

Dear Alasdair,

In May we shared with you a document submitted to the SG consultation on the easing of lockdown, based on conversations within Uist in particular, including with younger islanders.

On June 10<sup>th</sup> we had another meeting on zoom when much of the conversation focused on Fergus Ewing's announcement that day that the SG would like tourism within Scotland to resume from July 15<sup>th</sup>.

There was clear agreement at our meeting in expressing concern about the potential implications of this on our island communities, and in suggesting that the priorities being made in easing lockdown do not reflect the views of our island communities. The signatures on this letter demonstrate that these feelings are shared much more widely in our communities than just those who participated in the session on the 10<sup>th</sup>.

In our island communities:

- residents in care-homes have been confined to their rooms throughout lockdown with minimal visits by loved ones; many elderly residents have been unable to leave their homes; and dementia patients have declined rapidly with the lack of social interaction.
- those suffering from addiction and other vulnerable individuals (e.g. with disabilities, learning difficulties, mental health challenges) have not been able to access the kind of support they had been receiving professionally and within the community, and we know of cases where their condition has deteriorated
- there are those who will have undiagnosed conditions because they have not felt able to visit the doctor
- children have not been able to go to school or see their friends
- and there will be many facing mental health challenges, increased or triggered by lockdown, including some who are facing such challenges for the very first time.

***We believe that improving the situation for the elderly, the vulnerable, the ill, and children should be the first priority. Our priority is for such groups to have social interaction again and access face-to-face services they so desperately need, and for our children to resume school and receive the education they need.***

If we open up for tourists in July the likely impact will be that many of those who are currently severely isolated will have to remain so, because the risks are too great for them. Everyone, whether resident or tourist, has to use the same few shops, the same few community facilities, the same medical services, many of which are very small and will struggle to maintain effective distancing and other protective measures with increased numbers of customers. Unlike in cities and many other places, it is not possible for islanders to choose not to go to places that attract tourists. And it cannot be right for our medical services to deal with visitors, least of all a covid outbreak, before they have been able to address the accumulating health issues within our island communities.

Our island economies have been deeply reliant on tourism, and yet, as one islander has said, "Between Uist and Mull, I don't think I've come across any resident (most of whom rely on income from tourism in one way or another) who say that they want increased numbers of visitors

anytime soon, quite the opposite!" All tourism providers on the islands are also members of families, networks and communities that have much at stake, and a July date for opening for tourism has come as a big shock.

Along with some other islands, we are in the enviable situation that there are still no identified cases on Uist and Barra, and yet we are still under the same severe restrictions as elsewhere.

There is a viable alternative strategy:

- We maintain restrictions on travel to the mainland, following the example of the Irish Government with their islands
- We ease lockdown on the islands so that we can resume some of our community life that is so important to our health and wellbeing, and above all we can deliver effective support to the groups we identified above.
- To support the local tourism industry, we encourage and promote local tourism within the islands (which is very possible at least within the island authorities).

And as Calmac takes on more passengers, priority for the limited number of places due to social distancing should be given to islanders to meet with their families before visitors come here.

The most likely scenario, if we are not allowed to follow such a strategy, is that cases emerge on the islands and spread rapidly within our small and often elderly communities, with potential awful consequences, and we are forced to go back into severe lockdown. Nobody wants to see this happen. With track and trace not fully in place in England until September, the risks are just too high. And with English holidays extending all the way to September, we will be hosting tourists just as our community is trying to get our schools and other services back in operation. Even after the holidays most of our children will not be going into school for more than 2 days a week at the most, with all the consequent knock on effects on workers, organisations and businesses.

This is particularly the case as our islands will be a favoured tourist destination because we are known to be covid-free, and so apparently 'safe' for visitors. Our limited services will quickly be overwhelmed.

The only potential way to allow opening up the islands is through a comprehensive testing regime. Countries like Iceland and Greece will be testing everyone coming in, and it should not be beyond the capacity of the Outer Hebrides to devise a system for comprehensive testing within our island populations, and ideally testing everyone before they embark on plane or ferry to these islands. However, we suspect that such a comprehensive testing regime will not be anywhere close to being in place by mid-July, and so we cannot rely on this for our protection.

We are aware that the Scottish Government favours a uniform strategy across Scotland. However, as island communities we want to do what is best for our communities. Ireland has made an exception for its islands, and for the same reasons, because they are highly vulnerable small populations with a higher proportion of elderly people, and that have minimal capacity to deal with an outbreak. Scottish islands deserve no less.

And to indicate that our feelings are shared widely, we append some recent comments on social media since Fergus Ewing's announcement.

We request that you bring our concerns to the urgent attention of Fergus Ewing and other Ministers and officials.

All signing in our individual capacities (in alphabetical order):

Rosie Blake	Fiona Buchanan	Ameena Camps
Peter Cooper	Simon Davies	Sue and Austen Dancey
Emily Durie	Thomas Fisher	Josie Anne Gaitens
Nick Ingledew	Angus and Kathryn Johnson	Vanessa Langley
Kirsty MacCormick	Anne MacKinnon	Joanna MacKinnon
Fiona MacIsaac	Rona MacKay	Olivia MacLellan
Angela & Duncan MacLure		Lachina MacVicar
Vicki Manchester	Anne Corrance Monk	Mary Morrison
Pàdruig Morrison	Theona Morrison	Heather Moser
Andrew Mucaster	Pauline Prior-Pitt	Raphael Rychetsky
Lawrence Shaw	Robin & Michelle Spratt	Nye Stenning
Matt Topsfield	Rhoda Trusswell	Tracy Walker
Joan Williamson	Margaret Wiseman	Catherine Yeatman

While each of us is signing in their individual capacity, among us we represent:

- **Accommodation providers** (over a quarter of all signatories), as well as **tour operator** and **tourist businesses**
- A quarter are **younger islanders**, mostly **young leaders** within the community, also **students**
- **5 Managers of community organisations**, from large to small, including some who depend heavily on tourist income
- Also, **10 Trustees/Directors/community workers** at community development organisations
- A range of **employees and self-employed** (community dementia project, crofters, Post Office, home care, lecturer, musician, artist, remote worker)
- The **Chair and Vice-Chair of a Community Council**, as well as other **members**
- The **Chair of the Locality Planning Group** for Health and Social Care on Uist
- **Parents**, and the **Chair of a Parent Council** of one Uist school

#### **Appendix: Selected, but representative quotes on social media since Fergus Ewings's announcement:**

*"I have taken the decision not to open my holiday cottage at all this season and have just refunded all my guests which has been very tough or transferred their booking to 2021... This decision was made to safeguard my family, guests and local community. It now gives me peace of mind. "*

*"how about those that have holiday let's here on the islands letting them out to residents? I have heard a few local people saying they'd be quite interested in having a little local holiday."*

*"Consideration must be given to Inter Island tourism within the Outer Hebrides to get the tourism trade going. We have to take baby steps with the reintroduction of tourism and not tap dance through a minefield by opening up the mainland ports. The risks of reopening free for all tourism could be very detrimental to our Islands, and could actually set us back on our quest to return to normal."*

*"my business welcomes tourists and visitors, AND the money they spend with me, but I'd rather see my own business fail, than stand at a graveside."* (a resident and business owner on Harris: full post with comments here: <https://www.facebook.com/rebecca.hutton.71/posts/10222384896668701>)

*"Recognition about tourist travel issues? What about locals' travel issues? What about seeing our families? What about shielding folks? Firing tourists at the problem is not the solution. Someone rocks up with a galair and kills our grannies but yay, they had a nice holiday?"* (Island business owner, Tiree, and founder of [isle20.com](http://isle20.com))