Island Connections
Event Report

Thursday 20 October 2016
Seil Island Community Hall, Ellenabeich, Isle of Seil
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Introduction

On the 20 October 2016, Argyll and Bute Council hosted Island Connections, an event aiming to bring our island communities together, to identify shared issues and to share best practice.

This report provides a summary of the presentations made and discussions held. The views expressed represent those of the participants rather than Argyll and Bute Council. It provides a resource to inform current and future conversations between all stakeholders about island issues in Argyll.

The majority of delegates were drawn from the Argyll and Bute local authority area although, as the Scottish Islands Federation AGM occurred after Island Connections, attendees also came from North Ayrshire and The Highland Council areas. The event brought together approximately 70 delegates and speakers from:
- Community Councils, Development Trusts and other community organisations
- Community / third sector support agencies
- Argyll and Bute Councillors and staff, The Scottish Government, Argyll and Bute Health and Social Care Partnership, Scottish Ambulance Service, Scottish Futures Trust and Highlands and Islands Enterprise.

The presentations given are available at www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/island-connections.

Structure of the Seminar

The day was facilitated by Campbell Cameron of Making It Happen. Campbell introduced the speakers, summarised issues raised and facilitated questions and feedback from the floor.

The event aimed to cover issues which had been highlighted as most significant by our island communities:
- Introduction
- Health care for island communities
- Supporting economic growth
- Transport and island infrastructure
- Sustainable island homes
- Digital islands

Each of the topic sessions was introduced with a series of presentations and was covered in a workshop session at the end of the day. Key observations and issues raised during the sessions are outlined below.
Introduction

Councillor Len Scoullar, Provost of Argyll and Bute, welcomed attendees to the event.

Campbell Cameron gave an overview of the Argyll islands including the important issue of depopulation.

Darren Dickson from the Scottish Government’s Islands Policy Team then provided an overview of their work including the new Islands Strategic Group, of which Argyll and Bute Council are part, and the forthcoming Islands Bill which will be introduced to parliament in Spring 2017 and will cover all 93 inhabited Scottish islands.

Questions after this session covered the following issues:

- The Islands Bill will be separate legislation to the boundary review.
- The response to the 2015 consultation was fairly low; the Islands Minister will look to get additional feedback by visiting communities and through discussions with local authorities.
- The Islands Bill will not affect other legislation e.g. Local Government Bill but should strengthen island awareness.
- The Islands Bill is not expected to impact community councils.
- The high cost of delivering services and facilities – with a specific reference to affordable housing – was noted and it was hoped that island proofing would help to raise awareness of this.
Health care for island communities

Stephen Whiston, Head of Strategic Planning and Performance at the Argyll and Bute Health and Social Care Partnership gave an overview of the service including an indication of proposed changes to how future services are delivered; this includes a single point of contact, more use of technology and continuing local hospital and GP services. He highlighted that generally the health of the population is improving and that a key focus is preventing health problems. Issues with recruitment were also highlighted, Argyll and Bute needs to be a location which offers a challenging and rewarding career for staff.

Andy Brady, Area Service Manager with the Scottish Ambulance Service, gave an overview of the Scottish Ambulance Service and highlighted the resources available within Argyll and Bute and to the island communities. He highlighted the challenges of meeting an increasing demand with more centralisation of services and increased inter-hospital transfers.

Grace MacLeod from the Argyll and the Isles Coast and Countryside Trust reported on the Branching Out programme which aims to support positive mental health through outdoor activities such as walking, cycling, outdoor conservation, bush craft and arts and crafts. She outlined the requirements for the course to run in any new location.

Transport and island infrastructure

Brian Gordon and Paul Flynn from the Scottish Government Ferries Unit outlined the support provided to ferry services including subsidies to the Clyde and Hebrides Ferry Services operated by CalMac, the Gourock-Dunoon Ferry Service operated by Argyll Ferries and the Kerrera Ferry Service operated by Kerrera Ferry Ltd. The
procurement of the Gourock-Dunoon Ferry Service is currently underway and they are working to deliver a longer term mechanism to support Kerrera. Discussions are ongoing in relation to the Council operated ferry services. They also spoke about the Ferries Plan which sets out future ferry services until 2022 and is informed by a needs based assessment of each community.

Terry Heggarty from the Ross of Mull and Iona Community Transport Scheme then spoke about their community transport scheme which provides low cost transport for residents of the South West Mull and Iona area. As well as being used by local organisations, around a third of trips relate to medical appointments. In 2015-16, 317 trips were made with 767 passengers.

Supporting economic growth

Fergus Murray, Head of Economic Development and Strategic Transportation at Argyll and Bute Council, outlined the opportunities which support economic growth on our islands including their culture and heritage, opportunities to provide world class food and drink and their people. He also highlighted the updated Economic Development Action Plan and activities by Argyll and Bute Council to grow key business sectors and address barriers to economic growth.

Paul Duffy then talked about the work that the Bute Island Alliance has been undertaken to deliver regeneration, ultimately supporting economic growth and a growing island population. He spoke about the communities concerns regarding population loss and the action they have planned and undertaken including Remaking Rothesay, a community charrette which helped to identify the aspirations of the community and guidelines to be followed in achieving this.

Sustainable island homes

Councillor Robin Currie, Policy Lead for Strategic Housing, Gaelic, Community and Culture at Argyll and Bute Council, spoke about the Council’s activities in relation to housing. He confirmed that over the next five years 122 new affordable homes are planned on Argyll’s islands (22% of the Argyll and Bute new affordable homes). He also outlined the Strategic Housing Investment Plan (SHIP) which identifies investment priorities.
Affordable housing planned for Argyll’s islands

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Moray Finch, General Manager of the Mull and Iona Community Trust, then provided an overview of the Ulva Ferry Housing Project which is developing two new homes in Ulva Ferry to support local community growth. He also talked about the Trust’s work with the Assisting Communities to Connect to Electric Sustainable Sources (ACCESS) project which is helping to link locally generated renewable power with local demand in homes and businesses.

Shiona Ruhemann from Iona Renewables Group picked up the link to renewables to talk about the work that the group are doing try to match the island’s energy demand with energy generation on Iona. They hope to move towards achieving this with on island generation and energy efficiency measures including a district heating system.

Digital Islands

Stuart Robertson, Director of Digital at Highlands and Islands Enterprise, gave an outline of progress being made in relation to the rollout of fibre broadband across Argyll and Bute, 85% coverage is expected by the end of 2017. Coverage in 2016/17 is planned for Mull, Seil, Islay, Coll, Jura, Bute and Tiree. The Gigha Plus Argyll and Kyles of Bute community projects are also proposing coverage to a number of islands but no coverage is expect on Gigha or Kerrera. HIE are also supporting the major planned expansion of 4G phone networks, improved coverage is expected by the end of 2017.

Derek Graham and Rod MacFarlane, Scottish Futures Trust, then provided an overview of the community owned mobile mast they facilitated on the Isle of Coll. The mast has been operating for around 2 years and provides 2G-4G Vodafone coverage, in future it is planned to host O2, EE and BT services.
Unfortunately Ann MacDonald and Mark Vale did not speak about Tiree Broadband due to time constraints however their slides are available and detail the work of the group. 140 subscribers (31% of Tiree households) receive broadband through the Wi-Fi service which is operated on a commercial basis. It enables online services to be operated by residents on Tiree. The service is however not without its challenges including managing customer expectations, dealing with the weather, increased demand at times of high tourist activity and connections into BT’s infrastructure.

**Addressing Island Issues - Workshop Session**

Participants were invited to provide their feedback and thoughts on issues arising throughout the event. During the workshop session a focus on each of the main topics allowed more detailed discussions:

**Health:**
Issues include: inadequate GP coverage – flexibility required, workforce planning – now underway; need for adequate ambulance and patient transport service provision; and differing levels of health problems. Opportunities include: bespoke island first responders training for island groups; to lobby for more funding; procurement to allow island contracts; and identifying island patients – so as not to cancel appointments when patients are already travelling. Questions: How to respond to emergencies?

**Transport:**
Issues include: need for investment in ports and ferries; integration of public transport services; challenge of resources; cost of freight fares; ferry timetables; maintenance of roads – make it easier to report potholes and implement a strategy of repair rather than fill; and need for more charging points for electric vehicles. Opportunities include: improving rail links from Oban-Glasgow; consideration of fixed link to Luing and train based freight. Questions: Why are the four Council ferry services not delivered by Scottish Government?

**Economic Development:**
Issues include: addressing economic challenges; the higher costs of island living; providing suitable road infrastructure; regulation restricts some sales of local produce to other local businesses; and complying with regulation is a particular issue for small businesses. Opportunities include: a wealth of assets to support growth e.g. natural environment, products, people, place; review of freight
charges; bottom up growth; more processing of produce within Argyll and Bute; public sector procurement supporting local businesses; mentoring opportunities – e.g. in farming; and eco and adventure tourism as growing sectors.

Questions: what are our island needs?

Housing:
Issues include: cost of housing; affordable housing provision – availability and suitability of housing; fuel poverty; cost to build – creates a funding gap; second homes or empty home impact stock; statistics mask island issues; and cost of refurbishment of existing houses
Opportunities include: local energy systems; improved energy efficiency; more publicity around Local Development Plan allocation process; housing need to look at all options not just social; Local Development Plan 2 could be more flexible; create serviced plots for self-build; allocate housing based on need; district heating; and capacity building for community organisations.

Questions: What comes first homes or jobs to drive growth? Who could provide serviced plots? Renewables – using on island or exporting? How to deliver affordable housing?

Digital:
Issues include: broadband is essential – online only services and facilities exist; growing digital divide; market failure/not always commercially viable; more fibre cabinets needed; more funding required for broadband; more use of fibre to the premises (FTTP); resilience of service provision; ongoing subsidies; and limited access to information.

Opportunities include: open up BT infrastructure for community broadband; utilising technology when it becomes available; provision of equal distribution of service; and community delivery but support and expertise required.

Other issues:
Education was raised as an issue not covered, links to the University of Highlands and Islands and Argyll College were also highlighted.

Participant Feedback
We asked those attending the event to complete evaluation forms so that we could understand whether the event was useful to them and if so what parts were most useful.

We asked participants to rate different aspects of the event organisation. The feedback was that most aspects were ok or better. Some feedback indicated that the programme came out too late and there was a generally consensus that the agenda was too ambitious with too many presentations. The time slippage is reflected in the
feedback given for organisation on the day and this also impacted the opportunities to network.

We asked participants to rate how useful they found the different sessions from 1 not at all useful to 5 very useful. The Scottish Government update and the session on housing were generally the most useful elements. Comments indicated a desire to have more interactive sessions.

Other suggested topics include education (2), childcare/early years care (1), environment (1), infrastructure (1), young people (1), sustainable energy (1), community ownership (1) and social enterprises encouraging regeneration (1).
94% of respondents felt that the event was useful and 100% agreed that there should be a mechanism to bring Argyll’s island communities together more often. Suggested arrangements for doing this included an annual or biannual event similar to Island Connections but with more workshop sessions, a skype or web based event, quarterly project round up, monthly twitter meeting or island workshops on specific topics.

When asked whether they supported the Argyll Islands Taskforce vision 83% agreed, one respondent commented that it doesn’t include any reference to community or environment.

We also asked participants if there was one thing they would like to see changed on their islands what would it be. The following responses were received.

- **Easdale**: Ferry service secured (service is great at the moment)
- **Luing**: More affordable homes, a rising population with more young people
- **Mull**: No potholes, ABC to facilitate not hinder development
- **Coll**: Cheaper ferry fares inc. freight, more affordable housing
- **Tiree**: Cheaper freight fares, better solutions when ferry issues arise
- **Seil**: Licensed premises must have core operating times

Other comments received included the need to have a more focused agenda; that there had been little emphasis on the impact the development trusts and social enterprises can make; that the Island Taskforce should be visiting island communities and trusts and holding meeting in areas accessible to island communities; and it would be useful to have email contacts for those attending.

**Key learning from Island Connections**

Big island issues:
Action is already underway to help to address many of the issues raised during Island Connections, for example the Joint Health and Social Care Partnership are already looking at more innovative ways to recruit GPs, affordable housing is planned for island communities and discussions are ongoing about the future of the Council operated ferry services. There are however key messages that can be extracted from the discussions at Island Connections.

- Bespoke solutions may be required for our island communities and flexibility will be important in island proofing policies and programmes.
- Innovation will be important in addressing island issues, particularly when faced with growing budget pressures.
- Identifying island based customers and recognising difficulties in accessing some services could help to improve services.
- The cost of living and operating businesses on the islands can be prohibitive; activities which help to reduce these costs would be welcomed.
- There are lots of assets associated with our islands which can support economic growth and a good quality of life.
- There are opportunities for new businesses which expand on or support key sectors such as tourism and food and drink production.
- Statistics don’t tell the full story about island issues – e.g. housing demand.
- Digital connectivity is essential for island communities.
- Strong community organisations can drive growth and deliver jobs, homes, infrastructure and health programmes.