*Discussion document in response to "Covid-19 –
A Framework for Decision Making" (11th May 2020)*

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Easing lockdown in the Western Isles and other Scottish islands?

Background

This document *reflects* discussion among community representatives on Uist and Barra, a majority of them young leaders and other younger islanders, facilitated by CoDeL.

This document does **NOT represent** the views of the participants in these discussions. The community discussions suggest that there is unlikely to be a consensus on how to proceed. Different members of the community have different experiences under lockdown, and above all face different risks within their family and community networks.

"Most people I speak to individually want lockdown to be eased, but this is not reflected in the public debate."

"I have people within my family who are very at risk. The last thing I want is for lockdown to be eased now."

The facilitated discussions nevertheless suggest that it is possible to have constructive discussions on the challenges at a community level, to enable people to express their opinions and for others to hear them, and for people to adapt their views accordingly. This is particularly important when some people's views are amplified within media and social media, while many members of island communities do not air their views publicly even if, or perhaps especially if, they diverge from what is being articulated by others publicly.

Some key areas of consensus

The discussions did move towards consensus on some issues.

1) Whether lockdown within the islands is eased or not -

The very tight restrictions on travel between the mainland and the islands must be maintained,

and for considerable time, including potentially beyond the easing of lockdown conditions on the mainland and on the islands. In Ireland a roadmap for easing lockdown was set out at the beginning of May, in 4 phases of 3 weeks each, but restrictions on travel to and from the Irish islands will remain in place until August at least.

2) If lockdown conditions were eased on the islands -

Testing must play a critical supporting role in maintaining the safety of the islands.

A range of different ideas for testing were put forward, including regular testing of ferry crews and delivery drivers, as well as testing those returning from hospital appointments on the mainland. Islanders need clarity around testing, along with a proactive approach to testing, rather than just 'wait and see' until one or more cases emerge. Testing for care-home residents and staff is critical.

3) Framing the issue (as has often been done at the national and international level) as –

A trade-off between health vs economy is not the most important or relevant for the islands,

or other areas that have not been impacted by the virus. In our close-knit communities, where so many are related/known to each other and where there is a higher proportion of vulnerable residents (especially a higher proportion of the elderly) health comes first. Instead, the trade-off, put starkly, is between health vs health.

The key balance that we need to maintain is between protecting our island communities from Covid 19 and reducing the harm that lockdown is causing within our communities, including many damaging health outcomes and potentially some deaths.

Framing the discussion in this way has far-reaching implications for how we as island communities approach policies around lockdown.

4) On tourism –

We are very unlikely to be able to open the islands for tourism this year.

Indeed, the national profile we have achieved as one of the few places in the UK without any currently identified cases of Covid 19 ironically make our islands particularly vulnerable to an outbreak if travel restrictions are lifted. Many people from mainland UK will come to the islands as a 'safe' tourist destination, and many who may be particularly vulnerable to, and/or fearful of, Covid-19, may seek to reside on the islands temporarily. The islands will quickly be overwhelmed.

It would be preferable, both for the safety of our island communities and to create certainty within our important tourism sector, **to decide that there cannot be a tourism season in 2020 and, critically, for the Scottish Government and local councils to put in place measures to support tourist operators**, most of whom will face a whole year without any income, **right through to the beginning of the tourist season in 2021** (around Easter-time). This should include support for initiatives like www.isle20.com and www.eatdrinkhebrides.org.uk that island tourism businesses have launched to help their survival during lockdown.

5) On islands being a testing ground

There was a clear consensus that seeing the islands as a potential test-ground for easing lockdown restrictions is of very limited relevance.

… because we have no currently identified cases of the virus, we can maintain significant isolation from other areas by restricting ferry and air travel to and from the islands, and because we are a small and tight-knit community where tracking and tracing is comparatively easy. This unique

combination of factors makes the islands of little value as a testing ground, especially for others areas of the UK with very high incidences of Covid-19. It is also unnecessary. Many countries across the world, in Europe and elsewhere, are easing lockdowns at the current time, and these will provide more relevant experience for mainland UK.

6) What also emerged from our discussions, is

The real potential for islands to pursue localised approaches to lockdown as a 'specific geography' enabling the tailoring of measures.

Because of the unique combination of factors cited above, in particular our continuing isolation from the mainland, this would not dilute any national messages. Obviously this would have to be carefully planned and delivered by local authorities and health boards, in genuine consultation with island communities. This could be an effective way of achieving the balance that is right for our unique island circumstances between the risk of Covid-19 and the harms, including negative health impacts, of lockdown.

Some suggestions that were made to ease the negative impacts of lockdown, including on isolation and mental health, are:

- GP practices might proactively contact patients to check whether they have non-Covid symptoms that they are not coming forward with.
- Mechanisms to enhance social interaction for particularly isolated individuals, from the elderly to those challenged by addiction, should be developed. For example, the community dementia project (Cuimhne) has seen significant negative impacts on their service users since lockdown. Social interaction is the most effective strategy to slow down dementia, and is also the most important for isolation, addiction, etc.
- Somewhat larger funerals should be allowed providing social distancing at the funerals is maintained. (Because of the higher proportion of elderly people within our island communities, we have a greater number of deaths, and within our close-knit communities funerals are a major means to process grief.)
- Easing restrictions on diy, gardening and related supplies would provide much greater opportunity for those who have long been isolated and those who are recently isolated through lockdown to do productive things during lockdown.

Additional points on island economies

We have already drawn attention to the severe impact on tourism that the crisis has brought.

In addition, there was also concensus that easing of lockdown conditions specifically for crofting could be of significant value. **Crofting is at the very heart of our communities and local economies and relies heavily on shared labour within communities**. Spring is one of the busiest seasons for crofting, so easing restrictions would deliver significant help.

One further suggestion relating to island economies came from a local GP: *"Social care - if it was a more attractive, well-paid and well-supported career, then our economy would not be so dependent on tourism. Our care home staff have no uniforms, and local individuals are sewing these on a voluntary basis - is there an opportunity here to be making supplies locally and laundering them locally? Councils being forced to make huge financial savings over the years has produced a situation where biosecurity in care homes has been neglected."*