

Community actions in Uist and Glenkens: Delivering on Scottish Government priorities for island and rural communities

These are the key insights for Scottish Government policy and action that emerged from the project, along with ten recommendations.

Community organisations as credible and effective delivery partners

- 1) There are many effective community organisations, groups, enterprises on the ground across rural and island Scotland, who are deeply rooted in their community and know about local community needs and aspirations. They deliver diverse activities and services, responding to the particular needs of their communities.
- 2) Rural and island communities often have assets and strengths, e.g. physical, social, community, organisational. This includes having a multiplicity of skills within their populations.
- 3) Rural and island communities often have clear and holistic strategies and development plans (whether Place Plans or by any other name) ... and well developed organisational structures to deliver on these. Two of our casestudies bring this out in particular:

The casestudy of Community Action in the Glenkens reflects on the Glenkens & District Community Action Plan, which is rooted in local understanding of local challenges and in local decision-making and strong governance, on how to address these, through three connected but distinct community entities to ensure delivery and accountability.

“The Glenkens have created a model of effective delivery of regional and national priorities within remote-rural communities that we feel could be shared across the country. Our delivery model is a case study in how to plug the gap between national policy and action on the ground.”

“Rebuilding sustainable and vibrant local food economies requires multi-pronged and integrated strategies. The casestudy of Tagsa Uibhist demonstrates how this can be developed in practice within local communities. It shows how effective local community action can be that is deeply rooted in local experience and understanding, and how much such rooted action can positively influence national policy to realise policy objectives in practice on the ground.”

- 4) The strategies and actions of rural and island communities align closely with national and regional priorities. The casestudies demonstrate repeatedly that community action in Uist and the Glenkens is delivering on Scottish Government priorities and policies, for example in relation to the **National Performance Standards**, the **Good Food Nation Act**, the **Agriculture and Rural Communities Bill**, responses to the climate & biodiversity emergencies, **Community Wealth Building**, a **circular economy**, the **Addressing Depopulation Action Plan**, childcare, **Scotland’s National Outdoor Play & Learning Position Statement**, etc. Community organisations are therefore credible and effective delivery partners for national and regional policy who can deliver significant local impacts swiftly. As evidenced during Covid, local communities, rural, island or urban, can respond far quicker than the national public sector.

There are many dynamic local initiatives, like the Galloway Food Hub and Tagsa Uibhist, that are seeking to rebuild sustainable local food economies that directly meet the aims of the Good Food Nation Act (2022), e.g. “to increase the consumption, production, and provision of local food” by bringing more local food into shops, food outlets and schools. “High-quality, nutritious food which is locally and sustainably produced is key to our wellbeing – in economic, environmental, social and health terms.”

*“The Galloway Food Hub seeks not only to deliver climate and nature-friendly food, but contributes directly to a **Just Transition**, seeking to make local, sustainable and good food available to all, including those in food poverty.”*

Reco 1

Accessing greater financial returns from local assets can allow rural and island communities to be more ambitious and sustainable. This applies to assets, from renewable energy to knowledge assets.

Reco 2

The strategies and actions of rural and island communities align closely with national and regional priorities. Communities should be viewed as key strategic partners in delivering many national and regional priorities efficiently and effectively – but need to be valued and resourced as such.

High returns on public investment and positive externalities

- 5) Bairn Banter is an example of great things being delivered in rural and island communities by energetic and committed volunteers. This is all part of community resilience and cohesion, but exacts a significant toll on rural and island people. And dependency on volunteering limits how much communities can do.
- 6) This project on Community Action in Uist and Glenkens has demonstrated in practice that community organisations can take forward significant action at short notice, even with small amounts of funding. This is NOT a call for policy delivery to be off loaded on to community organisations and groups as a cost-cutting exercise. It is a call to recognise the high returns on investment that community organisations and enterprises can realise for public investment when they are enabled to deliver on their priorities, what they are passionate about. This was demonstrated so clearly in practice during the pandemic, but since then funding has often reverted back to the much more highly controlled and outcome-driven processes, with outcomes so often determined by distant policy-makers or funders, rather by communities themselves.
- 7) It is equally important to recognise the longevity of impacts within local communities. For example, the investment in a purpose-built learning centre and nursery for Cothrom still enables diverse and integrated support to some 200 people in Uist each year, 17 years later. A community enterprise like Cothrom is not in it just for short-term funding cycles, but has been engaged with local communities in Uist for over 30 years, supporting thousands of learners, both young and old, as well as children.
- 8) Local food initiatives generate many positive externalities, not just on the environment, but also on the local (circular) economy and local businesses, on community wealth and education, cohesion and resilience, and on people’s health. Access to nutritious food that delivers better health outcomes is a critical health intervention.

“Local food economies contribute to a circular economy, and have many more positive externalities on community, health and the environment. For example, local produce has a higher nutritional value than produce delivered through long supply chains. The Scottish Government spends half of its

budget on health. Access to nutritious food that delivers better health outcomes is a critical health intervention.”

Reco 3

Funding to pay some hours to volunteers who deliver on so many Scottish Government priorities could have a dramatic impact on services and cohesion within rural and island communities.

Reco 4

Investing in community organisations and assets can have swift and high returns for public investment, and often long-term positive impacts on communities, even many years after project “completion”. When positive externalities are also included, on the local economy, on community, on the environment, then the returns on public investment in local community organisations increases even further.

More than traditional economic development

“A focus on the Right to Food is very different from traditional development strategies for the food and drink sector which focus on boosting business income through the export of high value products.”

Social connections and services

- 9) In rural and island communities with populations spread over large areas, it is vital to nurture connections. Social opportunities are really important for young children, as they impact significantly on children’s development. They are also important for parents and carers.

“Bairn Banter has enabled many young families, including those who have moved into the area, to meet socially on a regular basis, to enable children and families to socialise with each other, a critical investment for the future population, economy and community in the area.”

- 10) Local services are critical for nurturing positive population trends. The loss of a local school can be a real blow to the sustainability of a local community; schools are often the very heart of a community. While there are frameworks to ensure that local schools are not closed without consultation, local authorities are circumventing any community influence over such decisions by mothballing schools (i.e. not officially ‘closing’ them).

Reco 5:

To ensure a sustainable future for rural and island communities, invest in social connections and community cohesion as much as economic development.

Reco 6:

Every service in a rural and island community contributes to the balance of pros and cons for living in that community: they have a direct impact on (de)population. If too many lights go out, the community dies. Every decision about service provision in a rural and island community should not be decided in institutional silos (education, health, finance, etc.) but must be reviewed holistically for the impact on the overall sustainability of the local community.

Jobs and housing

- 11) The narrative in many rural and island communities has for long been that there are no jobs, so that any economic development is justified by the need for more jobs. In some rural and island communities the challenge is less the number of jobs than recruiting to fill the many job

opportunities available, with public sector employers like health and education, and with local businesses and community organisations.

The Uist Beò platform features new jobs every week, with up to 50 current job opportunities available at any time.

With very small job and labour markets in some rural and island communities it is possible to have markets that do not function well, with a significant mismatch between the jobs available and the skills within the local community, so that there are recruitment gaps and unemployment. However, in some rural and island communities, unemployment rates are in fact low. Moreover, the Uist Beò platform demonstrates that there is a huge diversity of jobs, from basic manual jobs to highly skilled and professional jobs.

12) The lack of decent affordable housing is a key constraint in recruiting for jobs. This is a challenge demanding diverse strategies.

Reco 7

Within community economic development, there needs to be as much focus on filling recruitment gaps as on creating new jobs. Filling recruitment gaps may prove more cost-effective also, as the job opportunities are already in place, and do not require further investment except in enabling recruitment.

Such a strategy also builds the local economy, reducing the need to source from and/or travel to urban centres, which deskills local communities and renders them less sustainable. This can be applied across multiple sectors, health being an obvious example, but also 'local trades': why do national organisations spend a fortune on travel and subsistence to do a piece of work a local tradesperson could deliver?

Reco 8

It is important to develop better regulation of the housing market to incentivise housing for local communities, and to avoid positioning so-called remote communities as attractive places to retire. And significant investment in upgrading existing housing and building new stock is of course essential to ensure the sustainability of rural and island communities.

Tourism

13) Websites, social media and marketing targeted at tourist audiences often do not serve island and rural communities well. Most portray so-called remote areas as empty wilderness with communities lost in the mists of time, as places to escape to, rather than as great places to live and work, as vibrant communities that can attract young people and families to return or settle. New innovative platforms like Uist Beò are seeking to present an authentic perspective on local island life, including the dynamism, ingenuity and resilience of local communities and people, the many local assets, strengths and knowledge they can draw on, not just the obvious challenges like transport.

Reco 9:

Shining a light on the many advantages of rural and island living, not just the challenges, is a critical part of strategies to address depopulation, important to attract young people and families to live and work, whether they are staying, returning or settling. Deliberate promotion as good places to retire should be discouraged, until there is sufficient good quality and affordable housing for the local

population. And in some areas, tourism promotion must be reduced to avoid the severe negative consequences of overtourism that destroy local community.

Food

- 14) Island food insecurity is compounded by specific island challenges, including supply chain interruptions, transportation premiums, and less choice of fresh produce and quality nutritious food in stores.
- 15) Many island stores are defined as convenience stores on the basis 'that there is a bigger store a mile or so up the road', when in an island context it may be the only shop. Such stores carry more highly processed convenience foods, limiting the offer of healthier options, and are on average 25%+ more expensive.

Reco 10

In the context of Scotland becoming a Good Food Nation, it is vital to embed the realities of what a Right to Food looks like for island communities and to progressively realise such a right for communities.