

NCRA 'Rural Thinks' Workshop: Benbecula, Thursday 5th April

Attendees

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|----------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. Sarah MacLean | Bùth Bharraigh Ltd |
| 2. Hazel Smith | Uist Wool |
| 3. Beatrix Wood | Film-maker and crofter, TrixPix Ltd |
| 4. Mary Schmoller | Ceòlas |
| 5. Mary MacInnes | Ceòlas |
| 6. Kirsty MacCormick | Stòras Uist |
| 7. Christopher West | Hebridean Smokehouse |

"Vision? How about just getting the basics right?"

"Make it entirely feasible that any Scottish Government/public sector job could be done on Uist or Barra."

"We can't build a business on maybe."

The 'Rural Thinks' workshops were structured around three key themes of People, Infrastructure and Vision. The following notes capture the discussions around these themes.

Infrastructure

"It's depressing. Infrastructure is the biggest topic, and has been really for the last 100 years!"

Participants expressed a need to **improve infrastructure to support island living**. They felt there was a **lack of equality** in the delivery of infrastructure in comparison to mainland Scotland. Key areas discussed were internet connectivity, and transport links.

"Am I going to be able to make it to work on time? Is my computer going to work today? I want to access this learning opportunity – will the

computer work for me? I want to attend this meeting...will the broadband work for me?

If we had to stop thinking about the basics, then our energies would be freed up into our businesses, our organisations, our families, and all those things."

"Connectivity is key: transport, broadband, couriers."

"Infrastructure appears to be developing as a one-way street, that is urban to rural."

"Agree with the comment, if one part breaks down, it all does,"

- **Services**

Participants stressed **the need for development of key local services** including childcare, to enable people to be able to work, as well as accessible health services. A participant explained, for example, that the dental service had just been withdrawn. Again, there was a feeling of inequality in delivery of services from other parts of Scotland.

"The removal of the dental service from Lochboisdale was so disgraceful."

"We need the opportunity to have access to services that other people do. Access to dental services, for example."

"Banks and police are pulling out of our communities. Communities are expected to voluntarily pick up the pieces."

- **Transport**

"Equality of opportunity means improving transport."

The issue of transport was a predominant theme throughout the workshop. The group stressed urgent **need for an improved system across ferry, air and bus timetables**. Participants discussed at length the importance of improving the transport system to support day to day living, business, exports and the tourism industry. The workshop was

held shortly after a disruption to [Calmac ferry services](#) , which highlighted how reliant the community are on an efficient transport system.

“We need better transport links and equality of access to the internet. We need basic, reliable transport and equality of opportunity.”

- **Transport – commercial impact**

The negative impact of inconsistent and poor transport links **on business development** was highlighted by participants. Participants explained the effects, for example, food products that had passed their shelf life before they could be exported to customers. The impact of poor transport links on the success of the tourism industry was also highlighted. Participants explained that the inconsistent and fragile transport system is unable to get people on and off the islands reliably.

“We need to have good transport links to allow our products to leave the islands and get to market. If we can’t guarantee delivery, we can’t have the business. It really is as simple as that.”

“We can’t build a business on maybe.”

“There are no joined up transport links. Buses, trains, planes, ferries are not in sync.”

“Commercial development can’t happen because of our infrastructure.”

“Getting people here and out is absolutely fundamental.”

“Can we just get the basics right please?”

“You can have all the initiatives in the world, but unless you can get people in and out nothing will work.”

“If we have the transport links we can build our business, if we can build our business we’ll employ more people. If we have more people then everything that comes from that is obvious.”

“The solution? The Department of Transport sorts it. They are well paid. They are qualified.”

- **Transport - ferries**

Participants called for an improved ferry service, and explained the reliance of life and work on the ferry service, run by Calmac.

“Everyone’s Easter was ruined by the ferry fiasco. Who would consider renting a place for holiday, if they can’t be guaranteed they’d get here?”

“It is an ageing fleet, and too small.”

“Our new ferry is a year late. We have already been warned by Calmac that this summer will be problematic”

“The solution is we rent one, if we are serious about supporting the island economy.”

- **Local decision making and decentralisation**

Another significant theme raised by the group was **the issue of centralisation** - there was a general feeling that this is having an increasingly negative impact on development in the islands. The group called for **government and public sector jobs to be based in the community**. Participants suggested looking to Norway for examples of better practice of integration of government and policy makers into rural life. There was a feeling of disappointment due to lack of action following numerous meetings with policy makers and politicians.

“Instead of the outside coming in, development needs to come from the grassroots going out. Urban centric thinking is discriminatory.”

“Central Government doesn’t see Western Isles as cost-effective.”

“Policy makers need to come from here.”

“We meet with politicians on a regular basis and it doesn’t make a difference.”

“The Highland Council is run by Inverness, which is miles away.”

“We should look to Norway and how government is dispersed in rural areas.”

“A Government department should be based here.”

“For sustainable development, there has to be a grass-roots, and outwards approach. We need to reverse centralisation, and policy makers need to be embedded in rural life.”

“Decision makers are all in the central belt.”

“People responsible for rural life should be based in rural areas.”

“We’d like to see public commitment to geographical redistribution of public sector jobs.”

“Make it entirely feasible that any Scottish Government/public sector job could be done on Uist or Barra.”

“Radical redistribution of jobs. Let rural people work for big organisations but based in their own communities.”

“Centralisation: ignorance, arrogance and value judgements.”

- **Access to finance**

Participants raised concerns about the **level of investment** into the island, as well as **funding opportunities** post-Brexit.

“We have relied on European funding. What is the appetite to replace that?”

“Replace top-down words with bottom-up investment.”

People

- **Reliance on voluntary efforts**

Participants explained that the community is very proactive, and a great deal of services and support are provided through **voluntary efforts**. This is often as a result of necessity.

“Anything that is done in Uist is voluntary. We know what to do fine.”

“People are doing things to us on the edge of the edge. Most of what is good here is voluntary. We know what we need to do, but resources are contracting.”

- **Seasonal labour and impact of Brexit**

Participants explained that a significant and damaging issue is **shortage of labour** to support island businesses, particularly in more seasonal industries such as tourism and food and drink.

“Last year we had a very serious shortage, and we actually had to lose production because we couldn’t find anybody to come and work with us. We lost 15% of our annual turnover because we couldn’t find staff to come and work. There was no-where for them to live.”

“Because of the insecurities of Brexit, the available labour dried up.”

- **Gaelic**

The **importance of Gaelic** to this community was highlighted, as well as a calling for **more Gaelic jobs** to be based on the island.

“There are 120 Gaelic jobs in Stornoway and three in Uist”

“Gaelic is a Scottish language and it is so important to our community.”

“Gaelic is so important to our social economy”

- **Initiative Fatigue**

Participants expressed a general fatigue towards the **process of consultation**. They explained that they are frequently visited by people who are looking to do studies on them, or ask them questions, yet very little changes as a result.

“Our ideas are being asked for, but the investment is not there. We have two things running in parallel: cost-cutting, and asking for ideas. The words may be there but the realism of what’s happening on the ground is very different.”

“We just keep getting asked the same questions year after year in the hope that they’ll eventually get the answers that they want.”

“Consultation is simply window-dressing.”

“Properly cost initiatives in rural areas, bad costing causes problems.”

“If this is to be worthwhile, we need to see significant change, action and engagement.”

“Spend more money on direct action and investment rather than consultation and feasibility.”

- **Housing**

Participants highlighted the many **buildings that are lying unused** across the island

homes, and the negative impact of this. They called for measures to be put in place that can ensure standard of upkeep and activity.

“There is loads of property in rural ownership that is empty and decaying. There should be some means of forcing use or ensuring maintenance.”

Vision

Participants envisaged a vibrant community, with schools full, a good variety of jobs to attract families to the area, improved housing availability and better transport links.

- **Terminology**

The group called for certain terms and assumptions around island and rural life to be dropped in order that a change in mindset can be developed to aid positive development.

“Start with rural being ‘normal’.”

“Would it not be healthier to get rid of urban/rural terms?”

“Drop the words ‘remote’, ‘periphery’ and ‘edge’.

“The concept of a rural economy is not helpful.”

“The concept of you ‘empowering’ communities is patronising.”

- **Local changes and developments**

The group discussed the relationship between Uist, Barra and Stornoway and felt there was a divide between decisions being made in Stornoway and life on the ground in Uist and Barra. Improving relations with businesses and organisations in Stornoway was called for.

“We need to change relations with Stornoway.”

- **Shift of urban based jobs to rural**

Again, participants asked that measures are taken that would enable current urban jobs to be carried out on the islands.

“In ten years time, any job that someone in Edinburgh is doing can be doing in Uist.”