

CoDeL presentation to the Cross Party Group on Rural Policy Scottish Parliament, 29 October 2019

A focus on place-based policy is very appropriate for Scottish islands. The Islands Revival blog (www.islandsrevival.org), a partnership among the James Hutton Institute, SRUC, Community Land Scotland and ourselves at CoDeL, shows that each island is different, each island, or group of islands, is finding its own solutions.

The perspectives in my presentation draw on CoDeL research on young people (up to age 40) on Uist (see www.codel.scot), which triggered the idea for the Islands Revival project. The Islands Revival blog sought to identify green shoots of turnaround in islands, based on the knowledge of local people and island communities that might not be captured in national data.¹

The perspectives from Uist certainly provide a counterpoint to the projections in previous presentations, where the Western Isles face the worst projections of all areas in Scotland. Uist, which is part of Western Isles or Outer Hebrides, comprises 7 inhabited islands from Berneray to Eriskay all connected by causeways, with a population of about 5000.

So what is driving positive population change in Uist in the Outer Hebrides? It is primarily young people in their 20s and 30s returning, settling or staying. Our CoDeL survey, with a large sample of 469 young people (up to age 40) in Uist, showed half are returners or newcomers.

Why are they coming?

- ✦ for the unique way of life on the islands, ... for a sense of belonging
- ✦ to be with family and within a close-knit community,
- ✦ because of the cultural revival taking place in Uist, rooted in Gaelic language
- ✦ for the stunning environment
- ✦ for their sense of identity
- ✦ for the enterprising opportunities on the islands (as one young person commented, “Where else would I have worked for a public agency, then built a windfarm, then built a harbour, and now be managing a major social enterprise, and all so early in my career?”) And 1 in 10 of the young people we surveyed run their own business.

At a gathering of Scottish and Irish islands on Grimsay, North Uist earlier this month over 20 young people led sessions on culture, crofting, tourism, renewable energy and more. Eleven of them presented their businesses, social enterprises and community initiatives (from distilling and tourist businesses to community sports, childcare and befriending, to art and music, to climate change and housing).

¹ “Members of the local community are usually sensitive to changes in the way migration is affecting the population, and often have a sophisticated understanding of the complex factors at play in population change.

“The Islands Revival project is exploring the potential of this local knowledge, by collecting observations of “green shoots” of population turnaround from across the Scottish islands and showcasing them through this blog.”

Blog post from the James Hutton Institute on www.islandsrevival.org for 14 June 2019

This photo on the TV screen shows Erica Clarkson and Don Morrison of the Scottish Government's Island Team meet with Emma, originally from Sweden, who found a job within two weeks of coming to the islands, and is now also running the Scandinavian Bakery. With only 10 minutes to meet each young entrepreneur at the Grimsay gathering, Erica Clarkson commented, "It doesn't feel long enough. I feel like I want to talk to them all day. They're amazing."

This is part of a global trend, from Europe to America to Japan. With connectivity and social media young people no longer need to stay in cities to be connected. Why would they stay in an expensive top-floor flat in Glasgow when they could live in a stunning, safe and nurturing island environment for themselves and their families, and at a fraction of the cost?

And it is not just young people. Highly skilled individuals of different ages are settling in Uist, including architects, the advertising manager for national papers, managers of medical research and medical technology innovation, artists and photographers.

And critically all this is having an impact on the number of children. The returners and newcomers in our survey had 151 children between them. Many of the island nurseries are full. And because many babies are born on the mainland, not all of these children are registered in Uist.

We do not make claims about overall population trends for Uist within what is still an island population with a large proportion of older people. However, there is clear evidence that young people want and do return, settle and stay. Primary school enrolment across the Western Isles has been steady since the last census (1870 in 2011, 1875 last school year) suggesting that the critical demographic of young economically active people is being sustained, and may well be growing.

Uist demonstrates very clearly the lessons from the Islands Revival blog: changing demographics, especially around migration of younger people, community control and ownership, and investment.

Let me end with investment. Island communities have huge potential and many are doing quite well. In the last decade or more community organisations in Uist, in partnership with the public sector, have attracted millions of pounds of investment, and delivered programmes to invest in young people and entrepreneurs, from enterprising workshops through leadership programmes and mentoring to start-up support.

Younger people themselves are investing their own capital in running local businesses. Many of the restaurants, cafes and hotels in Uist have been taken over in recent years, often by younger entrepreneurs giving up careers and homes on the mainland with the confidence to invest in the local island economy.

Public investment in accredited qualifications in school that link to the local economy has helped. And investment in improving connectivity has helped hugely. All this sustained investment is turning around our island communities.

But constant cost-cutting and centralisation, e.g. of health, dental and other services, undermines that potential. Locally available services are critical for the survival of remote and dispersed communities. The more local services that go, the more lights are switched off in remote communities.

We need to move away from managing decline to investing again in the future for our islands. Now is the time to do so, tapping into the global shift in aspirations among younger generations that is benefiting islands and other remote communities like Uist.