



Scottish Women's Convention response to the Scottish Government's: Islands Bond Supplementary Questions

March 2022

Premise

Following the Scottish Government's open consultation on the Development of the Islands Bond in October 2021, the Scottish Women's Convention has been working with the Scottish Government's Rural and Islands Communities Team to ensure women's voices are represented in this important piece of work. After participating in an online engagement session, we were given a set of supplementary questions to pose to women across Scotland's Island communities.

We gathered women's voices through an online survey which was open for seven weeks between December 2021 and January 2022, gaining 40 responses in total. The main themes that emerged were around the higher cost of living, affordability and accessibility of housing, lack of childcare, the role of women in island life, and the value of community and meaningful engagement.

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC)

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) is funded to engage with women throughout Scotland in order that their views might influence public policy. The SWC uses the views of women to respond to a variety of parliamentary, governmental, and organisational consultation papers at both a Scottish and UK level.

The SWC engages with women using a range of methods, including roadshow events, thematic conferences, and regional contact groups. This submission provides the views of women, reflecting their opinions and experiences in key areas relevant to women's equality.

The SWC is currently engaging with women through digital roadshows, online surveys, asking women to comment by email, and by telephoning those who want to talk. We are also using our wide network to ask women to collate views in their local communities and forward these to us on a regular basis. We are continuing to review innovative ways of engaging with women throughout Scotland using whichever medium is appropriate to them.

Demographics & Background

There was representation from a range of age groups:

Age Group	18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70+
Number	2 (5%)	6 (15%)	8 (20%)	14 (35%)	7 (17.5%)	3 (7.5%)

Of the 35 who provided responses, women identified their ethnicity as:

White	White Scottish	White British	Gael/Gaidheal	Hebridean
5 (14.3%)	21 (60%)	5 (14.3%)	3 (8.6%)	1 (2.9%)

Across the present and previous experiences of women who participated, there was representation from:

- Shetland
- North Uist
- Kyle
- Islay
- Benbecula
- Lewis
- South Uist
- Mull
- Argyll Islands
- Orkney
- Barra
- Skye
- Eigg
- Arran
- Bute

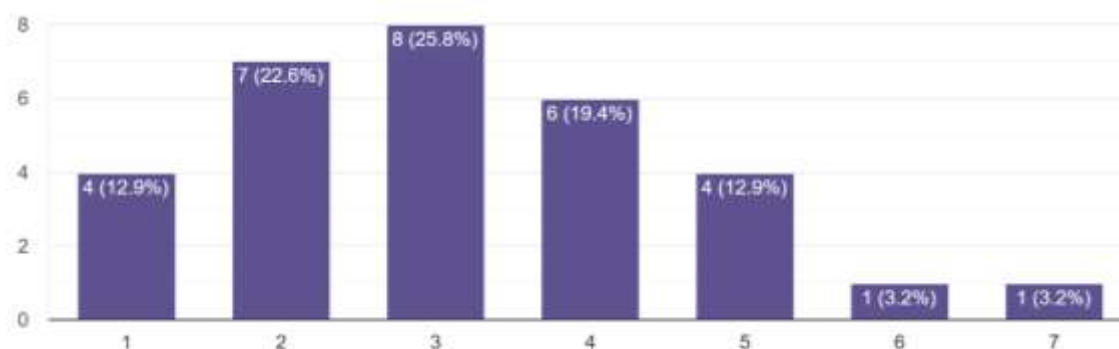
9 women (22%) had not previously heard of the Islands Bond, and 31 (78%) had.

Of the women who had heard of it, we asked them to rate their feelings towards the Islands Bond on a scale of 'Very Negative' to 'Very Positive'.

Very Negative	Negative	Somewhat Negative	Neutral	Somewhat Positive	Positive	Very Positive
4 (12.9%)	7 (22.6%)	8 (25.8%)	6 (19.4%)	4 (12.9%)	1 (3.2%)	1 (3.2%)

If yes, what would you say is your overall attitude towards it?

31 responses



13 (32.5%) women said that they had previously responded to Scottish Government consultations about the Islands Bond, and 27 (67.5%) women said that they had not.

Supplementary Questions

1. In your experience, what are the financial challenges to remaining in island communities?

Cost of living

- “There is a high cost of living. I would say between 40-60% higher than the mainland UK.”
- “Every single thing not made or produced here, and that’s most things, comes with a delivery surcharge, either directly or added to the price when bought in local shops.”
- “The Road Equivalent Tariff does not extend to commercial vehicles which constrains local businesses and adds costs.”
- “£50,000 wouldn’t be enough for a young person to stay on our island.”

Transport

- “Poor transport links due to rural location means you need a car (or even a car for every working adult) which is more expensive.”
- “There is the added cost of travel off the island, for leisure, business or health.”
- “The latest ruse of extra costs is for travelling by motor home on the ferry. Some islanders have motorhomes and use the ferries to take them to the mainland but are now going to be penalised for leisure trips. An ill-thought-out knee-jerk reaction to the antagonism of some to motorhomes.”
- “The cost of flights is too high and the ferry service is not island-focussed in any way.”

Housing

- “For young people, long-term rentals are almost impossible to get (because of tourism), and buying property is becoming prohibitively expensive due to in-migration.”
- “Everything costs more. The cold wind and colder climate make heating a challenge... We technically aren't poor as we have two good salaries but our mortgage (it took us 10 years and 18 offers to get a home) plus bills leaves us with little disposable income.”
- “Rent costs are very high due to limited availability and rent, and council tax takes up almost half a paycheck every month. Also eating costs are high as most buildings are not sufficiently weatherproofed.”
- “Housing prices are distorted by Airbnb.”
- “Youngsters starting out in life unable to compete in the housing market against the numbers of those looking to move here on a whim or retire here.”
- “Lack of affordable housing is the number one challenge and this impacts on everything else, from sustainability of the local economy to provision of essential services to the viability of school rolls.”

Employment

- “It is hard earning enough money all year round to remain here.”
- “Many people are under employed.”
- “As a freelance artist and creative professional, finding employment opportunities that offer remote working has been a huge challenge. Funding opportunities for my creative work is also a challenge.”
- “Wages seem lower than other parts of the UK despite the cost of living being substantially higher than most of the UK.”
- “There is a lack of secure work, because of seasonality and a lack of opportunity.”
- “Historic bias against island-raised people getting key jobs persists.”
- “Often there are reduced employment opportunities for higher-paid, skilled jobs.”

2. In your experience, what are the wider challenges to remaining in island communities?

Infrastructure and services

- “Broadband connectivity is not reliable here at all.”
- “Travel is growing especially more difficult if relying on public transport.”
- “If you have to access healthcare, such as cancer treatment, you face many trips off island with very little financial help (£45 per night from health board!)”
- “Access to specialist healthcare is very limited on the islands.”
- “Mental health issues in general are an issue across the population with no psychiatric care and limited psychology care on the island.”
- “Improvements are required for secondary education, particularly provision for those under support for learning, with educational psychologists, or those with behavioural issues.”

Housing

- “There are not enough one-bedroom houses being built as starter homes.”
- “Home-ownership or even tenancy in villages is hard to come by.”
- “Affordable or social housing just isn’t really a thing.”
- “As well as homes and opportunities for young families, I see no provision made for older people wishing to downsize from too-large homes into smaller, more convenient houses in less isolated places. As it stands, I have to run a car as there is no public transport anywhere near here. I am in reasonable health, but I will inevitably become less able as time goes on.”

Tourist-centred economy

- “There’s a lack of shops for basics (no shoe shops and few clothes shops, but craft shops and cafes aplenty).”
- “There has been a loss of community due to becoming too tourist-centred.”
- “We are viewed in terms of our pretty landscape, and economic ‘development’ tends to be the easy option of tourism. Tourism is chipping away at our communities as more and more housing is bought and owned by non-islanders.”
- “In our area, there is no recreational space, which erodes community cohesion as there are no opportunities for the community to gather. This impacts on attracting new families to the area, which then impacts the local school roll, which then affects the local shop, which then affects the bus services, and before you know it, you have a lifeless community with no heart.”

Social issues

- “It can be like living in goldfish bowl, and there is a lack of mobility in career progression.”
- “The lack of family support as an incomer can make things hard.”
- “I have definitely seen depopulation and a change in population demographics.”
- “Being an older person with grown-up family now living on the mainland, they work and rarely visit. I live in a very rural part of island, where older neighbours have died or moved away, and the places being taken as holiday homes mean I never meet the people.”

Concern over framing island life as ‘challenging’

- “I personally don’t find it particularly challenging as island life is what I am accustomed to.”
- “Policy decisions are made by those who do not have the actual lived understanding of those who live in island places today. So even if someone was born on an island, there have been massive change even in the last 5 years. The questions asked by researchers (always from the outside) ask what the challenges are. Does anyone ask what the challenges are living in Glasgow, Edinburgh, or Aberdeen? No, it’s always positioned as island areas are somehow suffering and need charity.”

3. In your experience, what are the positive opportunities that we should look to promote and support through the Islands Bond?

Community spirit

- “The way of life and wellbeing opportunities are very good. You feel like you are part of a tight-knit community and, if you embrace that, you'll develop close ties.”
- “There are opportunities to be part of a community and have space to flourish.”
- “Investing in sharing island experience with others, either sharing skills or inviting visitors to come and share.”

Support for local people to stay

- “Support islanders to remain with work schemes and control self-catering property numbers.”
- “Support for working-age people to stay on islands.”
- “There are very many young families on our island who wish to remain here, and others who would wish to return. These people should not be prejudiced against by giving money to 'new' people to come in.”
- “Supporting young, local couples and families starting out in life who actually really know what it is to live on these islands and who want to remain here long-term, despite perceived challenges. That will strengthen our communities, increase numbers of young people, and also help stop the erosion of our rich cultural heritage and language.”

Promoting Gaelic language and island culture

- “Newcomers should be positively encouraged to commit to learning the indigenous language, otherwise, one government policy contradicts another. You cannot have population growth AND protect the Gaelic language and culture unless steps are taken to encourage new residents to learn about both.”
- “Use the funding in other ways, for example increasing the croft house grant scheme budget.”
- “The bulk of laws and regulations are designed for urban situations ... The crofter grant and loan scheme that we benefited from in the late seventies was extremely useful and much fairer than this Islands Bond stuff.”
- “Actually support positive steps in Gaelic, housing, and crofting. All these are connected. Few mortgage lenders will lend on traditional houses in the islands, or even a few miles out of Inverness. They cherry pick, and this discriminates against young people and opens the gate to cash rich retirees from the south who sweep in and buy up 'quaint' houses as their second home and drive the prices up. The highest hike was seen in the Western Isles last year. This is crucifying Gaelic, despite the arguments by the professors in the Central Belt. They don't live in the Gaelic speaking communities and have not seen the decline in the last 30 years as was evidenced in the Gaelic Crisis in the Vernacular Communities publication. Some kind of indigenous status would help protect housing, land and the language and culture. Crofts being bought up and used for holidays is like the Highland and island clearances all over again.”

Identifying gaps in skills

- “Attracting the best people to communities, who can drive and develop change. But the infrastructure has to be there first! No good housing, no social amenities, no transport links means any new entrants would be short lived!”
- “The Islands Bond is a bad idea as it stands. However, if it was used exclusively to incentivise young islanders to remain OR was targeted at attracting newcomers with necessary skills or professions, it might be helpful. The last thing these islands need are more people who plan to make a living from tourism.”
- “Supporting people to set up or move businesses to the islands, especially if the businesses can solve existing issues like childcare.”

Land, environment, and infrastructure

- “Renovation of existing properties over new builds, and preservation of undeveloped land.”
- “Tunnels to connect islands, remote work opportunities, and creating crofts or sites with sufficient space for small holdings. Promote environmental restoration, create a National Park for Barra and the outer Islands, build cycle paths through the island, and plant trees.”
- “Renewable energy with tangible local benefits.”
- “More local facilities, both for enhancing community cohesion and also reducing fuel consumption.”

4. What are the wider issues that need to be addressed to support women living in island communities?

Access to services

- “We have reduced access to women's services and specialist advice. Not all organisations have an island branch, so sometimes it is hard to get the necessary support.”
- “Younger women need schools to send their children to, and medical facilities so they don't have to travel miles to access them.”
- “Mental health issues are one of the main areas lacking support and services.”
- “There is a lack of childcare groups, facilitated groups and clubs, fitness and gym facilities to help mental health, reputable schools, reusable nappies and menstrual hygiene products.”

Relationship between childcare and employment

- “The dispersed population and limited types of employment opportunities available in small communities means that quite often there is a lack of childcare and only part time job opportunities available, and these are often in gender stereotypical roles e.g., care, catering, and cleaning.”
- “Childcare support for those without family connections here is a real struggle.”
- “Better support networks, such as improved access to childcare options for varied shift working or attending evening meetings, would help.”
- “There could be central community hubs with crèche options and working spaces so parents could be working nearby their children rather than facing a 20+ mile commute to the central town to work. This could then help parents access work whilst also doing the really important things like being involved in community activities or school and pre-school activities.”
- “Childcare is still an issue as, in the majority of families, it is the mother who doesn't work, or takes low paid work to fit around their family. On Mull, there is no nursery and only one registered childminder, so many mothers juggle work with informal childcare arrangements which aren't sustainable.”
- “There are real issues with childcare availability and costs. All the classic gender disparities are magnified here.”
- “Affordable childcare outside of office hours. If women are to be involved in community groups or councils, childcare is often an issue.”
- “We need funding targeted specifically at women. Women are still earning less, still being paid less, still taking the main responsibility for child and elderly care, and so have less ability to build up capital to work with.”
- “All the women I know are very busy, for example I have multiple jobs and a husband who often works away, plus children. I'm looking for secure employment, but it's not easy.”

Diversity of jobs

- "Job opportunities are an issue. Many of the higher-level strategic roles have been centralised to the mainland. There is a distinct gendered job creation approach. Typically-male industries like construction, ports and the renewable potential are the focus of activities."
- "As a woman, I have never felt I needed special treatment and had no issues in progressing in my chosen career."
- "Support creative industries with an actual creative strategy. This has consistently been shown to be income-generating when in place, but support here is next to nothing."
- "Women are not given the same opportunities to enter crofting."

Women's role within society

- "There is a definite issue with elected leadership roles still being seen as a male province in the Western Isles. We have an unfortunate stagnation in public life, where older people (65+) who achieved a public profile 30-40 years ago, cling onto these positions. This makes it difficult for younger people of both genders, and women in particular (of any age) to participate in, for example, local government representation."
- "We need more women on the council, giving women a higher profile in community life. There also should be development support for women entrepreneurs."
- "There is a lack of women's representation on community boards and the local council which is a huge issue as they are missing a whole different point of view on matters."
- "Women run the islands!"
- "Encouragement and support for young females to be able to participate in local government would be very valuable."

Broader social issues

- "Opportunities for building social connections would be helpful."
- "There are some cultural issues that need to be considered, such as old-fashioned attitudes about what women can and should do."
- "Better support is needed for women who have to leave their homes because of domestic violence and relationship issues, and the compounding of existing issues can make this so difficult, for instance lack of employment, childcare, or housing can leave women stuck."
- "We need to tackle the macho male attitudes!"
- "There should be more accountability for toxic, male-heavy workplaces."
- "There is still a big religious influence – both Catholic and Protestant."

Groups for Further Consultation

We also asked women if they knew of any specific community groups or organisations that they thought should be consulted about the Islands Bond. The suggestions women made were:

- Community Councils
- Gaelic groups e.g., CnaG
- Comar - An Tobar & Mull Theatre
- Local development companies
- CnES
- Residents Associations
- Community Land Trusts
- Community Associations
- Young people wanting to return
- Citizens Advice
- Parent Councils
- Youth groups and elderly groups

In relation to this, women also commented:

- "What is even more important than consulting though is listening to people. That doesn't always happen with so-called consultations."
- "I can't say which groups have been consulted, as nothing has filtered down to us."

Questions about the Islands Bond

There was a general theme among the women we spoke to that there has not been enough information widely available and accessible, and many of them wanted to know more about it. They suggested more public information sessions, online information, and leaflets.

We gave women the opportunity to ask any specific questions they had about the Islands Bond.

- Several women asked questions relating to why money is being given to people coming to the islands, but not to existing residents:
 - “What are you doing to support the local families who are already living, working and participating in their local communities? We are struggling with all of the issues mentioned above, but we have still chosen to live where we do through a desire to make an area better, with a tangible connection to the area we belong to. It seems such a shame that families like this are not the focus of these schemes.”
 - “What will be done to ensure that local families are not overlooked?”
 - “Why is this not primarily aimed at people who have grown up on the islands?”
 - “Should those already managing to hold on to being in the islands be considered for assistance to remain here?”
 - “How does the Island Bond support those already living and working on the island and promote people staying in the islands rather than moving to the islands?”
 - “Why pay to bring families here, when you could create employment opportunities in the public sector so people could stay in their own communities? Or put proper controls around housing sales and Airbnb? Or put some proper land ownership controls in place? It makes no sense as a strategic intervention.”
- There were some logistical questions about the plans:
 - “What happens if it’s allocated and then someone decides they need to leave?”
 - “Please can you explain exactly what is offered?”
 - “I cannot see any positives from this gimmick which has the potential to harm the language and heritage of island communities. Are there to be specific criteria in selecting who gets the money?”
- Women also used this opportunity to question how the Islands Bond had been developed and whether it will be viable in practice:
 - “Why was this thought to be a good idea to include in the manifesto without asking the islands first?”
 - “My question is can you please think again and come up with resources for locally inspired ways of population attraction? This should be delivered by local agencies e.g., LAs or HIE. Many islands team-led funding grants are being administered by Edinburgh-based Inspire Scotland rather than by island-based agencies which undermines local jobs. This is quite ridiculous given the mission of the islands team.”
 - “We islanders are fed up of having unrealistic policies foisted upon us that we then have to take the time and energy to explain why they won't work.”
 - “Who thought it up?! It sounds like a civil servant thought it up as a box ticking manifesto pledge that makes no sense in the real world.”
 - “Think very very carefully about what you are doing. What you decide in the Central Belt will then affects us who live here.”
 - “I am totally against the Islands Bond and can see NO positive opportunities. Drop this divisive idea now.”

Conclusion

The SWC is grateful for the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Government's Rural and Islands Communities Team's supplementary questions on the impacts of the Islands Bond for women. As an organisation, we will continue to work with women from across Scotland to gather voices and experiences relating to this topic and its effects on women's equality.

For further information, please contact

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