

SC4: A plan for the islands

Orkney Liberal Democrats

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Conference notes:

- The strong feelings in Shetland and Orkney against the centralisation of public services, for example on policing, fire services, colleges, economic development, public sector construction and civil engineering contracts.
- Scottish Liberal Democrats support for radical action to reverse centralisation and empower communities through the Home Rule and Community Rule Commission report.
- The distinct needs of the islands on many matters, not least the seafood industries, the Scottish Government's exclusion of business from the Air Discount Scheme and the exclusion of Orkney and Shetland from any mechanism to reduce ferry fares.
- The 'Our Islands, Our Future' campaign jointly led by Orkney Islands Council, Shetland Islands Council and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar seeking additional powers to give communities greater control over island requirements. Conference believes:
 - The Scottish Government's centralised "one-size-fits-all" policies damage the interests of the islands where circumstances are very different from the Scottish mainland.
 - Public bodies such as Marine Scotland, Scottish Natural Heritage and Transport Scotland, for example, have a particularly big impact on island communities.
 - The seabed around islands is of vital economic importance locally and nationally.
 - Fuel poverty is higher in island communities than elsewhere in Scotland, due to poor housing stock, low incomes, and high fuel costs. This risks being made worse as Standard Assessment Procedure (SAP) rules result in new houses in island communities without access to mains gas are often built using less insulation.
 - Air services are a lifeline link for businesses, patients travelling to hospital appointments and the wider public.

Confidence in services has been hit following months of reduced reliability due to technical faults.

- In vital policy areas solutions in the central belt are inappropriate for the islands. Regulation of home care workers is one example. The level of accreditation required for home visits to patients on the smaller isles can appear disproportionate when visits more often deliver social interaction than healthcare provision.
- NHS Orkney and NHS Shetland have been underfunded by the Scottish Government, as assessed by the Government's own NRAC formula and confirmed by Audit Scotland. This has led to a squeeze on NHS budgets and services, already stretched by the costly nature of the provision of services in island communities.
- Good, reliable and affordable broadband is essential. For the Northern Isles, however, the current broadband roll out is only set to see 75% of premises covered by the end of 2016. This compares to a figure of 84% for the Highlands and Islands region as a whole and 95% nationally.
- Some council ward boundaries do not take account of transport or the differences between island communities, meaning that island residents can be underrepresented.

Conference resolves that a future Islands (Scotland) Bill should:

A) Subject all legislation proposed by the Scottish Government to 'Island-Proofing' to reflect the needs of island communities. 'Island-Proofing' should be extended to Scottish Government negotiations with the UK Government and with the European Union.

B) Give Scottish Government ministers the power, only at the request of local authorities, to issue statutory guidance in relation to island communities which relevant public bodies would be required to adhere to.

C) Ensure the ownership and management of the seabed round the islands should be devolved not just to Edinburgh, but passed to the islands.

D) Give Highland Council and Argyll and Bute Council the

powers over the waters round their islands.

E) Reform Standard Assessment Procedure (SAP) rules to help in efforts to reduce bills and tackle fuel poverty.

F) Extend the statutory protection of the Shetland and Orkney seat to Na h-Eileanan an Iar.

G) Give island councils the power to make the case to the Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland for the introduction of single or two member wards where there is a strong geographical case.

H) Introduce a working, active “Islands Plan” to provide a framework to address the interests of the islands. A new Scottish Government should be required to present a draft plan within 3 months of its appointment, then subject to consultation before a final plan is set within 6 months of the election to last the full parliamentary term.

Conference resolves that a future Islands Plan should:

1. Make provision to meet the costly provision of services faced by island communities, such as the recruitment of NHS staff and the provision of mental health services.
2. Work with relevant parties, including Loganair, to examine the longer term provision of this lifeline service.
3. Ensure significant decisions are not taken without proper consultation, such as the decisions of the SNP Government to exclude business from the Air Discount Scheme and the exclusion of Orkney and Shetland from any mechanism to reduce ferry fares.
4. Set out a framework and delivery of funding to plug the remaining gaps in broadband and mobile phone coverage.

Conference resolves that the Scottish Liberal Democrat Parliamentary Party should:

- Consult and work with Orkney Islands Council, Shetland Islands Council, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, the local authorities who have responsibility for island communities and relevant stakeholders, to build a consensus around future action.