



From Grimsay to Galway

25 Smart Islands in Scotland and Ireland shine a light on their island assets and futures

CoDeL Update for December 2019

From Grimsay: Shining a light on island renewal

In Grimsay, North Uist, fifty Scottish and Irish islanders gathered in the first week of October 2019, to focus in particular on the contributions of younger islanders in renewing island life and contributing to sustainable island communities.

For a whole morning (of Wednesday 2nd October), 11 enterprising young islanders, most in their 20s and 30s, told of the often remarkable personal journeys that brought them to Uist, whether returning to their island home from the mainland or as far afield as Kenya, or being inspired to make Uist their new home. And they introduced all the participants to their businesses in Uist as founders of start-up enterprises or social enterprises like the North Uist Distillery, the Scandinavian Bakery, Uist Forest Retreats and an outdoor nursery, developing community sports, reviving a community charity that almost went under, as a climate change artist, or as a young leader seeking to tackle the shortage of appropriate housing that is preventing more people returning or settling.



Throughout the week from September 30th to October 4th hosted by local organisation CoDeL (Community Development Lens) and the Scottish Islands Federation, more than 10 other young islanders led sessions on topics such as culture and identity, crofting, tourism, and developing island skills. They included young crofters and musicians, managers and development officers at social enterprises, arts, tourism and Gaelic development officers, and the founder of the Coral Box, Winner of this year's Entrepreneur of the Year at the Young Women in Tourism Awards. And young traditional musicians on Uist, both Uibhistich and UHI students, entertained the visitors at a welcome ceilidh on Grimsay.

Jonny Ingledew of the North Uist Distillery spoke about “so many opportunities on the islands and so much community support”, Kathryn Johnson of Uist Forest Retreats of “being out in the wild, seeing the eagles”. “My sloinneadh tells me both who and where I belong”, explained Gemma MacKinnon, Manager of Caraidean Uibhist and founder of St. Jerome's Children's Home in Kenya, “home is home”.

“Within two weeks of arriving in Uist I had a job”, said Emma Axelsson from Sweden, and “now I have set up the Scandinavian Bakery, which I wouldn't have done anywhere else”. “Where else would I have worked for a public agency, built a windfarm, built a harbour, and now be managing a major social enterprise, and all so early in my career?” asked Kirsty MacCormick, Manager of Cothrom.

The Grimsay island gathering brought together Uibhistich with members of the Scottish and Irish island federations representing 20 Scottish and Irish islands and launched the Smart Islands project, which is part-financed by the Scottish Government and the European Community Outer Hebrides Leader 2014-2020 Programme as well as four Irish LAGs. With additional funding from the Community Learning Exchange and the Scottish Islands Federation, the gathering came at a critical point for island development.

The whole of the Scottish Government's Islands Team joined the gathering on Grimsay midweek as the draft National Islands Plan was laid before the Scottish Parliament on the 3rd of October



2019. Key discussions included reviewing the extensive island consultations for the Plan, the implementation of the Plan, measuring its impact, how it can enable the best support for Scottish islands, and what the Irish participants might learn from this dynamic process.

And the gathering gave additional support and insight into the recent Islands Revival Declaration, released by the James Hutton Institute, SRUC, CoDeL and Community Land Scotland, which opened with the statement “that there is credible evidence of 'green shoots' of population turnaround in the Scottish islands, which as yet does not show up in official statistics.” (For the full declaration, see <https://islandsrevival.org/> and <http://codel.scot/>).

The Declaration emerged from the Islands Revival blog (which was first triggered by the research on young Uibhistich that CoDeL had conducted) and points to “multiple factors driving and facilitating positive population trends in some island areas. These include... local control of territorial assets (land and marine), accompanied by good governance and leadership.’ It was appropriate, therefore, that issues in the spot-light were taking over the management of crown estate assets through a unique partnership between the community land estate Urras Oighreachd Ghabhsainn and CnES; community renewable energy as exemplified by the new wind turbines just opened by the North Uist Development Company; and the long journey that the island community of Eigg took to buy out their island and all the positive impacts. from population growth to creating their own island grid, that has caused.

An overview of the work of Community Energy Scotland across Scottish islands given by Rona Mackay from Benbecula and the presentation on managing crown estate assets by Lisa Maclean from Galson on the Isle of Lewis demonstrated just how much cutting-edge innovation island communities are now driving.

The Irish island representatives drew inspiration and insight not just from the young islanders, the Scottish Islands Act and Islands Plan and all the sessions, but also from visits to Uist organisations such as Taigh Chearsabhagh, artist Ellis O'Connor's studio, and the eSgoil centre at Carinish (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar’s on-line teaching programme) on North Uist, ... Cothrom,



Hebridean Jewellery and Kildonan museum on South Uist, ... a working croft and polycrub on Benbecula, ... as well as, on Grimsay itself, Uist Wool, Kallin harbour, the boat building shed and interpretation centres, the Blackland Centre and of course Ceann na h-Áirigh, the community centre of the Grimsay Community Association where the island gathering took place.

... to Galway: Sharing inspiration and skills

The week after the event in Grimsay, an outdoor children's nursery was launched in Sherkin Island in Ireland, creating an opportunity for the young children and mums on the island to come together, building a network for children and adults alike. Until recently, Sherkin had no children; with young families deciding to move in, there are now 8 young children on the island. The nursery was directly inspired by the presentation on Uist Wild Outdoor Things at Grimsay.

Building on this very promising start, four facilitators from CoDeL and the Scottish Islands Federation Chair joined 13 Irish islanders in Galway to spend a week together in November 2019 working through aspirations for their islands: Tory Island, Arranmore, Clare Island, Inishturk, Inishbofin, Inis Mor, Inis Meain, Inis Oirr, Bere Island, Cape Clare Island and Sherkin Island.

During the week participants identified the unique positive assets of their islands. They considered the economic, social and environmental resource inflows and outflows and learned and honed coaching skills to enable them to support their fellow islanders to develop island-based enterprising aspirations.

From the offset, the week attracted visits from the Irish Government Chief Whip, Minister of State for the Irish language, the Gaeltacht and the Islands, followed mid-week by a visit and presentation by the Director of Schools with Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board in Ireland. On the final day two representatives from the newly established Irish Government Interdepartmental Group for Islands Development joined the session.



Perhaps counter to the usual negative and deficit narrative often presented to such visitors, on the contrary, island representatives at the Galway training presented well-articulated, often visualised outlines of the strengths of each island, as they are today and the plans for their future. The response from the official visitors was positive and affirming. One of the officials picked up on the clear message of moving from “managing decline” in islands to “investing in their future”.

The week of training in economic literacy and coaching led to comments like: “all expectations were exceeded ... useful process, will be well used”; “(learned) to look at assets already on the island ... young people are the future”; “coaching is enabling people, not doing for them”; “the importance of facilitating people – to follow ones passion, allow communities to record their interests, the importance of community”; “ways of creating opportunity!”.

Follow-up work with the Irish islanders will continue in Spring 2020 both in Uist and Ireland.

And in the meantime ... to Edinburgh and back to Uist

The impact of young islanders on Uist was shared with the Cross-Party Group on Rural Policy at the Scottish Parliament in October 2019 ... see presentation in Appendix 1

While young people drive change on Uist ...

Contributing to a solution: Housing in Uist by *Uibhistich Òga*

At the request of Cllr Iain MacNeil, a seminar on housing in Uist and Barra was held on the 14th of November 2019 in Lìonaclait, Benbecula, to re-energise the public sector-led approach and promote cooperation through a new policy framework for the area.

The Uist Collective: Uibhistich Òga, a group formed following CoDel’s Young Leaders programme in 2019, was asked to set the scene for the day’s discussion. The group, which is exploring means



by which they can positively influence several local issues including housing, is keen to resolve the shortage of suitable houses as this is one of the key stumbling blocks inhibiting many people from returning to the island.

The issue is not a lack of information or data pointing to the problems, the group believes, but evidencing the need which will draw in the financial support. A common anecdote is of older folk staying in a family home alone, leading to higher incidences of loneliness and an under-utilised housing resource. When elderly family members pass away, relatives may hold on to houses and use them for holiday homes or self-catering accommodation. The group counted 88 self-catering houses on AirB&B alone in Uist and Barra. This restricts the amount of housing stock available for long-term let.

Another issue is the need for appropriate housing stock in addition to that managed by the Hebridean Housing Partnership (HHP), the not-for-profit housing association in the Western Isles. HHP works to address homelessness, for example. (The [Shelter Scotland](#) defines homelessness as those who don't have a right to stay in a house, such as staying at a friend's house, or do not have suitable housing.)

Social housing needs can be different from other housing needs, such as affordable and shared equity stock. If the goal is to enable young people who want to move to Uist and Barra to do so, then different housing must be made available. There are some good examples of trusts working in partnership to bring appropriate housing to market, including the [West Harris Trust](#), the [Arran Development Trust](#) and the [Glasgow and West of Scotland Forum of Housing Associations](#). The Uist Collective would like to help drive this conversation forward. In the coming months, they're hoping to collect data on potential returners and migrants to Uist. They'll use this evidence to create a small number of localised plans at district level, based on where there is demand, in the hope that this may help evidence the need and accelerate the rate of progress.

***For CoDeL's original research on young people on Uist, see [here](http://www.codel.scot) (at www.codel.scot)
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