

Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform
and Islands

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Finlay Carson MSP
Convenor
Rural Affairs and Islands Committee
c/o Clerk to the Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
H99 1SP

31 August 2023

Dear Finlay,

2024-25 PRE-BUDGET SCRUTINY

Thank you for your letter of 11 July 2023 outlining the Committee's approach to its scrutiny of the 2024/25 budget and the funding associated with the National Islands Plan. Please find the responses to the requests for further information below:

Q. With many of the 37 projects from 2021-22 (year 1) now completed, what analysis has the Scottish Government done to measure the impact they are having on island communities?

Local Authorities have their own internal frameworks and processes for measuring impacts. For Islands Programme reporting purposes, our delivery partners, Scottish Futures Trust (SFT) engage with Local Authorities to assist in capturing and reporting on impacts which are then reported to Scottish Government.

During the application process, applicants identify their own outcomes and impacts to reflect the nature of their specific project, and relate them to the National Islands Plan and wider Scottish Government policies. For 2021/22, the monitoring process included an evaluation template to collate and monitor the intended outcomes of the successful projects. This included an ask of Local Authorities to show the immediate contribution of the project to the original purpose outlined in the grant offer letter, as well as how the outcomes and impacts are helping to deliver the National Islands Plan.

SFT have collated the information provided by the Local Authorities to provide us with an overview of both the short and long term impacts of the Islands Programme funding through the delivery of projects across our island communities.

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Q. How are the 11 projects awarded funding in 2022-23 (year 2) progressing?

Of the 11 projects awarded funding in 2022-23, three have been completed or are on schedule to be completed imminently. Four projects are scheduled to be completed by the end of 2023, and an additional three projects are scheduled to be completed in early 2024. One project (Pitstops in Arran and Cumbrae) is due to start imminently and is also scheduled to finish before the end of 2024.

Further information on the build status of 2022-23 projects can be found in **Annex A**.

Q. How will the 13 projects funded in 2023-24 (year 3) support the national islands plan's strategic objectives?

As part of the 2023/24 application process, Local Authorities were asked to detail how their proposed projects would support the delivery of the strategic objectives within the National Islands Plan, with the highest scoring applications able to demonstrate support for four or five of the thirteen strategic objectives.

The projects awarded funding cover all thirteen strategic objectives, with the strongest representations in:

- Sustainable Economic Development;
- Health, Social Care and Wellbeing;
- Environmental Wellbeing and Biosecurity;
- Climate Change and Energy;
- Empowered Island Communities; and
- Arts, Culture and Language and Education.

A summary of each of the projects' intended aims to support the National Islands Plan Strategic Objectives is provided in **Annex B**.

Q.To what extent have island communities been involved in the design, development and delivery of 2023-24 (year 3) projects?

All projects which are funded by the Islands Programme are required to demonstrate community involvement, with 35% of the Islands Programme application's scoring for 2023/24 reflecting Need and Partnership and specific information sought on the extent of community involvement and inclusivity.

This is evidenced by showing that the project demonstrates ongoing engagement with the community, how the project has been shaped to reflect community priorities, how it meets their aspirations, and how they would benefit from the expected outcomes.

Examples of community involvement include buy in from the community for the project to go ahead, local community representatives contributing to the project proposal and involvement of the community in the roll out and management of the project if the bid were to be successful. Evidence submitted as part of applications to the Islands Programme by the Local Authorities included letters of support, and evidence of need and testimonials from user groups, local Community Councils and Development Trusts.

For 2023/24, 9 of the thirteen projects awarded funding are being delivered by island communities. For example, in the case of Dyemill Bike Park, the local voluntary organisation will oversee the day-to-day progress of the project; for COPE in Shetland, the project has been run by a local social enterprise for 25 years and for Hymhus, the development builds on two years of consultation and studies by the local group resulting in securing community ownership in 2022.

Q. In light of the Committee recommendations following its 2023-24 pre-budget scrutiny, was the competitive bidding process conducted differently this year compared to last year and, if so, how?

In response to recommendations provided by the Committee the 2023/24 Islands Programme application process has been streamlined and adapted through the following key changes:

- To allow better management of key timelines and the delivery of projects as early in the financial year as possible, the 2023/24 Islands Programme was formally launched in January 2023, and applicants were notified of the outcome of submissions in May 2023 - two months earlier than 2022/23.
- In order to allow each Local Authority the flexibility to decide whether to focus on a major investment or numerous smaller applications, no ceiling was set on the number of applications they could submit.
- The 2023/24 application form was shorter and more focussed, with applicants asked to reduce background information to allow for a more streamlined application and to avoid duplication across sections.
- To support transparency and clarity for the necessary detail required for the application, Local Authorities were provided with scoring and appraisal guidance used by the Investment Panel.

Q. What is the Scottish Government's view of local authorities' experiences of the competitive bidding process and the support they received from the Scottish Futures Trust for 2023-24 (year 3) allocations?

Whilst we have endeavoured to minimise the resource requirements of the Islands Programme for 2023-24, I understand the process of applying for funding can be challenging and resource intensive for our Local Authority partners, who have confirmed that they continue to work under difficult resource pressures.

Scottish Government have continued to fund SFT as delivery partners for the Islands Programme in order to provide additional support and guidance to applicants from the initial application process and throughout the delivery of the projects. This includes advice on how unsuccessful projects might be supported to apply for funding in future years, by adjustments to elements of the applications, improving detail or focus in their applications, or whether an application to other programmes would be more appropriate.

Local Authority partners have provided positive feedback in relation to the support provided by SFT throughout the application process. They have also been appreciative of SFT support for projects in earlier years of the Islands Programme to reach key stages of delivery, such as grant condition compliance and claim, tender acceptance and variations.

As a centre of infrastructure expertise, SFT has provided clear guidance for participation and an assurance approach to realise the objectives of the Islands Programme, while also supporting Local Authorities to deliver infrastructure projects in a manner that ensures that their resource is allocated as effectively as possible.

Q. Has the Scottish Government reconsidered its decision, as set out in the capital spending review, not to provide any capital funding for the islands programme in 2024-25 (year 4)?

Spending reviews set out potential future high level multi-year financial parameters for portfolio funding envelopes. The envelopes are not portfolio budgets. The flat and falling capital grant allocation Scotland has received from UKG, coupled with the impact of high inflation, places significant additional pressure on our capital programme.

I remain committed to supporting islands investment and will continue to review this as part of the 24-25 annual budget processes.

This Government's commitment to the Islands does not just include investment through my portfolio directly, but through other funding that we have committed across Scotland.

Q. What are the challenges of delivering capital projects on Scotland's islands?

All of our inhabited islands have their own characteristics and challenges when it comes to delivering capital projects, not least because of their varying geographies, populations and weather. General barriers to successful delivery of capital projects on Scotland's islands include, but are not limited to:

- Higher costs
- Logistics And Transport Connections
- Weather and Seasons
- Geography And Terrain
- Lack Of Availability And Reduced Supply Chains
- People And Skills
- Land Ownership And Planning
- Building Standards
- Housing
- Service Infrastructure
- Finance And Funding

When reporting on progress of the 2021/22 and 2022/23 Islands Programme projects, our local Local Authority partners have specifically noted that issues with planning, availability of contractors, lead times for specific items, legal issues with site lease, weather, electricity connection, surveys, illness, procurement, ferry availability and further consultation with local communities regarding final site location have all negatively impacted on the delivery of projects.

Q. How important is it to have a pipeline of capital projects?

Developing a pipeline of capital projects allows for adequate resource planning and delivery, whilst helping to inform local and national governments and industry of the need for investment, support, skills and training and supply chain requirements. The importance of a pipeline has become even more clear in recent times, as it helps identify key critical projects in economically challenging environment. The Islands Programme supports numerous projects which, while currently at early stages, will hopefully result in a pipeline of investment and significant economic impacts.

Q. How is the Scottish Government and the Scottish Futures Trust ensuring that capital projects funded through the islands programme are additional, critical and transformative?

The application process for the Islands Programme provides clear eligibility criteria and requires applicants to demonstrate intended outcomes and longer-term impacts to ensure that successful projects are additional, critical, and transformative. During the assessment process, the applications are reviewed by the Islands Programme Investment Panel to ensure they meet the necessary criteria and will deliver the intended outcomes and impacts.

As the projects progress, they are closely monitored by a dedicated programme lead within SFT who reports weekly to Scottish Government. Additionally, monitoring and end of year progress reports provided by Local Authorities provide evidence to ensure that the terms of the grant offer letters are being met and the intended outcomes and impacts are being delivered.

Q. Whether funding to support the national islands plan is adequate given we are halfway through the five-year lifetime of the plan and only a fraction of its commitments have been fulfilled?

The majority of the commitments in the National Islands Plan are in progress or have been fulfilled. However, it is important to note that many of the commitments are of an ongoing nature, and whilst 2022 has seen the fulfilment of a number of commitments that had very specific remits, for others, they are of a nature where we must continue to take action on them and as such, they are categorised as 'ongoing'. Examples of this can be found under Strategic Objective 8, where we commit to 'Protect island biodiversity' or under Strategic Objective 2, where we commit to ensuring that 'crofting continues to provide jobs and opportunities to island communities'. For an update on this, please see our [National Islands Plan Annual Report](#) or accompanying [Implementation Route Map](#).

Progress has continued to occur despite the significant challenges since publication, not least Covid-19, turbulent economic times, Brexit, the war in Ukraine and the continued cost crisis. All of these difficulties have impacted on the Scottish Government budgets, meaning that ministers have had to make difficult decisions around where funding should be prioritised, yet we have continued to deliver.

Q. How the resource element of the islands plan budget has supported the delivery of the national islands plan over the past three years?

Over the past three years, Scottish Government has invested £3.5 million to support the delivery of the National Islands Plan. This funding has supported numerous projects which include (but are not limited to) the Islands Recovery and Renewal Pilot in collaboration with North Ayrshire Council and Highlands and Islands Enterprise, grants to the Scottish Islands Federation to promote, publicise and advance the interests of Scotland’s inhabited islands; funding to Scottish Futures Trust to provide expertise, resource and capability to help lead the delivery aspects of the Islands Programme; the delivery of the Islands Heritage and Culture Posts across all six of our island local authorities; the provision of the Island Skills and Repopulation Pilots in both Argyll and Bute and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar; funding for the Young Islanders Network; and a review and update of the Island Communities Impact Assessment Guidance and Toolkit.

Q. How has the £1.4m Island Cost Crisis Emergency Fund been allocated, on what criteria were allocations made and how has the Scottish Government evaluated the allocations?

The purpose of the 2022/23 £1.4 million Island Cost Crisis Emergency Fund was to target support to island communities and households facing additional challenges due to the current cost crisis. The Island Cost Crisis Emergency Fund represented an additional £1.4 million investment (£1.1 million resource and £300k capital) in the 2022/23 financial year.

This fund was directly allocated to Local Authorities, through a 100% population formula as approved by the COSLA Settlement Distribution Group and COSLA Leaders. Allocations for each Local Authority were:

Local Authority	Resource (£'000)	Capital (£'000)	TOTAL (£'000)
Argyll & Bute	155	42	197
Highland	115	32	147
Na h-Eileanan Siar	283	77	360
North Ayrshire	63	17	80
Orkney	240	65	305
Shetland	244	67	311
TOTAL	1,100	300	1,400

The main objectives/expected outcomes of the Grant were for island Local Authorities to:

- Use this funding to target island areas only; and
- Use the funding to target immediate need and help those who are struggling due to the cost crisis; and
- Use the funding for existing schemes and/or other new support where they feel the need is greatest.

Local Authority decisions on where funding was directed were based on their local knowledge and understanding of the impacts of the cost crisis in their area. Local Authorities had discretion to identify and support those most vulnerable and in need. Given the flexibility around this funding, the administrative cost to local authorities was expected to be minimal. In all cases, administrative costs were expected to be kept to a minimum.

A light touch monitoring form was designed to help Scottish Government understand how the Local Authority used the funding provided by the Islands Cost Crisis Emergency Fund and Scottish Futures Trust are supporting SGIT with monitoring. The monitoring forms have been completed by the majority of the Local Authorities with the remaining returns due imminently.

The monitoring form was designed to capture brief details of

- the main activities funded,
- how the level of need for that activity was determined,
- the specific groups to whom the support was targeted,
- allocated funding,
- partnership working, and
- impact.

A brief assessment of the impact of the funded activities/schemes and the extent to which the activity is meeting or partially meeting identified need has been reported as well as any challenges so far in delivering these activities, or reaching the intended groups.

Further details of how Local Authorities have utilised this funding is set out in **Annex C**. These include additional payments to direct payments to low income households, support of vital third sector organisations, additional food provision for school children, support of warm spaces for people to meet and investment in equipment to provide additional resilience and cost savings.

Q. Given the cross-government nature of spending on islands, how has the islands team influenced budget decisions made by other directorates over the past two years?

Scottish Government remains fully committed to the delivery of the National Islands Plan, and we engage regularly with colleagues across portfolios to ensure that we are working collaboratively on delivery of all thirteen strategic objectives.

Examples of Cross Government Spend on Islands

Housing:

- Over the lifetime of the previous Parliament, we delivered over 6,000 affordable homes in rural and island communities. In that time, over £86 million has been invested in the islands alone to provide affordable homes on a range of islands including Islay, Orkney, Shetland, the Outer Hebrides, Mull, Raasay and Barra, among others.
- £3.6bn funding is being made available in this Parliamentary term towards the delivery of affordable homes. Our planned investment in this parliamentary term includes support of up to £30 million for the continuation of the demand-led Rural and Island Housing Fund, offering support to community groups and other eligible organisations in the provision of additional affordable housing and supplementing the delivery through registered social landlords and local authorities in our mainstream programme.
- A Stronger More Resilient Scotland: Programme for Government 2022/23 reaffirms our commitment to deliver 110,000 affordable homes across Scotland by 2032, with at least 70% in the social rented sector, and 10% in our remote, rural and island communities.

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Digital Spend:

- Despite telecoms legislation being wholly reserved to Westminster, the Scottish Government has invested £600m through the R100 contracts. The R100 programme is now delivering at pace to Scotland's homes and businesses – over 10,900 connections through the R100 contracts and over 2,300 connections through the R100 Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme so far.
- On 19th August 2022, we announced an additional £20.2m investment in the R100 contracts, alongside £16m from the UK Government, to deliver gigabit-capable broadband access to an additional 2,637 rural and island properties in Scotland.
- Through the R100 North contract, 16 new subsea cables are being laid, providing future-proofed, resilient connections to those island communities for decades to come.

Fuel Poverty:

- Area Based Schemes (ABS) are designed and delivered by local councils, in conjunction with utility companies and local delivery partners. Local schemes target communities facing high levels of fuel poverty to provide energy efficiency measures to a large number of Scottish households.
- Over the last three years we have provided funding to enable over 3,000 fuel poor households in Island council areas to benefit from energy efficiency improvements. This year ABS funding allocated to the six island local authorities was just under £11.4m. This compares with £12.2m in 21-22; £10.9m in 20-21; £9.6m in 19/20; and in 2018/19, we awarded £9.5m in grant to these authorities.

Islands Growth Deal:

- This Deal is about investing in local people, projects and priorities in partnership with the island authorities and UK Government to spread the benefits of inclusive economic growth across the three island groups, increasing opportunities for all.
- The Heads of Terms for the Islands Deal was signed on 17 March 2021 and secures investment of up to £50 million from both the Scottish and UK Governments over a 10 year period. The £100 million investment will result in a total of £33.3 million of SG and UKG funds being invested in Orkney and Shetland, with £33.4 million to Comhairle nan Eilean Siar.

School-age Childcare:

- In our published 2023-24 Draft budget we committed to invest £15 million to continue to design an all-year-round system of school-age childcare, which will be funded for those families on the lowest incomes.
- We recognise the specific challenges for rural and island communities and that the provision of childcare is a key factor to support more people to enter and sustain training, employment and starting a business.
- That's why in 2020 we awarded The Mull and Iona Community Trust £180,000 to develop and deliver School Age Childcare services on Mull. The project explored ways to provide childcare with the flexibility required in island communities.
- The project, which was funded jointly by the Islands, Women in Agriculture and Early Learning and Childcare Teams delivered a mix of term-time and holiday childcare and organised children's activities, targeted at the six-priority family types as set out in our Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan.
- While many families benefitted from access to affordable childcare, the project found real challenges associated with the availability, recruitment and retention of suitably qualified workers. These specific learnings from the MICT project will be reflected in the forthcoming Strategic Framework for Scotland's Childcare Professionals.

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The [National Islands Plan Annual Report](#) sets out the progress across all portfolios towards delivery of the Plan's 13 Strategic Objectives each year.

Q. Can you provide an update on the Committee's recommendation that the Scottish Government consider how funds available to island local authorities could be "amalgamated or streamlined" to address the concerns expressed to us last year about the "cluttered landscape" of funds and budgets.

The Committee will appreciate that the timetabling and amendments to other funding stream schedules are sometimes out with our control. For example, in 2022 we saw the long delay in opening the UK Government's Levelling-Up application portal which impacted local authorities workload and resources. However, within these constraints, my officials are working to create timescales for launching the Islands Programme in future years which, where possible, will provide greater lead in time to accommodate other external pressures. In the spirit of the recently agreed Verity House Agreement, my officials will continue to collaborate with our local authority colleagues and aim to minimise future deadlines during particularly busy periods of the year.

Yours sincerely,



MAIRI GOUGEON

2022/23 ISLANDS PROGRAMME AWARDS – BUILD STATUS

		Completed	Started	Not started	Completion imminent	Completion due end 2023	Completion due 2024
Shetland Islands Council			10	1	2	4	5
Aald Skul, Mainland Shetland	Investment in new portacabin, access and parking to allow social enterprise to expand		Y			Y End of October	
Papa Stour	Safeguard and improve fabric of building for next stage of development		Y		Y		
Orkney Islands Council							
Kirkwall New Nursery Mainland Orkney + all 16	New build nursery facility total cost £3.12m		Y				Y
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar							
Ionad Hiort Lewis	RIBA 4 design work to enable £8.07m visitor centre project to move to build stage		Y			Y Full planning to be submitted November	
Community Facilities Uist Berneray and Eriskay	Regeneration projects to safeguard community buildings	Y (1 of 2)	Y (1 of 2)		Y		
Argyll and Bute Council							
Community Halls Digital Hubs, Iona, Islay, Coll Tiree	Creation of digital hubs in community halls across 4 islands	Y (2 of 4)	Y (2 of 4)			Y September	
Tobermory Sea wall and railings, Mull	Critical sea front infrastructure to provide tidal resilience		Y			Y Mid December	

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Highland Council							
Old Man of Storr Skye	Provision of EV charging points and retail/visitor unit on site		Y			Y EV points	Y Unit - March
Housing enablement Eigg	Ground enabling works, bore hole and electricity connection	Tracks & clearing	Y				Y Early 2024
North Ayrshire							
Millport Phase 2 Cumbrae	Phase 2 to develop building for central community space		Y				Y Early 2024
Pit Stops Arran and Cumbrae	Re-purposing of 12 toilet buildings into visitor stops			Y			Y Spring 2024

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2023/24 ISLANDS PROGRAMME – AWARDS AND SUMMARY OF CITED PRINCIPAL NATIONAL ISLANDS PROGRAMME STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

		1 Populat ion	2 SED	3 Transp ort	4 Housi ng	5 Fuel Poverty	6 Digit al	7 Heal th	8 Environme ntal	9 Climate Ch	10 Emp Com	11 ACL	12 Educati on
SIC 01	Growing Space		X						X				
SIC 02	Hymhus Bigton hub		X			X		X		X		X	
SIC 03	COPE		X					X		X	X		X
OIC 01	*Air Terminals	X		X				X					X
OIC 02	Kirkwall Regen		X										
CnES 02	*Acarsaid Harbour		X	X						X			
CnES 03	Seallam Heri Centre											X	X
CnES 04	Stornoway Campus	X					X			X			X
CnES 05	An Taigh Mor											X	X
ABC 01	Worker accom		X		X						X		
ABC 02	Tiree Comm Care	X						X			X		
HC 01	Canna Hub		X					X	X		X		
NAC 01	Garrison House		X					X		X			
NAC 02	Dyemill Bike Park			X				X	X	X			

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2022/23 ISLANDS COST CRISIS EMERGENCY FUND OVERVIEW

Shetland Islands Council

Shetland Islands Council is using its allocation for a wide range of support including additional contributions to the Winter Activities Fund; doubled payments to the Scottish Welfare Fund – Crisis grants; purchase of items to keep people warm and reduce bills; further support of the Emergency Household Energy Scheme with a payment of £400 to 200 households through the CAB; emergency food provision/ breakfasts for secondary school children until the end of the Easter holidays which will be available to more than 1,400 pupils in its islands; and grants to third sector organisations working with those in need.

Orkney Islands Council

Orkney Islands Council is using its allocation to work with Voluntary Action Orkney to support Third Sector organisations with the impact of the higher electricity costs through its Third Sector Cost of Living Crisis Fund. Third sector groups are critical to supporting families and individuals through the winter and are themselves facing existential threats in the cost crisis. 30 charitable or voluntary organisations have submitted applications which are capped at £15,000. Applicants must show a critical need for the funding solely related to the challenges caused by the increase in energy and overhead costs. Capital items funded include upgraded heating equipment to reduce future bills.

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar has added its allocation to already identified funding to support community groups' work to assist with the current cost-of living pressures. Whilst some of this support was by way of direct payments to low-income households and those in receipt of Council Tax Reductions, other initiatives were delivered by community organisations which provide valuable support within communities. These include support for foodbanks; provision of fuel and food vouchers; and provision of warm spaces for people to meet up, meals and equipment.

Argyll and Bute Council

Argyll and Bute Council agreed a wide range of measures including distribution of "Love Local" cards to low income households in its islands (in excess of 1,000 households) which can be used for local shopping, additional school meals or local ferry travel; free school meal top ups; and additional support to island foodbanks.

Highland Council

Highland Council has allocated funding to over 700 cost of living awards to island residents. It has also made payments towards the replacement of a community shop's storage shed, an electricity connection and freezer storage to enable bulk purchasing at more competitive pricing which will

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be passed onto local residents in Canna; the replacement of a backup generator to offer continued affordable electricity in Muck; and a village hall flood defence upgrade and maintenance to enable provision of warm spaces for the community in Glendale, Skye.

North Ayrshire Council

North Ayrshire Council undertook two mini-enquiries to listen directly to residents to identify key island challenges. The Council is working with Arran CVS, the third sector interface, to deliver local mitigations using local third sector and voluntary groups. Plans include the allocation of further funding to extend/scale up/innovate in relation to ongoing activity to support access to food, energy support and transport costs, including existing breakfasts/grab bags for school pupils, and further investment in its Energy Smart scheme to support households with energy costs and measures. Specific resources have been allocated to six primary schools in Arran and one in Cumbrae to provide remote on-line after-school support for pupils unable to attend in person due to costs and availability of transport; the introduction of laundry and other family support initiatives in schools; and the introduction of visiting specialists to broaden the experience of children due to unaffordability of transport for visits to mainland facilities and experiences.

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