

NCRA 'Rural Thinks' Workshop: Stornoway, Tues 3rd April 2018

Attendees

1. Ian Fordham Outer Hebrides Tourism /LEADER Advisory Group Chair
2. Domhnall MacDonald Community Development, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar
3. Duncan MacInnes Western Isles Fisherman's Association/ Outer Hebrides Regional Inshore Fisheries Group
4. Keith Morrison – owner of media production business, Wee Studio
5. Lynne MacIver - Business strategy consultant & enabler
6. Neil Graham - Finance Director, MG Alba
7. Elly Fletcher – Chief Executive – An Lanntair, arts centre
8. Karen MacRae – North Harris Trust
9. Sarah MacLean – Creative Industries – Comhairle nan Eilean Siar
10. Malcolm MacLean - Former UNESCO Scotland, Gaelic Arts Agency, Now St Kilda Centre (Ionad Hiort)
11. Jane MacIntosh – Strengthening Communities, Highlands and Islands Enterprise
12. Alex MacLeod – Chief Executive, Stornoway Port Authority
13. Shona MacLeod – Harris Gin Distillery (note, Harris Gin could not attend at last minute due to sickness so we visited instead. Contributions from this visit have been included.)

“One size fits all does not work here.”

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

“Growth and vitality are being constrained by infrastructure.”

- **Transport**

Participants raised concerns about the **standard of delivery of transport services**, and asked for a **syncing of ferry, bus and air timetables to improve efficiency**. Concerns were raised about the **reliability of ferry services**. Participants highlighted the reliance of the tourism industry on the ferry service, and called for an understanding of the relationship between the ferry service and the development of the island's tourism industry, for example, ferry capacity: the number of people travelling on ferries affects demand of hospitality services.

"There's no public transport anywhere really. The local bus services aren't good enough for tourists."

"The ferries can't cope."

"If we get a bigger ferry, we will need more hotel rooms to be available."

"Need to aim much higher on ferries, flights and roads."

- **Digital connectivity**

Reliability and consistency of delivery of internet connection was raised as a significant issue. Participants explained that there is a great deal of inconsistency: some areas have 4G while others don't, for example. Concern was raised over the impact of this on people, from tourists who wish to access Google maps, to people who work from home.

"Connectivity shouldn't be a barrier to your place of work. Having proper infrastructure and connectivity in place would mean you are remote from no-one."

"Be more ambitious around digital and set the bar higher."

"Digital is key."

"There's no 4G in Tarbert."

- **Centralisation**

Participants felt far removed from decision makers, and stressed that **increasing centralisation** has had a negative effect on local decision making for the island's rural economy. They called for a change in mindset and practices that puts island and rural economies at the heart of decision making.

“There has been a centralisation of decision making and what that has done has actually undermined local decision making, local action in a whole range of different ways. There is a challenge at a very fundamental level of shifting the mindset that sees that as being structurally good way to do business because it works completely against the best interests of the rural economy and in particular, island economies.”

“When looking at the rural economy, local decision making has been moved to the central belt. Local decision making should be linked to the rural economy.”

“Increasing centralisation”

“The Scottish Government has to take responsibility, and be accountable. The Government must take responsibility for reversing centralisation if they are serious about rural development.”

“The political climate: devolution from Westminster to Holyrood is great. Devolution needs to go to whole of Scotland however. Not just the Central Belt.”

“Decentralise policy making.”

- **Rural focussed policy measures and investment metrics**

Following on from the theme of centralisation, participants called for **policy measures and investment metrics to be rooted in rural needs** as opposed to urban standards and requirements. Participants highlighted that a ‘one size fits all’ approach does not work given the vast differences in needs between urban and rural. They cited examples of initiatives, such as those for young people, that were based on urban

needs and challenges, as opposed to those in an island or rural community.

“Rural first investment metrics and policy measures.”

- **Immigration policy**

Participants explained that the island economy relies on skills provided by **migrant workers**, particularly for seasonal industries, such as food and drink and hospitality. They raised concerns of the negative effect of **Brexit that have resulted in a lack of labour and skills**, and called for less barriers for people to come and work in the islands. They called for a strategy that sees further development of the multi-cultural community in the islands, and explained that they are a welcoming community and would further embrace migrant workers and families.

“Immigration policy is having an impact. We require skills to do work here that we now can’t get in.”

“Regardless where they come from, if they have the skills, they should be allowed to be here.”

“We have a multi-cultural community in hospitality, for example. There should be no barriers.”

- **Business support and investment**

Participants called for more targeted support for the islands business community specifically around **learning opportunities** and the development of **digital businesses**. They called for approaches to be developed that supported greater **inward investment**.

“There is a need for a strategy around inward investment into the islands, incorporating new digital businesses.”

“We need support and investment in new businesses and learning opportunities.”

People

“People have dreams that they can’t achieve because they are struggling to live here.”

“There are so many people here who have great ideas and are resourceful. Island people are very resourceful.”

- **Employment and jobs dispersal**

A key theme participants discussed was **the need for jobs** on the island. Participants called for a decentralising of public sector jobs so people can live and work on the island, and a creativity in thinking of the way that core services, such as IT can be delivered to supply Government from rural areas.

“Unless we have something that creates jobs, nothing else matters.”

“I cannot emphasise enough the need to decentralise public sector jobs.”

“Calmac employees are based in Inverclyde. £9m of salaries would be worth more here.”

“Why won’t Scottish Natural Heritage disperse into rural areas? From a Government point of view, they won’t do it. They need to do it.”

“Scottish Government IT functions could come from the islands. There is no reason why that can’t happen.”

“Infrastructure needs to be generated by, for and with the economy this equals decent jobs.”

- **Retention of young people and attracting people back**

Participants called for a strategy in order to retain young people. Other participants highlighted the need to attract people back to the region after leaving for university and work in order to stimulate the economy.

“Rural depopulation is a huge issue for us.”

“One of our big challenges is retaining youth. We have seen a 16% reduction in under 16s, and a 25% increase in over 65s.” (Note, stats not verified)

“We’re very forward thinking and want to encourage young people.”

“I think the people we should be focussing on are the people who are just starting to settle down, begin to have families, who are keen to move back...how we remove the barriers to them coming back.”

- **Ageing population**

As the ageing population continues to grow, participants called for strategies that would support living for older people to a. support current needs and b. improve desirability of region to live in.

“There needs to be focus on developing the region, but we have to deal with what we have at the moment, and we have an ageing population. And so the infrastructure needs to be invested in...in how we are going to deal with our old people...whereas in recent years we have had cuts to care homes, sheltered housing, independent living units.”

- **Housing**

The issue of housing became a significant theme during the workshop. Participants called for more innovative approaches to house-building and stressed an urgent need to address lack of housing in order to stimulate increased interest in returning, remaining or coming to the island to live and work.

“Affordable housing needs to be built”

“Young folk can’t afford to build houses.”

“There needs to be some form of rural housing initiative. It does not exist at the moment.”

“You need to have rural housing but you need to have rural jobs.”

“Build houses and they will come. West Harris Trust is a good example of this. They set out to build houses, and now people are living in them.”

“We’d like to see more innovation around how we build houses.”

“Balivanich managed to retain more younger people, by creating access to housing, ex MOD. It was affordable.”

“Cheaper accommodation, by a beach with fibre. That’s how the industry would grow quicker.”

“We need innovation in building technology, and investment in infrastructure for ageing population, for example, sheltered housing.”

“We have the highest percentage of single person households, but the infrastructure doesn’t go so far.”

- **Wage parity and affordability of living**

Participants discussed the need to improve wage parity so that people on the island are paid on the same level as those on the mainland. The cost of living on the island was also raised and participants called for a balance of both issues in order that life on the island can be more affordable.

“One of my team pays £350 a month for a single room.”

“A cultural shift needs to happen that a day’s wage is a day’s wage.”

“There are two things:

- 1. Affordability of housing – it’s too expensive*
- 2. People are not paid what people are paid on the mainland.”*

Vision

“In 20 years time, the Outer Hebrides will be an extremely desirable place to live with a great quality of life. Inclusivity, not displacement.”

- **Community ownership**

Participants highlighted the positive and unique community-led approach of island people and initiatives, and their importance to transformation and development. Participants called for further investment and attention to be placed on developing these approaches by policy makers and Government.

“The most exciting developments in the islands are to do with community buy-outs. They are to do with renewable energy initiatives. They are actually to do with a remarkable resurgence in community enterprise.”

“One of our strengths has been community buy-outs. This gives us the biggest opportunities to create wealth, set-up trust funds and regenerate rural areas.”

“The whole of the Outer Hebrides to be community owned. The Government will be more prescriptive in terms of expectations around community buy-outs, for example, employment and housing.”

- **Business and business models**

Participants called for more businesses exporting to international markets, while others explained the importance of social enterprises to the region, and the need to place further investment in these models that also support the community.

“200 plus businesses in vibrant chamber of commerce and a doubling of businesses who export to a global customer base.”

“There is increased prominence and importance of social enterprises with better support and development.”

- **International linkages and opportunities**

Participants felt that there was more that could be done to create international partnerships and business opportunities. It was pointed out that international partnerships in certain areas could be more valuable to the island economy than national linkages.

“International investment should be sought for Highlands and Islands. There may be more potential to develop with international partners.”

“A key thing is international connection. There is value in strengthening link, and developing investment link.”

- **Island lifestyle and brand**

Participants felt that further work needs to be carried out to develop the brand of the islands as an exciting and appealing place to live, work and visit.

“One of the biggest things we can do is transform the brand of the island so that inward investment can be a more positive thing for the islands in that folk will come because they believe they can find jobs and can enjoy life here.”

“We can offer a fun job, in a fun place. People will come for that. People are working with me (creative industries business) because it is a fun thing to do”

“There needs to be a common voice to encourage people to live here. This is a great place to live. Lots of people are so resourceful.”

“Make more of sea routes.”

“Lewis – it’s not as bad as you think! We need to sing our own praises more, as well as the benefits of living here.”

- **Utilisation of natural assets**

Participants suggested that there was a more joined-up approach to the use of the natural assets of the islands to develop the economy, in particular, opportunities around the sea as a resource.

“Our natural resources and sustainable communities will all be tied together.”

“We use the sea as a resource, and we provide a world-wide example of a locally managed marine ecosystem.”