

Statement of Benefits

A SINGLE AUTHORITY MODEL FOR THE WESTERN ISLES



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STATEMENT OF BENEFITS

BETTER OUTCOMES FOR COMMUNITIES: DELIVERY OF KEY SERVICES

For Western Isles residents there would be an expectation that an SAM/Single Island Authority (SIA) would improve services or at least prevent a diminution of services.

Services to and for Western Isles communities are planned, resourced and delivered by a number of organisations at present:

- [Comhairle nan Eilean Siar \(CNES\)](#):
Education and Children's Services Social Work, Social Care, Waste Collection, Transport/Roads, Leisure, Heritage and Culture, Environment, Strategic Housing
- [NHS Western Isles \(NHS WI\)](#)
Acute Health Services
- [CNES and NHS WI](#)
Primary Health and Social Care
- [CNES and Hebridean Housing Partnership \(HHP\)](#)
Strategic Housing Authority and Homelessness (CNES)
Registered Social Landlord for 2000 homes (HHP)
- [CNES and Highlands and Islands Enterprise \(HIE\)](#)
Economic Development, Business Support and Community Regeneration
- [Police, Ambulance, Fire, Coastguard](#)
Emergency and preventative Services

These services can be and mostly are undertaken locally, but the decision-making on their direction and resourcing is often determined elsewhere and at other times not practically accountable to the local public.

Local 'whole-system' decision-making by accountable decision-makers should result in improved decisions as there would be better local knowledge of what is required and the existing strengths and weaknesses of the local system. In addition, ultimately the decision makers would be accountable to the community in which they live.

Examples

Below are two examples of services which demonstrate why a SAM is necessary in terms of likely improved outcomes, better use of resources but equally importantly, joint strategic planning.

(1) Inter-Island Air Services (provision of this service covers wider issues but for this example, the issues relating to NHS services are highlighted)

After Comhairle nan Eilean Siar awarded the Benbecula - Stornoway plane contract to Hebridean Air Services, NHS Western Isles raised concerns about the new contract including reduced capacity and an unsuitable timetable. The service is operated by an eight-seater Britten Norman Islander with two daily return flights on Mondays, Tuesdays and Fridays.

NHS WI stated that the previous service under Loganair worked far better, with two returns on Tuesday and Thursday with Benbecula - Stornoway - Inverness links, which dovetailed with visiting clinicians' job plans and established theatre schedules and that changes will not allow many of the current services in Uist to continue.

NHS Western Isles says it was "not involved" by the council when the requirements for the tender were drawn up or consulted before the Benbecula to Stornoway contract was awarded.

CNES has explained that, from the Council perspective, following the conclusion of the tender process Hebridean Air Services had submitted the only bid that was within the Comhairle's budget and met the required contract length. Their bid also presented the shortest break in service delivery, increased the number of days of travel and offered the possibility of an extension of the service to Barra.

Over the years CNES has frequently called for NHS involvement and financial support in the operation of the Stornoway to Benbecula PSO contract. At present NHS Western Isles do not contribute anything financially to the service and are not involved in the tender process.

CNES would of course welcome financial support from NHS Western Isles which would safeguard the future of the service and open the door to potential service improvements.

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar is continuing to take reasonable steps to ensure that the current air service – which, like all air services, is a general service and not specific to any group such as NHS patients - works for service users. This includes continued engagement with Loganair, HIAL and Hebridean Air Services to encourage improved connections between inter-island flights and flights to the mainland.

It is important to stress that the Comhairle has for many years invited both NHS and Transport Scotland to share responsibility for the Stornoway/Benbecula air service, both in terms of planning and resourcing. Transport Scotland has consistently replied to say that, since this is an inter-island PSO, it has no responsibility; NHS WI has likewise said that running air services is not its statutory responsibility and that its services would be accommodated around the transport provision available. Unfortunately, neither is it the responsibility in law of a local authority to run air services but, to support its communities, local authorities in Orkney, Shetland and Argyll, as well as the Western Isles, choose to do so with some, but very far from total cost, support from government.

In an SAM/SIA model, the SA, hopefully working in harmony with Transport Scotland, would have been able to consider whether to specify certain conditions of the contract, for example on accessibility, schedules etc. A SA could decide to pool or allocate resources to increase the funding available if that was considered to be a priority by the SIA, thereby making the contract more financially attractive to operators and providing a better service for patients/passengers/residents.

The importance of the integration of Transport and Health Services cannot be underestimated, a fact already recognised by HITRANS (Highlands and Islands Transport Partnership):

The opportunities for improving access to health and social care and the public health of residents in our region have, rightly, emerged as key issues in updating the Regional Transport Strategy.

HITRANS with the support of the Cabinet Secretary has recently contacted the four NHS Health Boards (NHS Highland, Western Isles, Orkney, and Grampian) that share a common area to explore how closer and more cohesive working can take place across public bodies to help address the many issues where health and transport interface.

HITRANS proposes establishing a Health and Transport Access Plan (HTAP) for the Highlands and Islands. The intention of such a plan is that in partnership with other key stakeholders such as the Scottish Ambulance Service, Local Authorities, and transport operators, the HTAP will set out the strategic actions needed to improve the integration between health and transport for the Highlands and Islands.

(2) Move More



Report.pdf

The attached report highlights the issues around the Move More Programme where a much valued and well used local health promotion and preventative service, jointly run and funded with the Comhairle, has been closed down, much against local opinion and

resulting in compulsory redundancy of three posts in another Community Planning Partner's service.

An SIA would have ensured that there was an integrated and assessed approach to service provision and a process and forum for debate and assessment of impacts, including around equalities and for those most disadvantaged. In relation to Move More, NHS WI has confirmed that no impact assessments were undertaken before the decision to end the service was taken. The democratic oversight of an SIA would also allow the public to be listened to and community views aired, shared and considered.

GREATER ACCOUNTABILITY, OPENNESS AND TRANSPARENCY

Citizens need to know that, and how, they can influence decision making or they may not fully take part or even opt out of local democracy. Local democracy offers the best form of accountability with detailed scrutiny, analysis and consideration in a public forum the standard way of working. Of course, the electoral opportunity to remove the decision makers is the ultimate sanction. **A SA would expand the democracy and accountability which is inherent in Local Government to include all services provided through the SA or by other agencies with accountability to the SA.** One of the most significant criticisms of unelected organisations and agencies which discharge important public functions is that they are *de facto* unaccountable. There are numerous examples of such decisions which can be provided; the closure of local dental clinics in Uist is one such, regardless of the merits of the case.

GREATER DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION

The ultimate test of the vibrancy of local democracy is the willingness of the members of the community to participate in the democratic process. If people can interact with, communicate and believe they can influence the decision makers, indeed even be the decision makers, they are more likely to take part in the process that gives the decision-makers democratic legitimacy. Community democracy and representation is alive and well in the Western Isles, evidenced by the (near universal) presence of Community Councils, Area Forums, Community Land Trusts and other participatory and representative organisations. **Local planning and delivery of services under an SIA would provide a vehicle of opportunity for significantly expanded democratic participation in the key decisions affecting communities.**

BETTER AND MORE EFFICIENT USE OF DECLINING REVENUE AND CAPITAL BUDGETS

The Accounts Commission has said that Comhairle nan Eilean Siar's revenue funding has seen the largest decrease in revenue support grant of all 32 Scottish local authorities whilst the capital allocation has also significantly decreased.

The fact of the Comhairle, NHSWI and HHP all having Chief Executives and associated Corporate Management Teams promotes an obvious question: is it really necessary, for a population of 26,000, that each of these public sector organisations has a Chief Executive and associated management structures, with all the costs that this entails?

Below that executive level are multiple Finance, HR, IT and other important internal structures supporting the islands public sector. There are crossovers in those functions that could produce efficiencies and provide better value for money at a time of continuing financial challenge. But a SAM is not about losing vital jobs in the islands' public sector, which are essential to population retention and growth. The employment opportunities which arose from 1975 with the creation of the Comhairle would be repeated following the formation of a ground-breaking Single Island Authority, with jobs and opportunities being better distributed across the Western Isles than at present.

It can likewise be argued that in the context of Housing the purpose of stock transfer and the formation of HHP, i.e. to remove the housing debt, has successfully been fulfilled. It is therefore now appropriate to consider the best structure for providing social housing and the essential role that can play in meeting the critical objectives of combatting depopulation and providing economic sustainability and prosperity for island communities. It would also be appropriate to consider bringing together the strategic housing role exercised by the Comhairle and the operational functions of an SLA which currently lie with HHP. An SIA would provide the circumstances for doing so.

THE POSITIVE CASE FOR CHANGE

The challenges facing public funding, both revenue and capital, coupled with the reducing workforce, will demand significant changes to the delivery of public services throughout Scotland, and intervention at all levels of government is needed to bring this about before communities and services are detrimentally impacted even further. It is always of particular concern in island communities that models will be developed with a mainland focus and then imposed on islands without consideration of their particular needs and opportunities. Good island proofing should, of course, ensure this would not happen, but there has already been discussion, for example, of a reduction in the number of Health Boards which has already been mooted at Government level. A merger of NHSWI or CNES with a mainland Board or Authority in the name of savings or

efficiencies would not serve the population of the Islands well and would badly damage 50 years of work of strengthening and empowering the Western Isles community through local leadership, decision-making and delivery by islands-based organisations.

The Western Isles needs its own version of the European Charter of Local Self Government, shortly to be incorporated within the law of Scotland. Its provisions on local democracy and subsidiarity are worth reproducing in this paper:

The European Charter of Local Self-Government has become a landmark treaty for safeguarding the rights of local and regional authorities, such as the right to self-government, the right to elect their local bodies, to exercise their own powers, to have administrative structures and financial resources, and the right to take court action in the event of interference by other tiers of government.

The Charter commits the Parties to applying basic rules guaranteeing the political, administrative and financial independence of local authorities. It provides that the principle of local self-government shall be recognised in domestic legislation and, where practicable, in the constitution. Local authorities are to be elected in universal suffrage.

Local authorities, acting within the limits of the law, are to be able to regulate and manage public affairs under their own responsibility in the interests of the local population. Consequently, the Charter considers that public responsibilities should be exercised preferably by the authorities closest to the citizens, the higher level being considered only when the co-ordination or discharge of duties is impossible or less efficient at the level immediately below.

Lessons from the Western Isles for the future of public sector reform elsewhere in Scotland could be learned from the development of an SIA and the challenges, and gains, such a process would undoubtedly present. Scotland's islands areas have led the way in the last decade with the promotion of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, negotiation of the best *per capita* Growth Deal in the UK, working constructively and respectfully with both Governments and the Scottish Parliament.

Scotland's islands stand on the verge of one of the most significant changes to their economic dynamic in centuries: locally, the potential for the Western Isles to be a world class resource in Renewable Energy will transform the economy of the islands through conventional community benefit, shared ownership in generation and supply chain benefits. An SIA would provide the most effective, democratic and local governance, to enable the required community and political leadership and lead the integrated delivery of services in this new environment.

This is a critical time for the islands, the public sector and the delivery of services on which communities have come to rely for many years. Current models will no longer meet needs, and in the immediate period at least there will be significant workforce challenges to the delivery of services as these have been known. It is more than time to break free of current models, to free up resource currently tied into servicing organisational structures and to proceed with real, visible, accessible and accountable empowered government for areas such as the Western Isles. The Comhairle is of the view that the advantages would be hugely significant and could offer enhanced opportunities for safeguarding public services, enhancing democratic oversight, making the Islands even more attractive as places to live and work, whilst stimulating economic sustainability and reversing depopulation.

