

DSG RESPONSE TO PROPOSAL FOR A BILL TO ENHANCE THE CONSIDERATION GIVEN TO REMOTE RURAL MAINLAND COMMUNITIES BY PUBLIC BODIES IN SCOTLAND.

AIM AND APPROACH

1. Which of the following best expresses your view of legislating to enhance the consideration given to remote rural mainland communities by public bodies in Scotland?

- X** **Fully supportive**
Partially supportive
Neutral (neither support nor oppose)
Partially opposed
Fully opposed
Unsure

Please explain the reasons for your response.

The Islands bill was a response in part to Island (mainly Shetland's) reaction to the independence referendum. Subsequently there was a lot of lobbying from the island areas. These areas already got favourable treatment as regards council funding, which is a constant source of irritation, particularly in Caithness, which finds itself disadvantaged by both Holyrood and the Highland Council at times. Having said that, Highland Council does have a policy of rural proofing its decisions already, although evidence of the effectiveness of the policy is thin.

This Bill, sponsored by our constituency MSP is what should have happened with the islands Bill and arguably the resulting Act should amalgamate with it to provide true equity across the country. Indeed, the consultation document has an admission of this reality from the sponsor of the islands Act.

2. What do you think would be the main practical advantages and disadvantages of the proposed Bill?

There is a great groundswell of opinion that there is too much centralisation, both within our Highland area and within Scotland, despite both council and government protestations otherwise.

Examples at a council level are the establishment of area committees, which some other rural councils also have. Much of this does not give genuine localised decision making, more discussion fora.

If this was to be done correctly the advantages should be that policy decisions taken would not undermine local decision, ie local funding goes into project a but if policy decision is negative the funding already spent locally by other partners is wasted.

From a disadvantage point of view – this only works if everyone works together and decisions are not taken in isolation or in silos.

REMOTE RURAL PROOFING

3. Which of the following best expresses your view of placing the concept of Remote Rural Proofing into legislation?

- Fully supportive**
 Partially supportive
 Neutral (neither support nor oppose)
 Partially opposed
 Fully opposed
 Unsure

Please explain the reasons for your response

It provides more control locally which should lead to better services and arguably a prioritising of requirements from a local context.

The feeling of not being properly represented is not helped by the decisions of the Boundary Commission for Scotland which decided there were too many councillors in the country. This resulted in Highland reducing from 80 to 73, the biggest effect being seen in Caithness which saw its representation reduced from 10 to 8 councillors. Ironically, the exercise resulted in a reduction of only a handful across the country. This whilst island councils are allowed more representation, simply on the rather arbitrary criteria of the size of their towns. Highland is more sparsely populated than for instance Orkney and yet has vast areas being served by few representatives. We feel local government needs to be better structured and nurtured by government. For example, a candidate for Scottish or Westminster parliament is entitled to a free postal drop. Most of these are supported by political parties, yet council candidates often have to fund their own campaigns and with super-sized wards, this is an insurmountable obstacle and leads to voter apathy.

Similarly with proposals for constituencies, which would have seen Highland reduced from 3 to 2 Westminster constituencies whilst Orkney and Shetland retain individual constituency MSPs and the regional MSPs have impossible constituencies to serve.

As we understand it, the Bill (similarly to the Islands Act) merely requires government at local and national level to have regard for rural problems and to produce an annual plan on a variety of topics.

4. Which of the following best expresses your view of giving Scottish Ministers power to issue statutory guidance to other relevant public bodies related to Remote Rural Proofing which they would be required to adhere to in exercising their functions and duties?

- Fully supportive**
 Partially supportive
 Neutral (neither support nor oppose)
 Fully opposed
 Unsure

5. If Scottish Ministers had such a power, which public bodies should it apply to, and in relation to which of their functions and duties?

This should be applied to all public bodies and subject to scrutiny by a parliamentary committee and by the Audit Commission.

EMPOWERING REMOTE RURAL COMMUNITIES

6. Do you agree that councils that serve remote rural areas currently have sufficient powers to deliver positive outcomes for their communities?

- Yes
- No**
- Don't know

Please give reasons for your response (and suggest any additional powers that you think these councils should have).

Local areas have no budget – they can't decide very much locally and the HC is too big an area to be able to serve both the city and rural areas. As budgets get tighter this becomes more apparent. The City Region Deal being a good example of where rural communities were not given the same opportunities as the city area.

REMOTE RURAL PLAN

7. Which of the following best expresses your view of requiring the Scottish Government to prepare a 'National Remote Rural Plan'?

- Fully supportive**
- Partially supportive
- Neutral (neither support nor oppose)
- Partially opposed
- Fully opposed
- Unsure

Please explain the reasons for your response

If we really want to equalise opportunity between urban and rural Scotland, there are a number of areas that need a little more than words in a plan. We need statutorily enforceable standards.

Examples:

Rural transport, mainly bus services has seen unprecedented cuts as a result of reducing council funding. When the Caithness Transport Forum published its vision for 2007, there was no mention of bus services, presumably because they were sufficiently supported. Often the service was supported by school bus contracts which can be delivered more cheaply in other ways, so the whole community suffers. Even within towns, services have been cut, creating social isolation for older people.

The funding model for councils needs to be much more sophisticated, moving away from population-based for example.

Rural Broadband penetration suffered from percentage targets, easier to achieve in more densely populated areas.

Mobile phone connectivity is poor in many areas, even along parts of the trunk road network.

Bank branches and post offices have been closing at an alarming rate. Whilst some of this is due to technology changes, the lack of access to cash is most keenly felt by those without digital skills.

When the post office goes, often the village shop goes too. This drives the shift to on-line shopping, further exacerbating closure of small shop businesses in the towns and villages. Then delivery charges not encountered in towns and cities further disadvantage the population.

Healthcare is another area where inequalities abound. Scottish government chose to construct the largest hospital in Europe – the Queen Elizabeth in Glasgow and it's been beset by problems, as has the Sick Children's in Edinburgh. Again, concentrating on centres of 'excellence' rather than a more distributed model of healthcare. For many parts of the Highlands, it's impossible to have a hospital appointment without one or two overnight stays.

So, whilst the annual plan approach may start to highlight the problems of rural living, we remain unconvinced they will be translated into policy.

8. How often should the plan be reviewed?

Every 10 years

Every 5 years

Every 3 years

X *Every year to begin with (see Question 5).*

Other frequency (please specify)

No need for regular reviews

Don't know

ELECTORAL WARDS AND CONSTITUENCIES

9. The Boundary Commission is normally required to ensure that all constituencies and wards contain similar populations, even if that results in rural constituencies and wards being much larger than urban ones. At present, the only exceptions are for a few island areas (e.g. Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles must remain separate constituencies, despite their relatively small populations). Do you believe further exceptions should be made for mainland remote rural areas?

Yes

Please explain the reasons for your response.

For the reasons given above.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

10. Taking account of both costs and potential savings, what financial impact would you expect the proposed Bill to have on:

(a) Government and the public sector

X Significant increase in cost

Some increase in cost

Broadly cost-neutral

Some reduction in cost

Significant reduction in cost

Unsure

(b) Businesses

- Significant increase in cost
- Some increase in cost
- Broadly cost-neutral***
- Some reduction in cost
- Significant reduction in cost
- Unsure

(c) Individuals

- Significant increase in cost
- Some increase in cost
- Broadly cost-neutral
- Some reduction in cost***
- Significant reduction in cost
- Unsure

Please explain the reasons for your response.

11. Are there ways in which the Bill could achieve its aim more cost-effectively (e.g. by reducing costs or increasing savings)?

Unsure.

EQUALITIES

12. What overall impact is the proposed Bill likely to have on equality, taking account of the following protected characteristics (under the Equality Act 2010): age, disability, gender re-assignment, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion and belief, sex, sexual orientation?

- Positive
- Slightly positive
- Neutral (neither positive nor negative)***
- Slightly negative
- Negative
- Unsure

Please explain the reasons for your response.

13. In what ways could any negative impact of the Bill on equality be minimised or avoided?

No negatives identified.

SUSTAINABILITY

14. Do you consider that the proposed bill can be delivered sustainably, i.e. without having likely future disproportionate economic, social and/or environmental impacts?

X Yes
No
Don't know

Please explain the reasons for your response.

Many of the improvements sought for rural communities such as better public transport, broadband, locally provided services etc will reduce our carbon footprint.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

The key ingredient for well-being in rural areas is to have well paid jobs with companies based in the rural areas. An exceptional example of this is Dounreay, both in its R&D days and now in its decommissioning phase. Getting substantial industry and commerce in rural areas cannot happen by local decision making. It cannot even happen at regional level. This is because a

body like Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) is likely to be competing for inward investment with similar bodies in Argyll, Lanarkshire etc.

While local and regional decision making can be useful in "using" money on services it is not powerful enough for "creating" wealth. It therefore comes down to the attitude and policies of central government. If Scottish Government wishes to have equally balanced wealth creating regions with its citizens enjoying broadly similar jobs and careers with broadly similar incomes then it must be in the directing seat of enticing and locating such wealth creating industries. If the government views passively such investment primarily in the central belt and major Highland and Island towns then a balancing of wealth and opportunity will not occur however much local decision making is devolved.

ABOUT YOU

1. Are you responding as:

on behalf of an organisation?

2B. Please select the category which best describes your organisation:

Other (e.g. clubs, local groups, groups of individuals, etc.)

Dounreay Stakeholder Group: a body set up to scrutinise/oversee the operations of the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority and Dounreay Site Restoration Ltd.

3. Please choose one of the following:

I am content for this response to be published and attributed to me or my organisation

4. Please provide your name or the name of your organisation.

Name: **Dounreay Stakeholder Group**

Please provide a way in which we can contact you if there are queries regarding your response. Email is preferred but you can also provide a postal address or phone number. **(Note: We will not publish these contact details.)**

Contact details: c/o June Love, DSG Secretariat, Dounreay.com, Traill House, 7 Odrig Street Thurso, Caithness, KW14 7BJ. Email: info@dounreaystakeholdergroup.org

5. Data protection declaration

I confirm that I have read and understood the privacy notice attached to this consultation which explains how my personal data will be used.