and changes to encourage more graduate teachers to undertake probation in island locations.	Short	COSLA Local authorities Scottish Council of Deans for Education The General Teaching Council for Scotland
17.	Through the Learning Estate and Investment Programme, school infrastructure projects will be delivered in Brae, Broadford, Kirkwall and Mull before the end of 2029. While working with COSLA, local authorities and Scottish Futures Trust, we will explore how we can deliver further improvements in the school estate across island areas.	Long	Local authorities COSLA Scottish Futures Trust
18.	We will pilot an island scholarship scheme for postgraduate students to address skills shortages in locally-identified priority sectors.	Long	Heriot-Watt University Orkney Islands Council Skills Development Scotland Scottish Funding Council
19.	We will work with further and higher education institutions to attract international students and staff to our islands, including through the joint implementation of the Destination Scotland campaign, and to ensure that delivery of our International Education Strategy fully reflects the opportunities within island communities.	Medium	University of Highlands and Islands Heriot-Watt University Robert Gordon University
20.	We will work with island local authorities to convene localised workforce engagements that bring together employers, investors and public agencies to agree actions that address local skills shortages. This could include proposals for shared public-private investments, including through the Workforce North initiative.	Short	Local authorities Skills Development Scotland Highlands and Islands Enterprise Further and Higher Education Inst.
21.	We will work with partners to promote Scotland's Migration Service to island employers and investors, highlighting its support for those who wish to undertake international recruitment and retention activities.	Short	Highlands and Islands Enterprise Scottish Islands Federation

Climate, Nature and Energy

No.	Commitment	Timescale	Delivery Partners
1.	We will work with local government and a broad range of other partners to expand the network of “Climate Ready” partnerships in all island areas, with an initial focus on Na h-Eileanan Siar and Argyll and Bute in 2026.	Medium	Local authorities Community planning partnerships
2.	We will pilot a “Climate Tips for Teachers” resource for island communities to foster open conversations about climate, reduce eco-distress and empower young islanders to act.	Short	Education Scotland
3.	We will launch a programme of targeted engagements by NatureScot to identify and implement Nature30 opportunities that increase coverage of land managed for nature in a way that works for island landowners and communities. This work will have an initial focus on crofted land.	Medium	Crofting Commission Scottish Crofting Federation NatureScot
4.	We will work with local authorities, regional partnerships and communities to encourage the development of Nature Networks that reflect the specific circumstances of each island community.	Long	Local authorities NatureScot
5.	We will commission research to develop a comprehensive understanding of current and future threats to island biosecurity. This will inform more targeted actions and engagements to protect island environments and communities.	Long	NatureScot
6.	We will develop a public information campaign and deliver training for island communities to raise awareness of the environmental and economic benefits of peatland restoration, including for farming, crofting and other land-based businesses. Working with crofters and other stakeholders, we will also support restoration projects on Scottish Ministers’ Crofting Estates and develop solutions to encourage peatland restoration in other island crofting areas, with a particular focus on common grazings.	Long	NatureScot
7.	We will foster investment in island woodland projects that support a just transition and build community wealth.	Long	Local authorities Woodland Trust Scotland Scottish Crofting Federation Point and Sandwick Trust Shetland Amenity Trust

			Orkney Woodland Project Communities Housing Trust Community Woodlands Association
8.	We will work with island communities, local authorities and businesses to co-design local circular economy solutions that align with the aims of Scotland's Circular Economy and Waste Route Map as well as the forthcoming Circular Economy Strategy.	Long	Local authorities Zero Waste Scotland SEPA Resource and waste sector
9.	We will refresh the Scottish Government's Good Practice Principles for Community Benefits, so that these arrangements deliver sustainable, meaningful impacts and meet the needs of communities.	Short	Community organisations Local authorities Third sector organisations Energy infrastructure developers Highlands and Islands Enterprise
10.	We will expand the scope of the Carbon Neutral Islands Project (CNI), sharing tools and knowledge with other islands across Scotland whilst supporting our CNI communities to access climate finance for long-term investment in decarbonisation.	Long	Local authorities Highlands and Islands Enterprise Third sector organisations
11.	We will work with island communities and local authorities to help homeowners and businesses reduce their building emissions.	Long	Local authorities Community Councils
12.	We will undertake engagement with island communities, fuel suppliers and the UK Government to discuss means of mitigating the challenges facing island consumers who use alternative fuels for heating, including options to develop credit facilities.	Long	UK Government

Poverty, Cost of Living and Social Justice

No.	Commitment	Timescale	Delivery Partners
1.	We will ensure that barriers to take-up that impact island communities are considered as part of the development of the next Benefit Take-Up Strategy, due by October 2026.	Short	
2.	Social Security Scotland plans to undertake additional analysis on the experiences of island communities compared to other parts of Scotland,	Long	Social Security Scotland

	setting out notable differences in social research publications to inform future delivery.		
3.	We will ensure the learning and insights from the Shetland Fairer Futures Partnership and the Whole Family Support approach are shared with other island areas, improving our understanding of what measures are effective in tackling child poverty among island communities.	Short	Local authorities Third sector organisations
4.	We will review the guidance on the development of Local Child Poverty Action Reports and consider how to best reflect the distinct challenges facing island communities.	Short	COSLA Public Health Scotland Improvement Service Third sector organisations
5.	We will engage with the UK Government on energy market reforms, advocating for greater clarity on the implications for bill-payers and encouraging the development of a support package to tackle fuel poverty.	Long	
6.	We will explore the possibility of using local authority level data to investigate the impact of an energy social tariff on island communities.	Medium	
7.	We will establish a dedicated working group bringing together Disabled People's Organisations, island local authorities, and community representatives to gain a comprehensive understanding of the barriers faced by disabled people living on islands.	Long	Local authorities Disabled People's Organisations
8.	We will support island-based energy consumers to access help and advice on energy costs, metering and decarbonisation by working with advice bodies to develop services that are tailored to their needs.	Short	Consumer Scotland Advice Direct Scotland Citizens Advice Scotland Home Energy Scotland
9.	Informed by Consumer Scotland's research and recommendations, we will engage with UK Government, Royal Mail, Post Office, Ofcom, and parcel delivery companies to ensure island communities and businesses can access essential services, including banking and equitable postal and delivery services.	Short	Consumer Scotland
10.	We will work with local authorities and other key stakeholders to capture and apply learning from disruption affecting island communities, helping to strengthen preparedness and response planning, including in relation to digital infrastructure and food resilience.	Short	Local authorities

Empowered Communities and Culture

No.	Commitment	Timescale	Delivery Partners
1.	We will actively support island local authorities to explore, pursue and implement additional powers, where these can strengthen local decision-making and deliver better outcomes for island communities.	Long	Local authorities
2.	We will publish detailed plans and timelines for implementation of Single Authority Models in Orkney, Na h-Eileanan Siar and Argyll and Bute by the end of this Parliament. Early implementation will focus on deeper integration across key services in local government and health and social care, with potential for new governance arrangements to encompass a broader suite of functions.	Short	Local authorities Health Boards Integration Joint Boards
3.	We will identify practical improvements and set out clear, targeted actions to support consistent and robust application of ICIAs across all relevant areas, and work with public authorities and island communities to embed them more systematically in policy development and decision-making. This will include commissioning advice from island organisations to identify best practice in community engagement, with a particular focus on involving young people.	Medium	Local authorities Scottish Islands Federation Young Islanders Network
4.	We will conduct a new iteration of the Scottish Islands Survey in 2026-27.	Short	
5.	We will support community-led approaches to gathering island-level data to improve local understanding of trends and aid local planning. This will include a demonstrator project, with learning shared with other island communities.	Medium	Local authorities Scottish Islands Federation
6.	We will establish a training programme for island communities so they are empowered to participate in planning processes, including through the development of Local Place Plans and Community Action Plans.	Long	Planning Aid Scotland Scottish Islands Federation Young Islanders Network
7.	We will support the continuation and expansion of the *Even Here, Even Now* project to include all island areas, promoting island culture, heritage and languages.	Long	Creative Scotland
8.	We will support young islanders to celebrate and grow their islands' heritage, both locally, across Scotland and on the international stage.	Long	Young Islanders Network

9.	We will support the establishment of a network of Gaelic development officers. This will aid the creation of new Gaelic hubs, encourage inter-island collaboration on language development and highlight socio-economic opportunities connected to the use of Gaelic.	Long	Bòrd na Gàidhlig Highlands and Islands Enterprise Local authorities University of the Highlands and Islands
10.	We will expand Gaelic medium education provision on islands from early years to secondary levels, including through increased support for GME teachers and the establishment of a new GME secondary school.	Long	Local authorities University of the Highlands and Islands
11.	We will ensure the implementation of the National Islands Plan supports the development of guidance concerning Areas of Linguistic Significance. This will include enhancing the gathering of language data through future iterations of the Scottish Islands Survey.	Medium	Bòrd na Gàidhlig Highlands and Islands Enterprise Local authorities
12.	We will work with local authorities that include traditional Gaelic areas to assess the economic contribution of Gaelic and Gaelic broadcasting to their island communities. We will identify lessons that can support local language promotion and community regeneration in other island areas, for instance in relation to Orcadian and Shetlandic.	Medium	Local authorities Highlands and Islands Enterprise MGAlba
13.	We will ensure that the delivery of the BSL National Plan is responsive to the barriers faced by users in island communities.	Long	British Deaf Association Deafblind Scotland The ALLIANCE National Deaf Children's Society Scottish Ethnic Minority Deaf Charity

Duties in Relation to Island Communities: Relevant Authorities (introduced by section 7(2) of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018)

Scottish Administration

1. Scottish Ministers
2. Keeper of the Records of Scotland
3. Keeper of the Registers of Scotland
4. Registrar General of Births, Deaths and Marriages for Scotland

Scottish public authorities with mixed functions or no reserved functions

5. Accounts Commission for Scotland
6. Audit Scotland
7. Bòrd na Gàidhlig
8. Caledonian Maritime Assets Limited (company number SC001854)
9. Children's Hearings Scotland
10. Consumer Scotland
11. Creative Scotland
12. Crofting Commission
13. Crown Estate Scotland
14. David MacBrayne Limited (company number SC015304)
15. Highlands and Islands Airports Limited (company number SC097647)
16. Highlands and Islands Enterprise
17. Historic Environment Scotland
18. The Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland
19. Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland
20. Mobility and Access Committee for Scotland
21. Qualifications Scotland
22. Scottish Children's Reporter Administration
23. Scottish Courts and Tribunals Service
24. Scottish Enterprise
25. Scottish Environment Protection Agency
26. Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
27. Scottish Further and Higher Education Funding Council
28. Scottish Housing Regulator
29. Scottish Land Commission
30. Scottish Legal Aid Board
31. Scottish Natural Heritage
32. Scottish Police Authority
33. Scottish Social Services Council
34. Scottish Sports Council
35. Scottish Water
36. Skills Development Scotland Co. Ltd (company number SC202659)
37. Social Care and Social Work Improvement Scotland
38. VisitScotland
39. Zero Waste (Scotland) (company number SC436030)

Health Boards (including Special Health Boards)

40. Common Services Agency for the Scottish Health Service
41. Healthcare Improvement Scotland
42. NHS 24
43. NHS Ayrshire and Arran
44. NHS Borders
45. NHS Dumfries and Galloway
46. NHS Education for Scotland
47. NHS Fife
48. NHS Forth Valley
49. NHS Grampian
50. NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde
51. NHS Highland
52. NHS Lanarkshire
53. NHS Lothian
54. NHS National Waiting Times Centre
55. NHS Orkney
56. NHS Shetland
57. NHS Tayside
58. NHS Western Isles
59. Public Health Scotland
60. Scottish Ambulance Service
61. State Hospitals Board for Scotland

Integration Joint Boards

62. An integration joint board established by virtue of section 9 of the Public Bodies (Joint Working) (Scotland) Act 2014

Local Government

63. Argyll and Bute Council
64. Comhairle nan Eilean Siar
65. Highland Council
66. North Ayrshire Council
67. Orkney Council
68. Shetland Council

Regional Colleges

69. Ayrshire Regional College
70. University of the Highlands and Islands

Regional Transport Partnerships

71. Highlands and Islands Regional Transport Partnership
72. Shetland Regional Transport Partnership
73. Strathclyde Regional Transport Partnership

Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba

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