

**1st ISLANDS STRATEGIC GROUP
MINUTE OF MEETING HELD ON 28 SEPTEMBER 2016
ST ANDREWS HOUSE, EDINBURGH**

COUNCIL REPRESENTATION	
Cllr Steven Heddle, Convener, Orkney Islands Council	Cllr Angus Campbell, Leader, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar
Cllr Gary Robinson, Leader Shetland Islands Council	Cllr Margaret Davidson, Leader, The Highland Council
Cllr Dick Walsh, Leader, Argyll & Bute Council	Malcolm Burr, Chief Executive, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar
Mark Boden, Chief Executive, Shetland Islands Council	Steve Barron, Chief Executive, The Highland Council
Cleland Sneddon, Chief Executive, Argyll & Bute Council	Elma Murray, Chief Executive, North Ayrshire Council (by phone)
Karen Yeomans, North Ayrshire Council (by phone)	Peter Peterson, Shetland Islands Council
Paul Maxton, Orkney Islands Council	
SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT REPRESENTATION	
Humza Yousaf MSP, Minister for Transport and the Islands	Kevin Stewart, Minister for Local Government and Housing
Donna Mackinnon, Deputy Director, Local Government and Analytical Services Division	Ian Turner, Islands Bill Team
Darren Dickson, Local Government Division	

1. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS

1. Meeting began with the Minister for Transport and the Islands welcoming everyone, including new members to the first meeting of the new Islands Strategic Group. Attendees were as per list above.
2. Apologies were registered from Cllr Joe Cullinane, Leader of North Ayrshire Council and Alistair Buchan, Chief Executive of Orkney Islands Council.
3. In introductory remarks, Mr Yousaf commended the work undertaken by the Our Islands Our Future campaign for driving island issues up the agendas of national Governments. He was keen to see the pace of discussions and progress continue as before – expanded group should be no barrier to this.

2. TERMS OF REFERENCE

4. In discussion of the draft Terms of Reference, in addition to Council Leaders and Chief Executives, Mr Yousaf outlined that the core Ministerial membership of the Group would be made up of himself, the Minister for Local Government and Housing, and the Minister for Business, Innovation and Energy, though there would be flexibility as before to invite other Ministers to attend depending on subjects to be discussed. Donna Mackinnon, Deputy Director of Local Government and Analytical Services Division will also become a formal member of the Group.

5. An Officers Group will sit under the main Ministerial Group and will meet to discuss progress on the various strands of work being taken forward. It was also highlighted that whilst the terms of reference are important in governing how the Group functions, the Group should have the flexibility to adapt and change focus as it collectively thinks appropriate.

6. It would be the intention to proactively release the agenda and minutes (possibly papers) from each meeting in the interests of being open and transparent about the work of the Group, though it was acknowledged that there may be a need for some private space for discussions on certain issues.

7. It was agreed that the Group would meet quarterly with the location of meetings alternating between the mainland and an island location.

8. On specific changes to the terms of reference, it was suggested that under paragraph 3, in the second bullet the word 'future' should be inserted after 'existing' and before 'powers' to reflect potential future legislative changes. Also in paragraph 3, under bullet 4, it was agreed the word 'equality' would be added before 'within island communities' in the last line.

9. Other more general comments made in discussing the draft terms of reference included an offer from all Councils to host future meetings; the suggestion of holding mini-town hall type events when meeting in an island location; a keenness of Councils to feed in working papers on issues such as island-proofing; and a desire to look at monitoring progress from the 2014 prospectus.

10. A question was also posed about potentially widening out the membership of the Group to include other key external stakeholders. Whilst not closed off to the idea, the general consensus was that membership should remain as proposed but would be kept under review.

3. FUTURE WORK PROGRAMME

11. A number of proposals for the Group's future work programme had been put forward in advance of the meeting.

12. It was recognised that, at least initially, the focus will be on the Islands Bill given the tight timescales the Government is working to for the Bill's introduction. There would be scope to table other papers on specific policy issues (probably a max of two per meeting).

13. A high priority for the Group's future discussions would be the implications of the EU Referendum result and Brexit. It was however agreed that as this was on the agenda for the next Convention of the Highlands and Islands meeting in October, it would be sensible to await the outcome of those discussions before scheduling a more formal discussion as part of this Group.

14. It was also confirmed that the National Islands Plan, Island-Proofing and Councillor Representation in island communities will all be discussed as part of the wider Bill discussions going forward so there is no need to discuss these separately.

15. In the general discussions that followed, it was noted that Digital Connectivity had accidentally been omitted from the list but it was obviously a key issue the Group would wish to discuss going forward. Whilst progress was being made in this area it was recognised that islands and rural communities still faced connectivity challenges, which urgently needed to be addressed. The Scottish Government was challenging the providers and was in regular dialogue with them. The Government was also looking at different ways the planning system could be used to help overcome some the barriers being faced. It was also noted that perhaps going forward there was a need for a specific Islands Digital Delivery Group similar in nature to the Islands Renewables Delivery Group, which was set up jointly between the Island Councils, the Scottish and UK Governments.

16. It was also queried whether the Devolution of the Crown Estate would be dealt with separately or as part of the wider discussions around the Islands Bill. Whilst there was an obvious link between the two, it was agreed that the Group would have separate discussions on this issue, especially given proposals for a forthcoming Crown Estate Bill.

17. In terms of recruitment challenges linked to depopulation issues, it was recognised that these were not just limited to Education but ran across other services also, particularly health so this would need to be picked up as part of any wider discussions.

18. It was also recognised that housing was a particular challenge for island communities and there was a need for specific discussion around that issue. It was important that the right housing was in the right places. The Minister for Local Government and Housing highlighted the recently announced £5 million Islands Housing Fund, which sits alongside the £25 million Rural Housing Fund. He hoped people would tap into this funding and gave a commitment to look at any proposals the Councils wished to bring forward for tackling particularly difficult or challenging areas for housing.

19. In terms of a future discussion around the economy it was recognised that this was inextricably linked to so many other issues but in particular there was a need to pick up on equalities issues i.e. the cost of living and the cost of doing business in the islands. The HIE Minimum Income Standard Report from 2013 was highlighted as an important reference point for illustrating some of the challenges island communities faced. Islands not necessarily looking for direct subsidy to address these but rather help in reducing costs such as those linked to transport and energy.

20. In concluding it was agreed that the officers Group would identify key themes plus sub themes to help focus the groups work programme going forward. This would then be shared for discussion at the next meeting. The intention would be that specific Councils would take the lead in developing discussion papers, taking account of their respective interests.

4. ISLANDS BILL

21. In introducing the discussion on the Islands Bill, Mr Yousaf set out the current position, indicating the Bill was likely to be introduced in Spring 2017. He reiterated the Government's position that they saw this legislation very much as a framework Bill to put in place measures such as island-proofing and a national islands plan to better reflect, support and strengthen the unique needs of our island communities. This is a position the previous Ministerial Working Group had agreed upon.

22. The Bill is one piece of a wider, legislative jigsaw the Government is bringing forward that will hopefully support and empower our island communities. This of course started with the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act, and will also be followed by a Crown Estate and Local Democracy Bills.

23. The Minister also highlighted that responses to last year's consultation had been supportive of the policy proposals outlined. Therefore it was the Government's intention that these would form the basis of the Bill on introduction. Mr Yousaf did however also state that whilst these provisions are the starting point for the Bill, the likelihood is as discussions develop regarding the Bill's content, and it is introduced to Parliament, both the Government and opposition members may bring forward amendments to the provisions for consideration.

24. In the general discussions that followed, the Councils welcomed the inclusive approach the Government was taking by involving, and consulting them on preparation of the Bill ahead of introduction. The Councils also highlighted they looked forward to wider extension/devolving of similar powers to those contained in the Zetland and Orkney County Council Acts, which had served Shetland and Orkney well over the years.

25. There was a general discussion around the devolving of powers to Councils and Communities, and what was the right way to take this forward. Ministers expressed the importance of local communities being involved in decision making processes, and whilst agreeing with this, the Councils were clear that in the first instance powers should be devolved to them with consideration then being given to what could be devolved further down to communities, applying the principles of Community Empowerment.

26. There was general agreement amongst the Group that communities can take control and do things for themselves. Councils are important but should be seen as enablers in working with their communities. There are many good examples of Community Empowerment across the country with communities involved in participatory budgeting projects such as those in Barra and the Uists focused on local bus services. Would be good to see this kind of initiative right across the country, however it was recognised that not every community has the capacity or desire to take on additional responsibilities, and this has to be taken into consideration.

27. In concluding remarks, the wording of the European Charter of Local Self-Government – decision making at the right level was highlighted as a good form of words for what was being discussed. It was also mentioned that that the future Islands legislation should not disadvantage other isolated rural areas of mainland Scotland. Also, the Faroe Islands was highlighted as somewhere the Government may wish to look at more closely given some of the innovative approaches they have adopted in recent years to tackle many of the challenges now facing Scotland's island communities.

5. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

28. It was agreed that the next meeting of the Group would take place in December with a date being confirmed by correspondence.

ISG Secretariat – December 2016