

Item: 19

Policy and Resources Committee: 19 September 2023.

National Islands Plan – Consultation.

Report by Corporate Director for Strategy, Performance and Business Solutions.

1. Purpose of Report

To consider a draft response from the Council to the Scottish Government's consultation on the National Islands Plan.

2. Recommendations

The Committee is invited to note:

2.1.

That the National Islands Plan was published by Scottish Ministers in 2019 as a requirement of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 (the Act).

2.2.

That Scottish Ministers are required to review the National Islands Plan five years after publication.

2.3.

That Scottish Government is holding a public consultation to inform the review of the National Islands Plan, for which responses are required by 9 October 2023.

2.4.

The Council's draft response to the Scottish Government's consultation on the review of the National Islands Plan, attached as Appendix 1 to this report.

It is recommended:

2.5.

That the Council's draft response to the Scottish Government's consultation on the review of the National Islands Plan, attached as Appendix 1 to this report, be approved.

2.6.

That the Corporate Director for Strategy, Performance and Business Solutions should submit the response to the Scottish Government, on behalf of the Council, in relation to the consultation on the review of the National Islands Plan, by the deadline of 9 October 2023.

3. The National Islands Plan

3.1.

The Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 introduced several measures to ensure that there is a sustained focus across Scottish Government and the public sector to meet the needs of islanders – now and in the future – and improve outcomes for island communities. One of the first provisions introduced was a duty on Scottish Ministers to prepare a National Islands Plan.

3.2.

Scotland's first [National Islands Plan](#) was published in 2019. It contains 13 strategic objectives and 134 commitments. The strategic objectives as published are:

- Population Levels.
- Sustainable Economic Development.
- Transport.
- Housing.
- Fuel Poverty.
- Digital Connectivity.
- Health and Social Care and Wellbeing.
- Environmental Wellbeing and Biosecurity.
- Climate Change and Energy.
- Empowered Island Communities and Strong Local Partnerships.
- Arts, Culture and Language.
- Education.
- Implementation.

3.3.

The 134 commitments in the National Islands Plan are a mixture of pre-existing Scottish Government policy, new Scottish Government policy, and actions being undertaken with or by other parties, including public, academic, private and Third sector bodies. Progress against these commitments is tracked by the Scottish Government's Islands Team, which maintains an [Implementation Route Map](#) and publishes an [annual report](#). The Islands Team manages two forums to advise on the implementation of the plan: the Islands Strategic Group (for leaders and chief executives of the six Scottish councils with islands) and the National Islands Plan Delivery Group (for policy officers from the six councils).

3.4.

Scottish Government established the £25.8 million Islands Programme fund to support the implementation of the National Islands Plan over its first five years. Each year, the six councils with islands are invited to bid to the Islands Infrastructure Fund to support projects which will progress the strategic objectives in the National Islands Plan. To date, Orkney has benefited from the following awards:

Islands Infrastructure Fund	£
Projects funded in 2021-22:	
Livestock Trailers	114,683
Tractor	31,727
Improvements and new equipment for OIC sports centres and healthy living centres	330,562
Swimming pool enhancements	22,173
Electric Bikes and storage at campsites	56,237
Smartboards	3,811
Reroofing of Romney Hut at Scapa Flow Visitor Centre	355,000
Replacement doors at Orkney Library	13,800
Replacement doors at Orkney College	17,200
Loch of Ayre walkway enhancements	28,000
Herring Factory – new lift	40,000
Total for 2021-22	1,013,192
2022-23 – New Kirkwall Nursery	1,683,000
2023-24 – Kirkwall Bridge Street Regeneration 2023-24	200,000
Total	2,896,192

3.5.

The National Islands Plan was launched 12 weeks before the first Covid-19 lockdown in March 2020. It was published before the UK's exit from the EU, and before the onset of the cost of living crisis. Combined with the wider impacts of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, these issues have had a huge impact on Scotland's island communities and have diverted government attention and resources from the implementation of the National Islands Plan.

4. Consultation on the National Islands Plan

4.1.

The Act requires a review of the Plan within five years of its initial publication. This review provides an opportunity to reflect on changes in circumstance for island communities since 2019. The aim of the review is twofold. Firstly, it will provide a detailed overview of the impact of the current National Islands Plan since its publication. Secondly, it will inform Scottish Ministers on whether or not they need a new National Islands Plan and, if so, what the content of that plan should be.

4.2.

A consultation must take place as part of this review, and was launched by Scottish Government on 18 July 2023, with a deadline for responses of 9 October 2023. The consultation asks about awareness of the plan, its effect on respondents' lives, the content of the plan, progress towards the 13 strategic objectives, whether there are too many/too few/ the right number of strategic objectives and commitments, whether the plan has worked well, whether there should be a new plan and what respondents would like to see in a new or revised plan.

4.3.

A response to the consultation has been drafted on behalf of the Council and is attached to this report at Appendix 1 for consideration by this Committee. A second response is being drafted on behalf of the Orkney Partnership, in consultation with community planning partners, and will be submitted to the Orkney Partnership Board for consideration on 26 September 2023.

5. Links to Council Plan

The National Islands Plan should support and contribute to improved outcomes for communities as outlined in the Council Plan strategic priorities of Growing our economy, Strengthening our communities, and Developing our infrastructure.

6. Links to Local Outcomes Improvement Plan

The National Islands Plan should support and contribute to improved outcomes for communities as outlined in the Local Outcomes Improvement Plan priorities of Cost of Living, Sustainable Development, and Local Equality.

7. Financial Implications

7.1.

There are no financial implications for the Council arising directly from this report.

7.2.

Future financial implications for the Council could potentially arise from a new National Islands Plan, depending on its content and associated funding mechanisms.

8. Legal Aspects

Consultation on the National Islands Plan is a statutory duty on Scottish Ministers in accordance with the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 and associated Regulations.

9. Contact Officers

Karen Greaves, Corporate Director for Strategy, Performance and Business Solutions, extension 2202, Email karen.greaves@orkney.gov.uk

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10. Appendix

Appendix 1: Draft response to National Islands Plan consultation.

National Islands Plan Review: Consultation



Respondent Information Form

Please Note this form **must** be completed and returned with your response.

To find out how we handle your personal data, please see our privacy policy: <https://www.gov.scot/privacy/>

Are you responding as an individual or an organisation?

- Individual
 Organisation

Full name or organisation's name

Orkney Islands Council

Phone number

01856 873535 x 2160

Address

Council Offices, School Place, Kirkwall, Orkney

Postcode

KW15 1NY

Email Address

anna.whelan@orkney.gov.uk

The Scottish Government would like your permission to publish your consultation response. Please indicate your publishing preference:

- Publish response with name
 Publish response only (without name)
 Do not publish response

Information for organisations:

The option 'Publish response only (without name)' is available for individual respondents only. If this option is selected, the organisation name will still be published.

If you choose the option 'Do not publish response', your organisation name may still be listed as having responded to the consultation in, for example, the analysis report.

We will share your response internally with other Scottish Government policy teams who may be addressing the issues you discuss. They may wish to contact you again in the future, but we require your permission to do so. Are you content for Scottish Government to contact you again in relation to this consultation exercise?

- Yes
 No

The Consultation

Question 1

How much would you say you know about the current National Islands Plan?

Nothing at all

I have heard of it but know nothing about the content

I know a little about it

I know a lot about it

Question 2

Has the current National Islands Plan affected your life in any way?

Yes

No

Don't know

Please feel free to expand on your answer in the box below.

As a local authority, the Council's routine work has been affected by the National Islands Plan in various ways.

- We have participated in the Islands Strategic Group and National Islands Plan Delivery Group, helping to steer the implementation of the plan.
- We have given due regard to the targets and ambitions in the plan in developing our own Council Plan for 2023-28.
- We have used the data in the National Islands Plan Survey to develop performance indicators for Council and CPP plans.
- We have applied for and received Islands Programme Funding, both for Infrastructure development and emergency funds for Covid-19 and the Cost Crisis.
- Council officers have appreciated the opportunity to work more closely with the Scottish Government's Islands Team to our mutual benefit.

Question 3

Has the effect of the current National Islands Plan on your life been positive, negative or not at all?

Positive

Negative

It has not affected my life

Please feel free to expand on your answer in the box below.

The community engagement around the development of the NIP raised expectations that the inequality and historical injustice of issues like funding, RET and transport would be addressed to ensure all Island Authorities were levelled up to contribute to creating sustainable, thriving communities. Although Orkney has benefited from some strands of the NIP, these expectations have not been met.

Question 4

What are your views on the content of the current National Islands Plan?

- Positive
- Negative
- None

Please feel free to expand on your answer in the box below.

The existence in itself of the NIP is positive but, with regard to its content, we would have preferred an option to say “both positive and negative” given our reservations on some of the content of the plan, noted above and below. Generally, we feel that it included far too much detail. The content of the plan was developed in the course of a series of isles workshops, which was a positive feature in itself but failed to enlist the experience of local authorities in sifting through the many ideas generated in order to identify the critical path for their localities. As a result, it is difficult to see the wood for the trees.

Question 5

In your opinion, has the current National Islands Plan made progress towards achieving its Strategic Objectives to address:

	No progress	Minimal progress	Satisfactory progress	Progress exceeding expectations
Strategic Objective 1				
<i>Population</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Strategic Objective 2				
<i>Sustainable Economic Development</i>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Strategic Objective 3				
<i>Transport</i>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Strategic Objective 4

Housing

Strategic Objective 5

Fuel Poverty

Strategic Objective 6

Digital

Strategic Objective 7

Health, Social Care and Wellbeing

Strategic Objective 8

Environment and Biodiversity

Strategic Objective 9

Climate Change and Energy

Strategic Objective 10

Empowered Communities

Strategic Objective 11

Arts, Culture and Language

Strategic Objective 12

Education

Strategic Objective 13

Implementation

Question 6

There are 13 Strategic Objectives in the current National Islands Plan. What is your opinion on the number of strategic objectives?

- Just right
- Too Many
- Too Few
- No opinion

Please feel free to expand on your answer in the box below.

In our view there are too many strategic objectives in the plan, which is detracting from Scottish Government's capacity to deliver it. For example, SO1, Population Levels, is an indicator and should not be an objective in itself. It is counter-productive to seek to increase the population of the islands per se if the essential infrastructure – housing, transport, digital connectivity – is not in place to support more island residents.

Scottish Government has explored measures to increase the population directly – for example the Islands Bond – which gained no support from the islands and was dropped. We have no shortage of working people seeking to move to Orkney. What we need is investment in our supporting infrastructure and the population will naturally increase. Demographic balance is also cited as a key concern, and we agree, but if the economy is growing and the facilities are in place to enable younger people to work from the islands, they will come.

SO4, Housing, and SO5, Fuel Poverty, are closely linked and de facto are already rolled up together in progress reporting.

One reason why the plan is too long is that it duplicates a lot of government policy from other sources, which is not island-specific. For example, most of the policy under SO11 (Arts, Culture and Language) and SO12 (Education) applies across Scotland. Furthermore, there is a heavy emphasis on Gaelic, which has never been spoken in the Northern Isles.

Another reason for the length is the repeated references to consultation on national policy. There should be no need to say that national policy will take account of the needs of islands as this is already embedded in the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 and associated regulations relating to Islands Communities Impact Assessment.

We are unsure why SO13, Implementation, should be a strategic objective, and feel this belongs somewhere else, perhaps as part of a supporting Action Plan to replace the Implementation Route Map, which has not been effective.

Question 7

There are 134 commitments in the current National Islands Plan. What is your opinion on the number of commitments?

Just right

Too Many

Too Few

No opinion

Please feel free to expand on your answer in the box below.

There are far too many commitments in the NIP, largely for the following reasons:

- Some commitments are unrelated to specific outcomes, for example they express an intention to create an action plan for outcomes which are yet to be determined through consultation. This should have been done in advance of the publication of the NIP.
- Some commitments are statutory obligations – for example consulting islanders on new plans and policies – which would happen anyway and do not belong in a strategic plan.
- Some commitments begin “Continue to...” and relate to national programmes which were already under way at the time of publication of the plan. Much of the annual reporting on the progress of the NIP relates to these continuing programmes and there is little additionality resulting from the plan itself.
- Some commitments begin “Work with...” and relate to work which other bodies are doing. It is unclear what additionality the plan is bringing to these workstreams.

If these commitments were stripped out, the remaining commitments would make for a much more tightly focused plan, with the emphasis on what Scottish Ministers themselves were planning to achieve.

Question 8

Overall, what do you think worked well in the current National Islands Plan?

We are pleased that some of our key priorities have been addressed and progress achieved, notably the Pentland Firth renewable energy interconnector and the promised rollout of improved digital connectivity to more of our isles, although many of our communities have yet to see the benefit.

The Islands Strategic Group has provided a useful forum for discussion between Scottish Government Ministers, officers and islands authorities. The Islands Team has also formed a good working relationship with local authority officers through the National Islands Plan Delivery Group.

The National Islands Plan Survey worked well because it was structured – as per requests from the islands – with the smaller isles in each island group split out from the main island for each authority. The commitment to repeat the survey every two years was welcome because it enabled us to use output from the survey as a baseline for indicators tracking progress in our own plans too.

With regard to specific strategic objectives, we have seen some local progress in SO7 (Health, Social Care and Wellbeing) with regard to funding for our new nursery in Kirkwall, which is welcome. Under SO8 (Environment and Biodiversity), National Planning Framework 4 has introduced a stronger policy on biodiversity, so we are now able to do more to protect island biodiversity through the planning process. This objective also covers the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund and the Council has successfully bid for projects including an upgrade of the Point of Ness Caravan and camping site.

We were pleased to be part of a successful pilot of Reverse Vending Machines to mitigate the impact on islands of the Deposit Return Scheme, although the delay of the DRS to late 2025 has meant that the pilot closed on 31 August . The project recycled over 50,000 drinks containers. The final amount of money raised towards local charities has still to be confirmed, by mid August it was over £8,500.

Question 9

Overall, what do you think could have worked better in the current National Islands Plan?

We are disappointed that we have failed to see any progress on our most urgent priority, the replacement of Orkney's ageing internal ferry fleet. SO3 (Transport) included a suite of commitments relating to ferries:

- Ensure that existing and future transport-related policies, strategies and services are fully island proofed so that they truly meet the needs of island communities.
- Produce a long-term plan and investment programme for new ferries and development at ports to improve resilience, reliability, capacity and reduce emissions to give confidence to island communities on our ongoing commitment.
- Develop a new Ferries Plan that will meaningfully contribute to delivering the outcomes of wider Scottish Government strategies as set out in the National Transport Strategy and this National Islands Plan.
- As part of the next Ferries Plan, review the impacts of Road Equivalent Tariff and consider future ferry fares policy options that will meet the needs of islanders and support island economies.

In the event, Scottish Ministers took a decision to exclude local authority services from STPR2 which meant that our most crucial services were excluded from the key national strategic plan for transport, and none of the commitments above have been fulfilled.

We were hopeful that the Ferries Task Force announced in January 2023 might fill this gap, but work stalled on the Scottish Government's change in leadership and has only recently resumed.

We were also hopeful that the commitment under SO7 (Health, Social Care and Wellbeing) to "Work with Orkney Islands Council and other partners to use the hosting of the 2023 Islands Games by Orkney to strengthen sports development on the island" might translate into some much-needed funding for the infrastructure required to host the Island Games, but unfortunately our application to the Islands Infrastructure Fund was unsuccessful.

The Local Governance Review (included under SO10, Empowered Communities) likewise stalled for two years. Given the many changes in personnel in our various organisations during this time, we are having to repeat much of the work we did in developing the proposal for Orkney which the Council submitted in 2020.

With regard to SO11 (Arts, Culture and Language), this sector is experiencing a crisis born of chronic underfunding for decades, the impact of Covid and now the cost of living crisis. The change in regulation of short term lets caused some accommodation providers finally to give up. This sector feels that the NIP has not helped them and would welcome recognition at Government level that it is important, both culturally and economically, and needs urgent support.

We would add that the overemphasis on Gaelic in the NIP, and lack of acknowledgement of Orkney Dialect or Shetlandic Dialect, is problematic, notably when the inclusion of Gaelic is required in funding applications.

Under SO8 (Environment and Biodiversity) there has been a lack of direction from the Scottish Government on the policy requirements for developers to conserve, restore and enhance marine biodiversity. NPF4 has introduced policies to deliver this on land but there is no equivalent national policy for marine development.

Continued delays to the consideration of the Orkney Islands Regional Marine Development Plan have led to scheduled local consultation events across our Islands this Summer having to be cancelled.

It was unfortunate that the scheduled 2022 repeat of the NIP survey was postponed to 2023, as this has knock-on effects in terms of our ability to report progress against indicators taken from the survey. We trust that the 2023 repeat and subsequently biennial surveys will take place according to plan.

The Implementation Route Map was not effective as it failed to prioritise the 134 commitments or to establish a critical path. This was in part because many of those commitments didn't belong in the NIP, as discussed above.

In general, we have found progress to be minimal at best against nearly all the strategic objectives. This is reflected in the published annual reports, which are very wordy but not everything they report is actual progress. In some cases the action reported is the publication of another strategy, which does not translate into progress on the ground.

While the island councils were all represented on the Islands Strategic Group and the NIP Delivery Group, their role was to inform and advise and they had no input into Ministerial decision-making, nor any powers to hold key players accountable.

Question 10

Do you think there should be a new plan for the Scottish Islands?

Yes / No / Don't know

Please explain your reasons

Given the many unforeseen events impacting on the islands which have taken place since publication of the NIP in 2019, new initiatives which have arisen in that time, and Scottish Ministers' failure to make progress on some of our most pressing priorities, we feel that a new plan is needed.

Question 11

What would you like to see in any future or revised National Islands Plan?

Refresh the current National Islands Plan but keep the same format

A whole new plan is needed

Something else

Please feel free to expand on your answer in the box below.

We would like to see a much more tightly focused plan, with the emphasis on what Scottish Ministers are undertaking to do to progress islanders' priorities. It could also take account of factors unforeseen in 2019, such as the war in Ukraine, the consequent increase in fuel costs and the wider cost of living crisis.

Contribution to Impact Assessments

We will be seeking the views of stakeholders and the public for the Island Communities Impact Assessment for this work and on any potential equality issues. We are assessing what impact our islands policies may have across protected characteristics as defined in the Equality Act 2010 (age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation). Impact assessments will be further developed alongside the drafting of the refreshed National Islands Plan.

If you would like to be engaged in the impact assessment process, please email the Scottish Government's Islands Team at info@islandsteam.scot.