



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee

Wednesday 4 May 2022

Session 6



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RURAL AFFAIRS, ISLANDS AND NATURAL ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE
14th Meeting 2022, Session 6

CONVENER

Finlay Carson (Galloway and West Dumfries) (Con)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Beatrice Wishart (Shetland Islands) (LD)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)

*Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP)

*Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

*Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP)

*Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con)

*Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP)

*Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Erica Clarkson (Scottish Government)

Nicola Crook (Scottish Government)

Mairi Gougeon (Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands)

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP) (Committee Substitute)

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con) (Committee Substitute)

Philip Raines (Scottish Government)

Professor Francesco Sindico (Scottish Government)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Emma Johnston

LOCATION

The Mary Fairfax Somerville Room (CR2)

Scottish Parliament
**Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural
Environment Committee**

Wednesday 4 May 2022

*[The Deputy Convener opened the meeting at
10:00]*

**Decision on Taking Business in
Private**

The Deputy Convener (Beatrice Wishart): Good morning, and welcome to the 14th meeting in 2022 of the Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee. Apologies have been received from the convener, Finlay Carson, and we welcome Edward Mountain as a substitute. We will also welcome Emma Harper for part of the meeting, as Jim Fairlie has to leave for approximately 90 minutes.

Jim Fairlie (Perthshire South and Kinross-shire) (SNP): I apologise to the rest of the committee and to the panel. I will be gone for about 90 minutes, but I intend to return and be brought up to date at the end.

The Deputy Convener: I remind members who are using electronic devices to switch them to silent.

Our first item of business is a decision on whether to take item 5 in private. Do members agree to do so? Members who are participating remotely should type N into the chat box if they do not agree; otherwise, I will presume that we are content.

We agree to take item 5 in private.

**Islands (Scotland) Act 2018:
Islands Plan Annual Report**

10:01

The Deputy Convener: Our second item of business is an evidence session on the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 annual report. I am pleased to welcome Mairi Gougeon, the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands, and her Scottish Government officials: Erica Clarkson, who is the head of islands policy and communities; Nicola Crook, who is the national islands plan team leader; Professor Francesco Sindico, who is the carbon neutral islands team leader; and Philip Raines.

I invite the cabinet secretary to make some opening remarks.

The Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands (Mairi Gougeon): I will say a few words about the Scottish Government's second annual report on our delivery of the national islands plan for 2021. The report outlines where progress has been made towards each specific commitment in the national islands plan, and it details our projects and resource spend where that is appropriate.

I acknowledge the support that we have received from stakeholders in the past year. We have benefited from vital collaborations with local authorities, island stakeholders and communities themselves.

We have lived, and continue to live, through really challenging times. Approximately 12 weeks after we launched the national islands plan, the country entered lockdown and, like so many other communities across Scotland, our islands faced unprecedented challenges. Islanders experienced issues with supply chains, transport and access to services. Covid-19 has had a deep and lasting impact on the health, wellbeing and finances of many islanders, and we continue to work exceptionally hard to support them in the best way that we can.

Now that we are slowly moving out of the Covid-19 pandemic, the stark rise in energy prices and the associated negative effects on the cost of living are creating a new set of challenges. Islands already face some of the highest levels of fuel poverty, and they are being further impacted by the current energy crisis.

Despite the challenging times, however, the national islands plan continues to provide the Scottish Government with an opportunity and a focus to improve the lives of people on the islands. As you will see in the annual report, I am pleased to see good progress across the national islands plan's 13 strategic objectives. I do not have time to

detail all the work that has been done on every one of those objectives and commitments, but I want to share with the committee a few of the highlights from the report.

First, we have launched a number of funding streams that have enabled island communities not only to better cope through Covid-19, but to develop innovative and transformational projects. Secondly, we are developing the islands bond, which will play a role in tackling depopulation and promoting sustainable economic development on our islands. Thirdly, we have launched the carbon neutral islands project, which will support six islands in their efforts to reach net zero by 2040. Those islands will become climate trailblazers for all other Scottish islands. Fourthly, we are continuing to work with Kerrera and Fair Isle on two major projects, which are transforming both islands in a positive way.

I will be happy to talk about other projects and activities in answering the committee's questions, but I hope that those examples give the committee a flavour of the range and breadth of work that we have done in relation to the national islands plan.

The cost of living, child poverty, depopulation and the climate are just some of the critical issues that islands face. The Scottish Government takes them all seriously and, together with my colleagues working across other portfolios, we will spare no effort in tackling them decisively.

Delivery of the national islands plan is a journey, and, although we still have a way to go, it is also an opportunity to provide support and capacity to islands so that they can emerge from these challenging times as resilient and, ultimately, more sustainable communities.

The Deputy Convener: Thank you, cabinet secretary. What does the annual report say about the overall progress towards meeting the 13 strategic objectives? You have already referenced reducing fuel poverty. To what extent have the objectives of addressing population decline and improving transport services already been met? You will not be surprised that I am interested in the latter.

Mairi Gougeon: The annual report sets out our commitments, and you will see that it also sets out where we are in relation to them. Many commitments in the report have been completed, but work is on-going for a number of others on which we cannot take immediate action. Many issues have gone on for a long time and we are working very hard to resolve them.

For example, in relation to some of the areas that you touched on, such as transport, and some of the other projects that we have been working on, I mentioned in my opening remarks the work that has taken place on the Kerrera project.

Through our islands infrastructure fund, we awarded more than £500,000 to connect the length of the island, which we know will have a tangible and very visible impact.

I also touched on the Fair Isle Bird Observatory project, in which we have invested through the same programme and which will also have a positive impact on the island itself, as well as on the wider island communities. Those are the tangible things that we can see, but huge pieces of work are still under way and we continue to make good progress on them.

You touched on transport, but a power of work is also under way on addressing population decline. I briefly mentioned the islands bond, on which work is being done at pace and in which extensive community engagement is taking place so that we can develop a proposal that will work for our islands and for our island communities. I do not know whether officials want to touch a bit further on the islands bond project, if the committee is interested in hearing a bit more on where we are with it.

The islands bond itself will not solve the problem of depopulation on our islands, for which we know that many different, complex reasons are responsible. The bond is not seen as a silver bullet that will resolve the issues that we face, but we believe that it can help if it is used in the right way. I hand over to officials if there is any further information on it.

Erica Clarkson (Scottish Government): Would the committee like more information about the islands bond?

The Deputy Convener: Everybody wants to ask so many questions. We can pick up the subject if it comes up again in questions from other members.

Erica Clarkson: Of course.

The Deputy Convener: I would like to ask about the islands connectivity plan, which will replace the ferries plan by the end of 2022. Orkney's and Shetland's internal ferry services are excluded from the islands connectivity plan. Can you explain the reasons for excluding the northern isles from the plan? What can be done to provide communities with the lifeline ferry services that they desperately need?

Mairi Gougeon: The islands connectivity plan is due to be the successor to the ferries plan. Progress on it had been delayed because of the pandemic, but it will progress this year and I believe that a draft of the plan will be ready for consultation by the end of this year. That is the aim.

I do not know whether officials have further information on the specific details of the

connectivity plan and the issue that you have just raised.

Erica Clarkson: We might need to take some of this back to our transport colleagues and respond to the committee about that data. We are working closely with our Transport Scotland colleagues on the development of the islands connectivity plan, and we are listening carefully to communities as we support that work.

I know that our colleagues are careful to have regard to aviation, ferries and fixed links as well as to issues of connections and onward travel once folk leave the islands.

Alasdair Allan (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The cabinet secretary and the deputy convener have touched on the strategic objective of reducing fuel poverty and what the Scottish Government is doing around that. How does the work that the Scottish Government does on that relate to what is happening in the reserved sphere? It is difficult to talk about fuel poverty without talking about transmission charges. If we are talking about renewables as being part of the answer in the islands, it is difficult to overlook the fact that energy companies in Scotland have to pay £7.36 per megawatt hour to connect to the national grid, although projects in most other European countries pay virtually nothing.

Mairi Gougeon: You are absolutely right: there are undoubtedly challenges in that area, which is reserved to the UK Government. We continually engage with the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets to raise the significant issue of what are, essentially, penalties that we face in Scotland. We continue to raise that with Ofgem and the UK Government.

Alasdair Allan: In relation to that, how does your work on strategic objectives on fuel poverty in an island context relate to recent fuel price hikes? I am sure that other members who represent islands are more than aware of that. I am very aware that the price of heating oil, which is still the main source of heating in areas off the gas grid, seems to be accelerating even beyond the dizzy heights of the cost of other fuels. How do you adjust those strategic objectives as you go, to ensure that you take account of what is happening at the UK level?

Mairi Gougeon: That is a really important point. We must continue to monitor that, because things have escalated and become worse even since the plan was published. That is why the monitoring of the plan and of the objectives and commitments that we have set out is important. The route map that we will publish shortly is also an important part of that process. It will set out in more detail the actions that we will take to meet the commitments in the plan.

We have regular communication about that in a couple of different forums. The national islands plan delivery group has been meeting quarterly to look at the route map. We are in constant discussion with that group, which is made up of local authorities and third sector and community representatives. There is also the islands strategic forum, where we engage with local authorities and their chief executives to talk about how we can work together to address challenges as they emerge. Through that regular engagement, we can identify emerging issues and try to address them.

We also have a number of different strategies. We passed the Fuel Poverty (Targets, Definition and Strategy) (Scotland) Act 2019 and we have a fuel poverty strategy. A variety of funds are in place to help those who are experiencing the worst fuel poverty. There is no doubt that people living in our island communities feel the pressure acutely, so it is important that we do everything that we can by working across Government to tackle those issues.

Rachael Hamilton (Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire) (Con): The annual report has an objective to

“work with policy colleagues to produce a National Development Plan for crofting which will set the long-term strategic direction for crofting”

and ensure that there are plenty of new entrants in rural and remote communities. Cabinet secretary, when will the Cabinet bring forward crofting reform, and how will that ensure a healthy turnover of crofting tenancies on our islands to create opportunities for new entrants?

Mairi Gougeon: Unfortunately, I cannot give the committee a definite date for introducing that legislation. It is ultimately up to Parliament to decide that, but we have committed to it because we know that issues around crofting reform were raised in the most recent session of Parliament and we must address them. We are working on that and will introduce legislation at some point, but I cannot give the committee a definite date at the moment.

Rachael Hamilton: Another of the annual report's objectives is

“to work with the Crofting Commission to encourage a healthy turnover of croft tenancies”

to create the demand for new entrants, but the croft house grant scheme gave out only half of its budget between 2016-17 and 2020-21. The budget was £11 million and it has distributed only £6 million. Is there a reason for that?

Mairi Gougeon: Ultimately, it is down to demand and the number of applications that we get to the croft house grant scheme. We have

committed to maintaining and supporting the fund because we recognise that it is critical in helping to sustain our crofting communities.

10:15

Rachael Hamilton: Will the islands bond be used to enable young people to access crofting?

Mairi Gougeon: We have undertaken detailed engagement on the islands bond. We would not want it to duplicate or cut across other Government initiatives, as that would not make sense.

I will hand over to Erica Clarkson to provide more information on that.

Erica Clarkson: We have spoken to a lot of crofters as part of the islands bond consultation, and it has become apparent that we need to think more deeply about how the bond might be able to support them with some of the smaller costs, such as those to do with applications. I am afraid that I am not very familiar with crofting policy.

We have spoken to lots of crofters, and we are looking at how we can work with the Crofting Commission to enhance what it does through the bond.

Rachael Hamilton: I wanted specific detail. Crofters cannot get a mortgage. Will the islands bond allow them to seek finance options for purchasing a croft?

Erica Clarkson: We are starting to analyse the responses that we have had to the consultation and to set out the criteria for applying for the bond, so we are not yet able to answer that question.

The Deputy Convener: Alasdair Allan has a supplementary question.

Alasdair Allan: Can you say any more about how many crofters have been helped through that route or through other routes, such as the croft house grant scheme? Is that on the increase?

Mairi Gougeon: I would be happy to come back to the committee with further information on the amount of funding that we have provided to crofters and how many people we have assisted through the croft house grant scheme, if that would be helpful.

Alasdair Allan: Thank you.

Jenni Minto (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I have the privilege of representing Argyll and Bute, which includes lots of amazing islands. You mentioned the Kerrera road project, which has made a huge difference. The island communities are working together to find different solutions to their problems, whether they be with housing, renewables or community land and asset ownership. Many of those issues fall under

different ministerial portfolios. How do you work with your colleagues to ensure that the specifics of the islands are included in all policy areas?

Mairi Gougeon: As you can see from the strategic objectives that we have set out in the plan, it touches almost every other part of Government. An important part of my role in Government is engaging with my colleagues to ensure that our islands and rural areas are taken into account when policy is formed. Island community impact assessments, which were introduced under the landmark Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, are important in that respect. Such assessments are an obligation and a critical part of the process.

In addition, I engage with my ministerial colleagues on cross-cutting issues. I mentioned some of the groups that we have for continuous engagement. One of those is the islands strategic forum with local authorities. There will often be another minister there from the relevant policy area to discuss matters with local authorities and chief executives. It is important to have cross-portfolio working, whether in transport, health or housing. A variety of ministers have come along to previous meetings. Such engagement is critical. Ensuring that issues relating to islands are considered across other portfolios is a vital part of my role in Government.

Jenni Minto: In your introduction, you mentioned the impact of Covid-19 on island communities. Like the whole of Scotland and the rest of the world, we have had negative impacts, but important lessons have been learned, with islanders recognising their resilience.

Last week, I was at a Community Land Scotland event that involved considering how asset management and asset ownership help communities to pull together and find solutions. That is really positive but, on the flipside, when I visit islands, I often hear concerns that other stakeholders that are incorporated into the way that islands operate perhaps put up barriers to prevent innovative ideas from coming from islanders. What can the Scottish Government and the islands team do to help to reduce that?

Mairi Gougeon: Working with other bodies is absolutely critical in trying to overcome some of the issues. It is simply not possible for us to deliver the objectives and commitments that we have set out on our own or in isolation, and nor would we want to. It is important that we work with others, including local authorities, to overcome the issues.

Jenni Minto touched on the impact of Covid-19. Research on that issue that was undertaken by the James Hutton Institute identified many challenges, but one of the strengths was exactly

the point that the member highlighted about the resilience and strong community bonds that exist.

I do not know whether my officials have anything to add on that work by the JHI.

Professor Francesco Sindico (Scottish Government): I am happy to say a few words on how the team can help to produce innovation and work together with island communities. As Jenni Minto mentioned, the innovation and resilience that Covid-19 has highlighted have been absolutely outstanding, and the Argyll and Bute islands are just one example of that.

Obviously, I can talk more on behalf of the carbon neutral islands project, and we see it as very much a question of working with the communities. Now that the pandemic is slowing down, we will finally have the opportunity to go back to the islands and to listen a lot. There needs to be a lot of learning and listening, because the world has changed to an extent. Through the project, the islands bond and many other activities, we have an opportunity to go back to the islands and re-establish that relationship, which is the foundation that can take them forward. That is the case with any community, but it is particularly true in the islands, because of the work that we do.

I stress the cabinet secretary's point that the nature of our work is collaborative, both within the islands and in this building. I emphasise that that is not just at cabinet secretary level; it is also at official level. We work closely with our colleagues in Government, because that is the only way that the strategic objectives will ever be achieved—we do not have a magic bullet. I emphasise that and reassure the committee that we work closely with our colleagues.

To give one example, we are part of a Government-wide climate change committee or group. We bring the island voice to that and we are heard. We have developed such relationships. A lot of our work is about relationships—obviously, I know that you need more than just a relationship, but it is an incredibly important foundation.

Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green): Thank you so much for that last contribution—I did not catch your name, because I am joining the meeting remotely. I apologise to everyone for that.

I will continue on the theme of improved outcomes during years 1 and 2. The provisions on additional powers requests established a power for island local authorities to request devolution of specific functions, duties or responsibilities. That was intended to be a key mechanism to empower island councils and communities, yet I have not heard of it being used. Cabinet secretary, are you aware of it being used? Are there barriers that are inhibiting local authorities in using the power?

Mairi Gougeon: No, the power has not been used so far. From the conversations that I have had, I am not aware that there are any particular potential barriers that inhibit local authorities from using it. However, officials might have something to add on that point.

Erica Clarkson: I can confirm that, as yet, we have had no requests from any of our local authority partners for additional powers, but we would welcome such a request. From a policy perspective, it would be quite exciting to take that forward.

Mairi Gougeon: Yes—and to work constructively through that process.

Ariane Burgess: Are the islands councils fully aware of it? Given how busy they are in their day-to-day work, have they fully taken on board that they have been given that power?

Mairi Gougeon: I think so. As I said, I have not been made aware that there is an issue at the moment. I presume that, by their nature and through the 2018 act, island authorities are aware that the power exists—I would like to think so, anyway. I am not aware that they perceive any barriers in relation to using the power.

Ariane Burgess: I will move on to the theme of addressing population decline. It is encouraging to hear about measures such as repopulation zones, which aim to increase island populations, but I am aware that not all population growth is equal, given that growth in older demographics can inflate house prices and crowd out young people. If the Government rolls out repopulation zones, will it allow for a nuanced approach such as focusing efforts on increasing the population among 18 to 40-year-olds and taking measures in line with achieving that more specific goal?

Mairi Gougeon: A lot of work is going on in that area. We have talked a bit about the islands bond and how it might complement some of the other measures that we are looking at. Through the convention of the Highlands and Islands, we have a population working group, which works with the Scottish Government and the third sector. Francesco Sindico talked about the importance of collaboration. When we are dealing with issues such as this one, collaboration is absolutely critical.

In Government, we also have an expert group on population and migration, which was reconvened in March. Part of the group's work involves looking at zonal methodologies. The group has been commissioned to scope that out, consider what the boundaries might be, and how they could be implemented and monitored. It is important that those aspects are considered.

Officials might want to touch on the work of the working group, but, before I hand over, I will highlight some of the other initiatives that we are working on. We have a ministerial task force on population, which is due to meet this month. That involves working across Government to consider all those issues.

We have also announced that we will be taking forward a rural visa pilot scheme. That was agreed by Sajid Javid when he was the Home Secretary, based on the recommendations of the Migration Advisory Committee. In countries all over the world, different means and methods are used in relation to migration. Therefore, we have established a working group to start to develop pilot proposals. The reasons behind depopulation are multifaceted and complex, so we need to ensure that we get to grips with all the data and try different initiatives to find a solution that will work for rural communities in Scotland.

I will hand over to the officials in case they have anything to add.

Philip Raines (Scottish Government): The only thing that I will add relates to the work of the ministerial task force on population, which is being led by the Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture.

Given that it is such a multifaceted issue and that it is less about one particular policy area or investment and more about how to bring all those things together and sequence them for the needs of a particular place, we are working with our colleagues who lead on that population programme work to give a lot of serious thought to how to make real the idea of a place-based approach. That involves considering how to bring together all the different initiatives, which are often national, but sometimes regional, in a way that addresses the population needs of a particular place. That is not always as easy as it sounds, but we are working closely with colleagues and we will be working closely with COHI colleagues on how to take that forward in a very real way under the umbrella of the population work.

10:30

Ariane Burgess: One thing that comes to my attention when I travel in the islands is the need for affordable housing. As we have said many times, there are so many aspects to that issue. I encounter older people who live in homes that are too big for them and who want to downsize but do not want to leave their communities.

Through the national planning framework 4, we will have housing allocation across Scotland, including the islands. During NPF4 evidence sessions, we have discussed the idea of clustered housing or clachan housing. I get a sense that

older people want to downsize but do not want to leave their communities and feel isolated. Is there an opportunity to consider a different model for housing? To pick up the point that Philip Raines made about place making, clustered housing with shared community facilities could push us in a good direction and free up bigger housing for younger people who might want to start families to move in.

What are your thoughts on that, cabinet secretary?

Mairi Gougeon: I am absolutely open to considering that. Obviously, I want to listen to island communities as we develop proposals. One of our key commitments is to develop a remote, rural and islands housing action plan. I cannot yet give a definitive date when that will be published—it is led by my Cabinet colleague Shona Robison—but that will be critical in trying to address some of the issues.

You talked about travelling around the islands. Whenever I am out in our rural and island communities, housing is raised as being critical to the ability to retain young working-age people in a community. It is not always a case of a lack of jobs. There can be job opportunities but the ability to house people is frequently raised as a critical issue.

I believe that engagement work in relation to the action plan has commenced but I would be more than happy to feed back the information that you give to ensure that it is part of the process, too. There will be extensive engagement with our island communities so that they can be part of it.

Ariane Burgess: Thanks very much for your thoughts on that.

The Deputy Convener: We know how complex population decline is. Better transport links can help to stop the outward flow. We have seen what fixed links or tunnels can do in places such as the Faroe Islands, where there is evidence that they have increased populations and brought people out from the centre. What is your view on that, cabinet secretary? Could such a policy change help to stop island depopulation?

Mairi Gougeon: Issues related to that have been considered through the strategic transport projects review, the consultation on which closed last month. As part of that work, there were proposals for fixed links at, I think, the sounds of Barra and Harris. There has been extensive engagement in relation to the development of those proposals, too, so they form part of the STPR.

The officials might have something to add on that point. Otherwise, I would be happy to get back to the committee with further information.

Professor Sindico: I have a quick comment on the Faroe Islands experience. We tend to think that the fixed links and depopulation are completely interconnected there. I am not saying that they are not, but the picture is much more complex than that. The reasons for depopulation are a bit like the national islands plan, which is about all the strategic objectives, not just one. What we see in the Faroe Islands is an historical development that relates to Denmark and governance.

We have a lot to learn from the Faroe Islands and other islands and countries in northern Europe, but we must also be careful to understand that the reason why a measure works in Denmark, Norway, the Faroe Islands or Iceland also has to do with their governance, the setting and many other things. Nevertheless, I reassure you that we are looking closely at the likes of the Faroe Islands and other islands, particularly in the project that I lead. Although there is a lot that is being done very well on our islands that we can share, including innovation and resilience, there is always a lot that we can learn from the Faroe Islands, in particular.

The Deputy Convener: I absolutely agree. We can always learn lessons and there is no point in reinventing the wheel.

Jenni Minto has the next question.

Jenni Minto: I feel that I am kind of giving you a road trip round the islands in my constituency, cabinet secretary.

On Friday, I was on Jura, which is experiencing population growth and attracting younger populations. Quite rightly, the development trust and the community council there are incredibly proud of the work that they have been doing. However, they raised concerns about volunteer fatigue and who will take the island on to the next stage. Given that islands are not the same and that each has its own unique character, how is your work focusing on the differences across the islands? We can also talk about learning from other islands, as well as those in our own communities.

Mairi Gougeon: Absolutely—you are right about that.

It is interesting and exciting to hear about the work that is happening on Jura, and I would be interested to find out more about it. I completely understand your point that, in small communities in particular, there can be volunteer fatigue and the same people sometimes do a lot of the work. If there is anything that we can do to support communities and the initiatives that are under way on Jura, I am more than happy to take that away and look at it. You have outlined an exciting development.

Jenni Minto: Ariane Burgess asked about housing, which was also raised as an issue when I was on Jura. I know that you have visited Colonsay, where a fantastic partnership exists between the community, the Scottish Government and the salmon business there. One suggestion that was raised by people on Jura was about how to raise funds for housing through community share ownership or wider share ownership of housing. There are lots of innovative ideas, and I am pleased to hear that you hope to get out and listen to communities. I would hope that the listening process is the short part and that the action is the big part. I would be interested to know how you plan to move forward with the ideas that communities have suggested about those issues.

Mairi Gougeon: It is vital that we capture that innovation and listen to those ideas. If there is a different way to make things work, it is important that we consider that. It was brilliant to visit Colonsay and see the impact of that project. As I touched on in a previous response, the issue is not a lack of employment. The company there—I think it is Mowi—is investing in homes on the island, and the partnership between the three bodies is critical. The housing on Colonsay is transformative. The challenges with housing hit home when listening to the community. A woman spoke passionately about that: her family had lived on Colonsay for generations, but she was living in a caravan because the majority of homes are second homes and that is shutting young people out of accommodation, even though ample job opportunities are available. That is an exciting initiative.

Wherever we can, we will work with communities and businesses on that—more communities are looking at what they can do to deliver affordable housing, which is important. I want to make sure that we capture that innovation and the different ideas, and that we listen to communities about what will work and what can be delivered in those areas.

The Deputy Convener: Emma Harper has a supplementary question.

Emma Harper (South Scotland) (SNP): There is a comprehensive document on the islands of the European Union, which talks about the state of play and future challenges. How do we work with our European neighbours now that we are not in the European Union? Some comprehensive planning and work have been taken forward to consider equivalent issues—[*Inaudible.*]

The Deputy Convener: We lost the link, but I think that we got half of it.

Mairi Gougeon: I can jump in and answer anyway.

Now that we are out of the EU, that engagement is a bit more difficult. We are not members, so we do not have exactly the same connections or involvement that we would like to have had and to maintain. However, we still look to engage closely with our European neighbours, particularly on issues such as the ones that we have been discussing, which affect us all. I know that there will be similar challenges in other parts of the EU.

As we have talked about in previous responses, we do not want to reinvent the wheel. It is important to look at what is happening elsewhere and to engage with our European counterparts. As an example, the 26th United Nations climate change conference of the parties—COP26—was a great forum; I took part in an islands event and engaged with my equivalent ministers in other Administrations in Europe and further afield to talk about how to address the similar challenges that we face. That continuing engagement is really important in allowing us to see what learning we can take from one another.

Francesco would like to come in.

Professor Sindico: I want to stress that, although Brexit happened and the EU is not as close as it was previously, it is still possible to make those partnerships. The team is developing partnerships and collaboration with policy makers and other stakeholders in European islands and beyond.

Obviously, I can speak more about the climate side. Islands are at the forefront of the climate struggle and climate action across Europe. Through the carbon neutral islands project, we do not want to just share practice and receive learning but lay a platform for Scottish companies, industry, universities and research and development to continue collaborating with our European partners.

It is true that some funding streams are either not available any more or not as conspicuous as they were previously, but others are still available, so it is a question of mapping what funding we can still tap into. In the island dimension, we can learn so much not just from Europe but from around the world. We are present and have a very strong voice in organisations such as the Global Island Partnership and the UN sustainable development goals islands hub.

Let us remember that only two countries in Europe have an act and a plan—Croatia and us. That does not mean that we are better than others, but it means that we have a story. As we implement that story, those partners are looking at us and want to know what we are doing. We might not be part of the EU formally but, in the island dimension, we are very much at the heart of it.

Alasdair Allan: I want to turn briefly to the islands survey and return to the familiar theme of housing. One theme that came out of the survey was that of younger people expressing the complications that they experience in coming back to an island after being away for education or work elsewhere. How can the Government respond to that problem, given that, as we have heard, many islands face a labour shortage?

Mairi Gougeon: It is disappointing to hear that theme come out of the survey. We want to encourage people and young islanders to return to and live and work in our island communities. A few different issues come out of the survey: we have an ageing population, and younger working-age people move away and do not return. It is important that we do what we can to address those issues.

Various initiatives are under way in relation to student retention. We have to tackle issues such as the lack of affordable housing and connectivity, whether that be transport or digital. We need to make it as easy as possible for people who want to come to live and work in our island communities. It is important that we address those multifaceted issues.

10:45

Alasdair Allan: You mentioned housing and the work that is happening in that area. A lot of money is going into social rented housing in the islands. What can the Government do to draw people together across different sectors to make that exercise work to the maximum? What more can be done to listen to the needs of business in all this? One of the themes that is coming through is that we need to plan such housing around the future needs of business and the future population, not just around the people who are on the housing waiting list just now. How do we work together across sectors to make sure that that kind of stuff happens?

Mairi Gougeon: That is important, and it touches on the example that Jenni Minto raised. Industry has played a critical part in solving some of those problems, so it needs to be part of that conversation. I hope that such engagement will take place through the remote, rural and islands housing action plan. We must make sure that we are doing that in the right way, through collaboration.

Alasdair Allan: Do you feel that there are opportunities outside what might be considered to be the traditional solutions to this? We have talked about how there are plenty empty houses. What can we do to make sure that we work flexibly across sectors to do things such as bringing empty houses back into use in an affordable way?

Mairi Gougeon: Our planning policy is important in encouraging that. We previously had a discussion in committee on NPF4 and its focus on vacant and derelict properties and bringing them back into use. We need to knit those different strategies together and work collaboratively to ensure that we are delivering and providing affordable houses where they are needed by communities and suiting the needs of businesses now and into the future.

Alasdair Allan: Finally on this theme, looking at the issues that were raised in the survey about housing, you said that the situation is different on different islands. How does the Government intend to make sure that its response is tailored to those different situations? I will not go into all the examples, but some islands have an oil industry, some have a fishing industry and some have a shortage of housing. How do you make sure that an island's policy is tailored to those realities?

Mairi Gougeon: You are absolutely right. Every island is different and has its own unique set of challenges. This probably touches on a previous response in relation to the data that we get and trying to tease out the detail to understand the different issues for particular communities. Some of those issues were also drawn out through the engagement that has been taking place through the islands bond. Some people would prefer to see that mechanism work in a way that retains population, while others would like to see it work in a way that attracts people to come and live in particular communities. It is important that we carry out that engagement in such a way that we develop policies that are flexible and will work for individual communities. The islands policy is not going to be one size fits all. Collaboration and engagement will be critical going forward.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): We have just heard about how the islands are all individual and they all have their own unique positives and challenges. We are seeing a lot of labour shortages because of Brexit. With island communities being so dependent on tourism, fisheries and agriculture, how have those shortages impacted on the islands' sectors? Does that have anything to do with the impact upon population decline?

Mairi Gougeon: It has had a massive impact on all the areas in my portfolio, so I see it at first hand and hear it in my engagement with different communities and businesses. As you outlined, a lot of the industries on our islands have been those most adversely affected, which means it probably disproportionately affects our islands more than other areas.

Tourism was affected by the impact of Covid but also by the critical labour shortages right across the piece. Those shortages in tourism itself and

right through our food and drink businesses have also meant that those sectors have really struggled and are continuing to struggle. Those shortages are because of losing the free movement of people and the additional barriers to businesses in trading with the EU, which have made it a lot more difficult because of the added layers of bureaucracy and the extra costs that businesses have to incur. All of that has undoubtedly had a huge impact across the food and drink industries, of which there are a lot in our rural and island communities.

Karen Adam: We were also discussing housing. How does Brexit impact housing? For example, has the cost of materials and sourcing them affected house building?

Mairi Gougeon: We have seen escalating costs for a while, and that is getting worse rather than better. It has had a disproportionate effect on our island communities because there are extra costs for transport to get the materials to islands before projects can even begin. That means that our islands already have an extra financial burden that areas on the mainland do not, so increased costs are a problem.

The Deputy Convener: Rachael Hamilton has a brief supplementary question, and then I will bring in Ariane Burgess.

Rachael Hamilton: Obviously, tourism, fisheries and agriculture are very important, and it is important that islanders can get things on and off the islands—including people and goods. Why does the islands plan not mention ferries, considering that they are integral to that part of the economy?

Mairi Gougeon: There is a transport section in the annual report, and within that are the objectives and commitments that we have made in relation to ferries.

You are absolutely right that connectivity is vital in getting goods and services to islands, as well as for people to access healthcare appointments and live their day-to-day lives. There are issues in relation to that and there are a number of pieces of work that are on-going. I talked about the strategic transport projects review and the consultation that has been under way. There is also the islands connectivity plan. We aim to have the draft of that plan available for consultation towards the end of this year. It will be the replacement for the ferries plan and will consider the issues you mentioned.

Rachael Hamilton: I met a group from Shetland who said that the STPR does not include a plan for the replacement of ferries for their ageing fleet. It is important to recognise that all of the interconnected policy aims are, perhaps, not connecting.

Mairi Gougeon: Absolutely. That point was raised by the convener and we said that we would follow up on it with transport colleagues.

Ariane Burgess: Professor Sindico began to speak about this topic. The Scottish Parliament information centre briefing talks about the impact of our EU exit, but one large impact that is not mentioned is the loss of horizon funding and capital expenditures infrastructure funding, which has transformed marine infrastructure on islands. What will the Scottish Government do to ensure parity of funding for islands from any new Scottish or UK funding streams?

Mairi Gougeon: On parity of funding, we expected and hoped for the full replacement of EU funds that have been lost as a result of our no longer being a member of the EU, but we have not seen that fully implemented so far.

Of course, we continue to use our resources as best we can. I have raised this example with the committee before, but our marine fund Scotland provides £14 million of funding when we should have received around £62 million. With full replacement of those funds, we would be able to do a lot more than we are able to do at the moment.

Alasdair Allan: One issue of interest to me is workforce dispersal, and I know that the Government has raised that issue. Obviously, as has been observed, the world has changed in terms of people's practices around where they work. What can the Scottish Government do to give individuals the choice to work in an island setting? I am thinking particularly of those who work in public agencies or the public sector.

Mairi Gougeon: It is really important that we lead by example in that regard, too. The islands team is probably the perfect example of doing that. Since it was established, in 2019, it has operated using remote and hybrid working. Members of the islands team live on our islands, which I think is important. Maybe one of the team will want to jump in on that point.

We are also setting up a working group to look at workforce dispersal, because it is really important that we support people to live and work in our remote, rural and island communities. We have also seen that approach being taken by the Crofting Commission, which has made specific development positions available on our islands. We have our network of rural payments and inspections division offices, too. We are certainly keen to encourage workforce dispersal, and to encourage hybrid working.

Alasdair Allan: Obviously, not everyone wants to work all week from home. For hybrid working to make sense in an island setting, is part of the solution to establish or find places where people

can hot-desk during at least part of the week, so that they are not stuck in the house all week? How do we make sure that there are the facilities in island areas to do that? What work can we do with others to achieve that?

Mairi Gougeon: That is a really important point and something that we need to consider. Especially now that more people are working from home, we want to encourage people to embrace hybrid working as well.

I do not know whether there is a specific strand of work on-going in relation to that at the moment. Erica Clarkson can come in on that.

Erica Clarkson: I take advantage of the hybrid working options. I live and work in Orkney. I work some of the time in the RPID office in Kirkwall and the rest of the time in my office-shed in my garden—I am very lucky to be able to do that. On other occasions, as needed, I travel further afield. That works very well.

On the islands team, we are, without exception, either islanders—including islanders born who might have left—or island experts. We are very careful to make sure that we are able to put that lived experience into the work that we do.

Through the islands bond work, we are looking at options for hubs for other sectors that will make it possible to bring people together under one roof so that they can work in a hybrid way and not work from home all the time. We are looking very closely at that.

The Deputy Convener: Alasdair Allan made a good point about workforce dispersal. If people are going to be working at home more, they also need digital connectivity. I have always said that there can be work from the outside coming in, but far too many remote areas still do not have the connectivity that they need to allow everybody to have the opportunity of hybrid working, if that is the option.

Mairi Gougeon: Do you want me to touch on the issue of digital connectivity now? I completely agree with your point, convener. We have to have that infrastructure and ensure that there is that capability if we want people to live and work in these areas and to embrace hybrid working, too.

That was outlined through the reaching 100 per cent programme—the R100 project—and the extra investment that we put into it to try to develop and strengthen the digital infrastructure that we have. We have also committed to a project to lay 16 subsea cables to improve connectivity. I believe that those are due to be in place and delivered this year, which will obviously help.

We have also been involved with work on 5G, and there is the 4G infill programme as well, in which we have been installing more mobile

infrastructure through nearly £30 million of investment in 55 not-spot areas. More than half of those masts are already in place and delivered. We understand that improvements need to be made and we are working hard to deliver them.

The Deputy Convener: That gives me the opportunity to highlight a situation in Whalsay in Shetland. A subsea cable is going there, but not everyone on the island will be connected. I have taken that up separately, but it is an issue that demonstrates that not everybody is being reached as anticipated.

11:00

Alasdair Allan: I have a brief question on that point. Clearly, there is much more still to be done, cabinet secretary. However, given the work that you have described and the fact that broadband, or rather the internet, is reserved, will you give an indication of roughly the balance of support that has come from the UK and Scottish Governments towards achieving those things?

Mairi Gougeon: I would be happy to come back to the committee with the figures on the funding that we have provided. Dr Allan is absolutely right that those are reserved areas, and we have had to spend over and above to ensure that we are delivering as best we can in reaching not-spot areas and improving digital connectivity—without that extra investment, that would not have been seen as a priority and it would not have been rolled out to the extent that it has been. I would be happy to come back to the committee with figures on that.

Mercedes Villalba (North East Scotland) (Lab): The annual report mentions plans for a working group to be formed, initially looking at the Scottish Government workforce. There is also the question of whether some civil service jobs could be undertaken across any area of Scotland. Will you give us a bit of information about how the working group will be set up and who you envisage having a seat on it?

Mairi Gougeon: I will have to turn to officials on that. I am not sure exactly what stage that work is at.

Erica Clarkson: I believe that we are working with our population colleagues on establishing that group as part of the action plan that the cabinet secretary referenced earlier. We would certainly like to involve island voices in that, including members from our young islanders network, so that we can really capture from them what they need us to address.

Mercedes Villalba: Given that it will be looking specifically at civil service jobs, will there be an

invitation to relevant trade unions—for instance, PCS Scotland—to sit on that working group?

Erica Clarkson: I will certainly take that question away and put it to my population colleagues who are helping us with that work.

Emma Harper: I will pick on the digital questions that colleagues have asked. I read on the Scottish Government's website that the programme is implementing £600 million to support the R100 roll-out. We have already talked about hot-desking and hub models, and I know that those models are already part of what is happening not only on the islands but in other remote and rural areas such as Dumfries and Galloway.

Are you confident that the digital infrastructure that we need will support people to work from home or hub, whether they work that way part time or completely, as has been described? How confident are you that we will have roll-out for the islands for better connectivity digitally?

Mairi Gougeon: We are certainly planning for that to be the case. Obviously, technology is changing all the time and it is really important that whatever infrastructure we put in place is, in essence, future proofed and can deal with any changes or upgrades that there may be in the future. It is important that we made that extra investment to ensure that we reach as many areas as we possibly can. That is where that extra investment has been absolutely critical.

Emma Harper: I have a final wee supplementary point. Part of that is about working with other stakeholders, such as local authorities, as you have highlighted. I am also reading about HebNet CIC, which is a superfast broadband provider for the small islands of Canna, Rum, Eigg and Muck. Obviously, the Scottish Government will need to work and engage with other stakeholders in order to implement the roll-out.

Mairi Gougeon: Emma Harper is absolutely right. In previous responses, we have touched on collaboration being critical in many policy areas, to many of the objectives that we are looking to implement and to our commitments. Working with our local authority partners, different operators and industry is really important.

Jenni Minto: I want to move on to the issue of carbon neutral islands. My colleague Dr Allan mentioned the differences in transmission charges. The other side of that is that our islands are brilliantly situated to contribute to the blue economy and renewable energy, whether we are talking about tidal power, community wind turbines, small hydro power schemes, the community heating network scheme in Iona or the big W1 project off Islay and Tiree. I would like some information on how the Scottish Government

is working and what it is doing to ensure that islands are supported in their drive to carbon neutrality.

Mairi Gougeon: I will start on that question, although I know that Francesco Sindico has been desperate to talk about the carbon neutral islands project, which he has been working on in some detail, and I would not want for a moment to steal his thunder.

The initiative is really exciting. Initially, we had committed to working with three islands to reach carbon neutrality by 2040, but we have increased the number to six islands. I emphasise that, even though the focus is on six islands, we want to ensure that all islands benefit.

The initiative is exciting because our islands are at the forefront of innovation. With all the work that is happening in renewables throughout our islands, we really want to capitalise on the opportunities that exist and to work closely with islands in reaching carbon neutrality.

An external working group looked to identify the different criteria for which islands we should work with. It is important that we get a mix. Some islands will be quite advanced in the journey in the work that they are undertaking, whereas some will potentially have a bit further to go.

I will hand over to Francesco Sindico to provide a bit more detail.

Professor Sindico: I will make a few points. I interpret the question beyond the carbon neutral islands project. We have incredible and abundant natural resources and the issue is how we can harness them to deal with the climate emergency.

The key driver and principle of the carbon neutral islands project, which is a programme for government commitment, is alignment with—there will be no duplication—what is already happening. Although we have to learn from other countries, we have a lot to share. A lot of good things have happened. The climate emergency is urgent and we cannot rest on our laurels. We have to do things. We have to take action, and there should be no duplication.

The second driver and principle is that things must be done in a fair and just way. Getting to net zero can be seen as an expensive burden. We need to find the right mix of policies from Government so that the approach works for all and leaves no one behind. The third driver and principle is that the approach must benefit all islands and not just the six that will receive more direct support.

On resources—the wind energy, the turbines and so on—I go back to a previous question, which I did not have time to answer but which is very important. Listening is fine but, if there is an

emergency, we have to stop listening at some point and take action. I will explain how we are planning to do that in the context of the project.

Once the six islands are announced, the first thing to do will be to work very closely with everybody in the communities and all island-related stakeholders—businesses, the communities, policy makers, the local authorities and so on. Together with island-based organisations—partners that are embedded on the islands—we will develop community-informed climate plans. However, we cannot have a plan if we do not know what the emissions picture is or what is happening with the emissions on Jura, Islay, Colonsay or wherever. That requires technical expertise in some cases; in other cases, the community might have that technical expertise, or there can be training so that the community can take that on. That should not be a one-off. If we make a climate plan or do climate accounting in 2022 but then forget about it until 2040, we are not taking it seriously. Things must be done progressively and continuously, which requires time and resources.

Once we have a plan, which will be informed by climate accounting, we will work with the community and other stakeholders to create a climate investment strategy. That is another point at which working with other areas of Government and stakeholders will be crucial. That is where the action starts. However, action requires funding, and that cannot be only public funding.

Public funding is one of three streams that we are thinking about. Net zero cannot be achieved anywhere in the world with only public funding; no country or island in the world can do that. The example of Colonsay in promoting a public-private partnership, which is the second stream, is therefore relevant. There are plenty of examples in Europe of public-private partnerships in transport, energy and housing. Those things do not just happen; you have to nurture them and learn from good practice elsewhere.

The third funding stream is private investment. We have mentioned innovation on the islands. Innovation is not only about harnessing renewables; it is about doing that in a way that drives profit back into the community. Community renewables are a clear example of that, where there is already a landscape of initiatives and climate hubs are emerging. The carbon neutral islands project will bring those together to provide a platform for island communities.

Jenni Minto: That is very helpful.

When I was on Islay at the weekend, I visited the Bowmore distillery. I spent a couple of hours with the distillery manager, who told me about the increasing time that he spends on greening the

process. The distillery has looked at transportation, water usage and power consumption, and it is trying to improve the heating in the adjacent swimming pool. There are lots of projects going on. I know that other distilleries on the island are also following plans. Whisky is a really important industry for Scotland and contributes billions of pounds to the UK Treasury. What engagement has the Scottish Government had with the UK Government to ensure that places such as Islay get appropriate investment to support the important and immediate work that is needed to reduce carbon footprints?

Mairi Gougeon: Francesco Sindico spoke about the importance of partnerships. You are absolutely right that a lot of exciting work is happening on Islay. Those critical industries, which are looking at their sustainability and the impact that that has right through the supply chain, are taking a positive lead. It is critical that we work with them so that we do not duplicate anything that is already happening but do support their work.

Professor Sindico: I know that members are aware of the growth deals that are in place. We often talk about the islands growth deal, but there is an Argyll and Bute growth deal, which also focuses on Islay and is co-financed by the Scottish and UK Governments.

You mentioned a swimming pool. That is an example of a co-benefit. We want to deal with the climate emergency for the sake of the climate but not only because of the climate. Net zero, if done well, will provide energy and the means to tackle fuel poverty, which is what we were discussing earlier. It will provide community benefits that will make a net zero island more attractive, which brings us back to the idea of the population.

Rachael Hamilton: Will the six carbon neutral islands be announced soon? Will that happen in six months, a year or two years?

Mairi Gougeon: I will not be making any announcements today, and you will understand why the Government has not made any announcements in the past few weeks, during the run-up to the local elections. The announcement will be made soon.

11:15

Edward Mountain (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I remember the Islands (Scotland) Bill coming through the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee at stages 1 and 2 and through Parliament at stage 3. One of the questions that was raised was whether island impact assessments would be worth while and carried out properly or whether those would simply be a tick-box exercise.

Professor Sindico said that there are multifaceted reasons for population decline, but I suggest that connectivity, health, education and quality of life keep people in the islands. Let us start with health. Mental health issues can be a real problem in rural areas. Islands do not necessarily have mental health experts so they have to be brought in and they do not always make it because the ferries are not available or there is bad weather. How many island impact assessments have been carried out in relation to changes in health provision on the islands in the past year?

Mairi Gougeon: I do not have figures on that. I do not know whether the team would be able to answer that question, but I would be happy to come back to the committee with more information.

Edward Mountain: We know from when we went to Shetland—it was possibly Orkney—that the mental health professionals are supposed to travel up on a Tuesday, but that does not always happen and sometimes there are delays of two or three weeks. That is a serious issue. I am not aware of the health boards having carried out impact assessments of the failure to provide healthcare. It would be helpful to have that information.

My next question is a little more parochial. Raasay, for example, relies on the good will of CalMac Ferries to deliver parcels: they are dropped off at the terminal when the ferry comes over. CalMac is stopping that service because it says that it costs £250,000 a year to run. I am not sure where that figure came from—a man or lady in a white van would not cost £250,000 to run such a service. Getting Amazon parcels or shopping delivered to Raasay is a real problem, although that happens on other islands. CalMac has been very iffy about the issue. I have looked at the CalMac impact assessment and it realises my greatest fear: it is a tick-box exercise that cannot be justified. Are you convinced more generally that island impact assessments for changes in services are being done properly? If you are unable to give an answer now, could you look at a few assessments and respond to the committee to confirm whether they are being done properly? I fear that they are not.

Mairi Gougeon: We do not want island community impact assessments to be tick-box exercises, because that would defeat their purpose. If there are any particular examples that you are aware of in addition to the one that you have mentioned, please raise them with me in writing. I would be happy to look at them in more detail.

I do not have the detail of that particular community impact assessment before me, so I am

not able to give a view on that today, but I would be happy to follow it up for the committee. There is an option available for the local authority to ask for a review of an island community impact assessment.

Edward Mountain: Thank you. I believe that those impact assessments would demonstrate that they are becoming tick-box exercises. I believe that it is a failure of the legislation to ensure that they are being done properly. In the future, I would like the annual report to include confirmation from the cabinet secretary that island impact assessments are being carried out and implemented in the spirit of the legislation that introduced them.

Mercedes Villalba: I have a couple of questions about strategic objective 3 of the national islands plan on improving transport services. The Scottish Government has committed to engaging with local authorities and island communities

“in developing regulations and guidance for the bus services provisions”

under the Transport (Scotland) Act 2019. As the cabinet secretary will be well aware, the act gives local authorities powers to bring buses into municipal ownership. Given the geographical challenges on the islands and issues around passenger demand, what additional support does the Scottish Government plan to provide to local authorities to deliver publicly run bus services, should they wish to do that?

Mairi Gougeon: I know that the bus provisions had been delayed because of the pandemic and because of on-going work with Brexit. We are due to engage with local authorities and with communities on that, too. I would be happy to take away that issue to look, in particular, at what more support we can provide.

Mercedes Villalba: Okay. Thank you very much. Will the connectivity plan be published by the end of this year?

Mairi Gougeon: Yes, the intention is that the draft plan will be published by the end of this year and available for consultation at that point.

Mercedes Villalba: Are you able to give a commitment that ferry services will remain in public ownership as part of that connectivity plan?

Mairi Gougeon: As a Government, we have already given that commitment. I am happy to provide that assurance again today.

Mercedes Villalba: Brilliant. Thank you very much.

I have a question on strategic objective 4, on housing. What recent assessment has the Scottish Government made of private rent levels on the

islands? Are the levels higher or lower than the national average?

Mairi Gougeon: Finding affordable housing is increasingly an issue for people who live in our island communities. I do not know whether the officials who are here today have any further information on that, but, again, I would be happy to raise the topic with my Cabinet colleagues and get back to the member and the committee with further information and more detail. I do not have the figures in front of me.

Erica Clarkson: We do not have those figures, but Nicola Crook and I can work together on the next iteration of the islands survey to make sure that we include some work on that, in collaboration with our housing colleagues, and report back.

Mercedes Villalba: Related to that, what work has there been to explore whether a rent freeze for social and council tenants could be implemented on the islands? I do not know whether the Scottish Government has spoken to relevant local authorities about that.

Mairi Gougeon: The islands team will not have done that. I would have to check with housing colleagues about whether they have undertaken such a piece of work.

Mercedes Villalba: Have you looked at all at how a rent freeze might benefit private tenants on islands?

Mairi Gougeon: Again, I would have to check that with housing policy officials.

Mercedes Villalba: Okay. Thank you very much.

The Deputy Convener: We have a question from Emma Harper. Just for the record, she is no longer acting as a substitute member, as Jim Fairlie has returned to the meeting.

Emma’s screen appears to have frozen. We will move on to a question from Karen Adam. If we can come back to Emma, we will.

Karen Adam: Cabinet secretary, will you unpack the nature of the projects in the roll-out of the £30 million islands programme and touch on the partnership work that is under way? Specifically, how will the Scottish Futures Trust support the Scottish Government in the delivery of the programme?

Mairi Gougeon: We committed to investment worth £30 million over five years to support the islands programme. We delivered the first part of that—about £9.5 million of investment—last year, and the programme worked over three different strands: the infrastructure investment fund; the communities fund, which communities could bid into for grants of up to £150,000; and the healthy islands fund, which involved just over £1 million of

funding for projects that would help to support the health and wellbeing of people on our islands.

We have taken some of the learning from that and have listened to our local authority colleagues in shaping what the programme will look like this year. I was at the committee for the budget session at the start of this year, when we announced £4 million of funding for the programme. This year, it will be different; it will be done on the basis of competitive bids to the fund. That is based on the feedback that we received.

As for projects, I have already talked a bit about the work done in Kerrera and the impact that we have seen there. We have also committed infrastructure fund money to the Fair Isle Bird Observatory, and the rest of the funding available as part of that was allocated to the different island authorities.

The officials might want to come in and talk about some of the other projects that have fed through the different strands of the fund.

Nicola Crook (Scottish Government): As the cabinet secretary has said, numerous projects came through last year. It might also be useful if I note that, on 21 March, we launched this year's fund, which will be run as a competitive process.

We felt that the process last year was very successful; there were numerous community projects, with proposals for the healthy islands fund and the island communities fund very much focused at the community level. Moving forward, we hope still to be able to work with our local authorities as the lead applicants while also taking bids from communities.

The Scottish Futures Trust has come in with its expertise to manage for us not only the fund but our relationship with the local authorities. It is also ensuring that we can leverage funding from other areas of Government that it has expertise in, to get best value for both the money that we have and the money that we can source from other areas.

Karen Adam: Will the annual report provide a guide for future fiscal decisions?

Mairi Gougeon: It is really important that we learn from previous rounds of funding as well as consider what is in the annual report, but it will feed into how we shape funds in the future.

Nicola Crook: It might be useful to note that we are running all this by our national islands plan delivery group and our islands strategic group so that they can support us in any funding decisions that we make.

The Deputy Convener: I think that we have Emma Harper back, so we will take a question from her.

Emma Harper: Apologies, convener—my internet dropped there.

I want to ask about the impact of Covid on meeting the 13 strategic objectives. We cannot just forget two and a half years of the pandemic and the impact that it has probably had on everybody's lives. Going back to Edward Mountain's point about mental health professionals, I know from evidence taken by the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee that digital connectivity supported engagement with mental health services, although we cannot forget the importance of face-to-face appointments, too. How has Covid-19 impacted on island communities and the progress towards meeting the plan's 13 strategic objectives?

Mairi Gougeon: Undoubtedly, it has had an impact, with resource having to pivot completely to try to deal with the pandemic as well as EU exit. Despite that, though, and as you will see from the annual report, some actions have been completed, and I would say that we have made good progress right across the piece with the strategic objectives. Although some pieces of work had to be put on hold or delayed because of the pandemic, we have managed to make really good progress in all the different areas.

Coming back to the earlier point about healthcare, I think that, through the pandemic, we have seen such innovations being rolled out, as we have in a lot of other areas. The NHS Near Me service, which has now been rolled out across all health board areas, has been a particular success. There have been other developments in healthcare—I am thinking of, for example, the test of change pilot for diabetes that has been rolled out. I think that we have been fairly successful in working towards the objectives, despite the undoubted impact of the pandemic.

Emma Harper: Does the plan need to be slightly revised or renewed to acknowledge the Covid pandemic? After all, as you said in your opening statement, it was launched 12 weeks before the pandemic. Does the plan need to be tweaked at all to make people aware that, although there has been an impact, progress has been made in certain areas?

Mairi Gougeon: That is why the plan's implementation and the monitoring of that are important. In an earlier response, I touched on the route map that we will be setting out to detail the actions that we will be taking on each of the commitments. That will be published shortly.

We have talked about the islands strategic forum, and there is also the national islands plan delivery group, which will continue to monitor things and ensure that we are dealing with the challenges being experienced by our island

communities. By continuing that collaboration and getting that feedback, I think that what we have set out in the plan and the actions that we will be taking will remain relevant. After all, the route map will be a living document that will have to change. Indeed, as we are seeing every day with the cost of living situation and fuel poverty, different challenges can be thrown at us at the last minute, and it is important that we have a plan that can adapt and adjust to things as necessary.

I think that Nicola Crook would like to come in.

11:30

Nicola Crook: Thank you for the question. I just wanted to point out that, in 2020, we undertook a national islands plan through a Covid lens survey in which we asked our local authorities to identify any key strategic objectives that they thought were particularly relevant in the light of Covid, and we were quite reassured that the plan was still relevant at that time.

The Deputy Convener: I am conscious that we have reached the end of our allocated time, but Jim Fairlie has a question that he would like to put to you.

Jim Fairlie: I must apologise—I feel as though I am gatecrashing my own party by going out and coming in again.

I have a technical question for Professor Sindico. Alasdair Allan has alluded to the charges for getting island communities connected to the grid and the fact that connection costs more for an island than it does on the mainland or, indeed, down south. Given the renewable capabilities of island communities, is there an opportunity to do what they have done on Eigg and create community energy systems that do not require permission from anyone else to connect to the grid and that will therefore allow the islands to take advantage of their own natural resources without their being constrained?

Professor Sindico: Such an opportunity is definitely out there, especially for the so-called off-grid islands. You mentioned Eigg, but there are also the likes of Foula and Fair Isle. Indeed, there are a number of islands, especially the smaller ones, that are already taking that opportunity or are looking very closely at it, particularly with the support of the community and renewable energy scheme—CARES. With slightly bigger islands, however, the technology required will probably get there quite soon, but again it is a question of governance, the Ofgem situation and so forth.

I will perhaps leave it at that, but I am happy to take your question back to our Government colleagues who deal with the regulatory side of these energy issues. In short, though, the

opportunity is definitely there, and some communities are looking very closely at the examples of Eigg and so forth, but it is a bit like the situation with the Faroe Islands in that the landscape is complex.

Jim Fairlie: I have what I promise is a very brief question for Professor Sindico. We have wind, tidal and all these other sources of renewable energy, but can energy from waste, too, play a role in reaching net zero in future?

Professor Sindico: Everything counts, by which I mean that biomass, the circular economy and energy from waste all need to be looked at. One of the activities in the carbon neutral islands project has been a scoping exercise with regard to projects elsewhere. I promise that we look not only at the Faroe Islands, but, in a very interesting project there that involved a public-private partnership, waste from the salmon industry provided energy and heat to a certain number of houses in the capital, Tórshavn. There is definitely scope in that respect.

The Deputy Convener: I thank the cabinet secretary and officials for joining us this morning and for the helpful advice that they have provided, and I suspend the meeting to allow our witnesses to leave.

11:34

Meeting suspended.

11:38

On resuming—

European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018

Official Controls (Transitional Staging Period) (Miscellaneous Amendments) (Scotland) Regulations 2022 (SSI 2022/90)

The Deputy Convener: Our third item is consideration of the Official Controls (Transitional Staging Period) (Miscellaneous Amendments) (Scotland) Regulations 2022 (SSI 2022/90). The instrument has been made using powers under the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018.

The process for consideration of instruments that are laid under the 2018 act consists of two parts. First, the committee must agree whether it is content that the parliamentary procedure that has been designated to the instrument by the Scottish Government is appropriate. I refer members to paper 3, which starts on page 14 of the briefing pack.

The Scottish Government has designated the negative procedure for this Scottish statutory instrument. Are members content that the negative parliamentary procedure that has been designated to the instrument by the Scottish Government is appropriate? I ask members to raise their hand or to type R in the chat box if participating remotely.

Members *indicated agreement.*

11:39

The Deputy Convener: We turn to the policy of the instrument. If members have any comments on the instrument, they should raise their hand or type R in the chat box if participating remotely.

Members will have seen the proposal that is set out on page 17 of the members' pack. Are members content to write to the Scottish Government to ask why it considers it necessary to introduce this exemption, which, unless the transitional staging period is extended for a fourth time, would be in place for only approximately six weeks, between 12 May and 30 June 2022, and for an update regarding the transitional staging period beyond 30 June 2022?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Rachael Hamilton: I am content with that, but can we ask the Government what the impact of the exemption is? We are asking why the Scottish Government considers it necessary to introduce the exemption, but what would the impact be if the exemption did not exist?

The Deputy Convener: Yes, we can do that.

Rachael Hamilton: Thank you.

The Deputy Convener: There are no further comments, so that concludes our business in public.

11:41

Meeting continued in private until 11:55.

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