



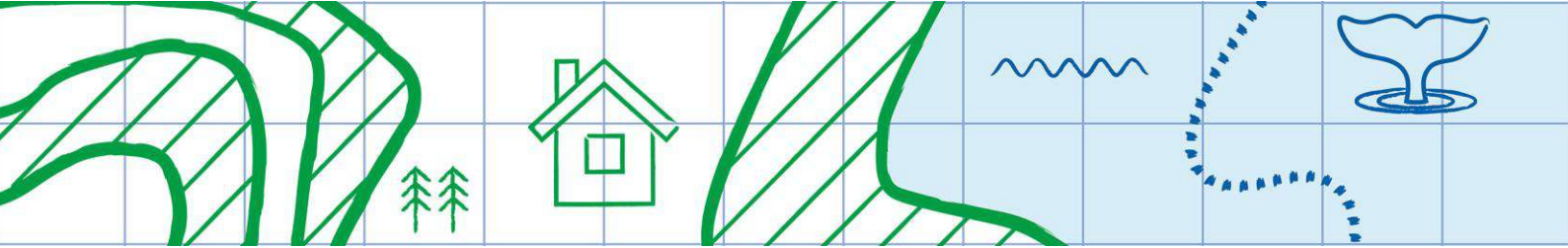
Young Islanders Network

Residential Report

Orkney 2026



Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba
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Introduction

The Young Islanders Network residential is an annual event hosted across different island locations to create opportunities for young people to come together, both within and beyond their own island communities.

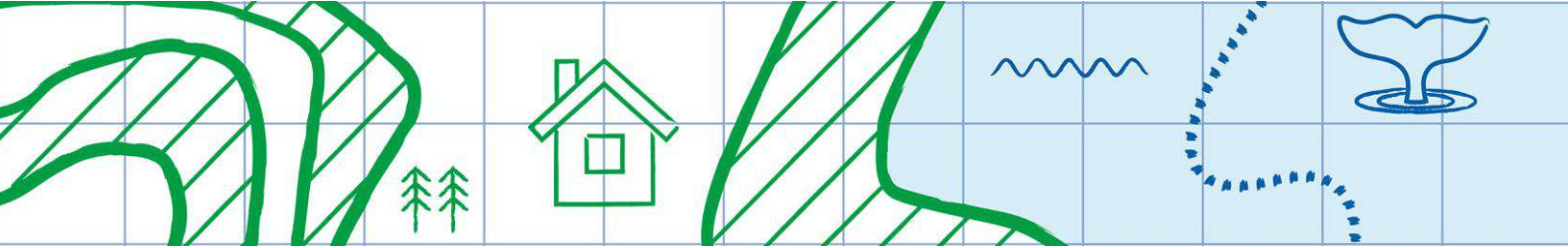
Each year, the residential is hosted in a different island setting, enabling young people to experience new places, build connections across island groups, and engage with perspectives beyond their immediate context. This approach supports both on-island and off-island opportunity, reducing isolation, strengthening networks and creating space for shared understanding.

The residential brings together young people to explore what matters to them, providing a structured but open environment for discussion, reflection and collaboration. Through a series of activities, participants examined key aspects of island life including housing, transport, education, culture and wellbeing.



For 2025-26, we were hosted by Orkney. A multi-site residential hosted 13-15 March, posed multiple logistical considerations including staggered arrivals and departures of delegates by plane and ferries. The multi-location planning incorporated themes of local economy and opportunities, targeted to support local economy and investment, the links to tourism, heritage and culture of the islands and identified the logistics of island living, co-ordinating travel and resilience.





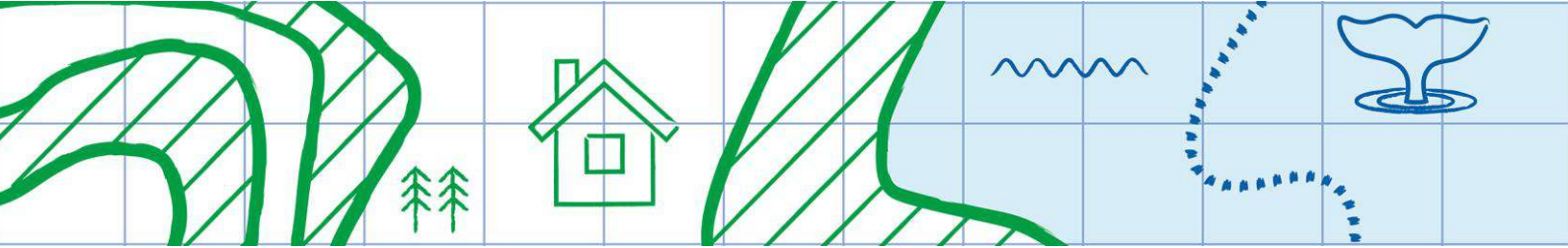
Purpose

The residential was designed to support the transition from policy to delivery, following the launch of the National Islands Plan Implementation Route Map, where the Young Islanders Network is identified as a named delivery partner. It continues to provide a strong evidence base to inform delivery, aligned with the National Islands Plan and its implementation, with the Young Islanders Network playing a key role in connecting lived experience to implementation.

Within this context, the residential aimed to:

- Establish a strong foundation for delivery by connecting national policy with lived experience
- Build and strengthen relationships across the Northern Isles, following feedback from Orkney and Shetland groups for more opportunities for collaboration and shared understanding in effective delivery
- Create a space for young people to explore and articulate the realities of island life in relation to policy priorities
- Identify key themes and interconnections to inform Young Islanders Network delivery for 2026–27
- Support young people to engage as active contributors to implementation, shaping not only what is delivered, but how it is delivered

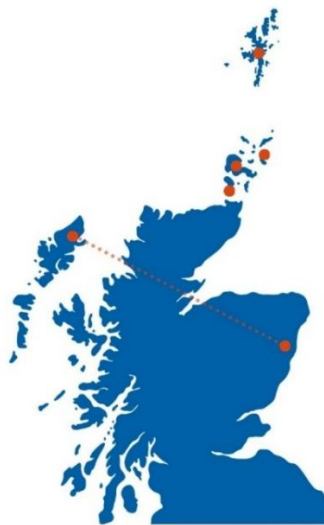




Who Attended

The residential brought together young people aged 12-19, with delegates from Hoy, Stronsay, Shetland, and Lewis.

Young people represented Shetland Youth Voice, OPEN Shetland, Ability Shetland, Orkney Youth Forum, Anderson High School, Aith Junior High School, Stronsay Junior High School, Stromness Academy.



Total Delegate travel miles

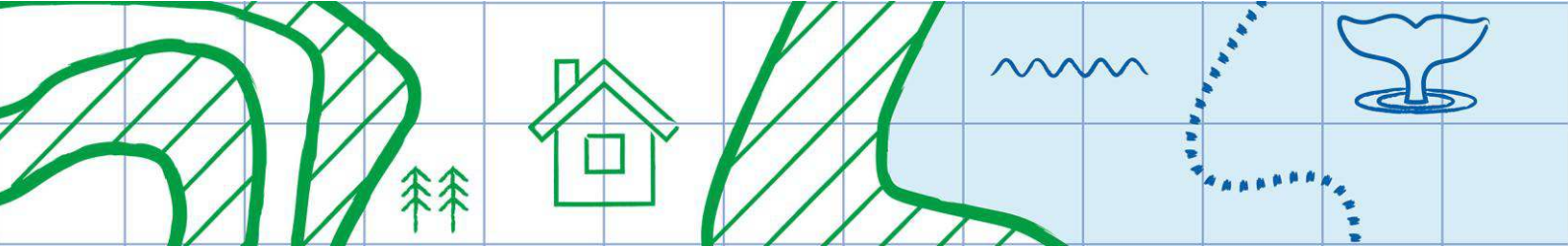
3350

Delegates **13**

YIN volunteers **1**

YIN partner youth workers **3**





Activities

A range of interactive and reflective activities were used to support engagement and draw out insight. Across all activities, the approach prioritised open dialogue, peer-led discussion and critical thinking - linking personal experience to wider systems, allowing both depth of insight and strong participant ownership of the findings.

Scavenger Hunt (Kirkwall-based Exploration)

Participants explored the local environment, comparing external perceptions of island life with their own lived realities. This created a strong foundation for later discussions on representation and reality.

“Spill the Tea” Reflection Session

An open, informal discussion space with bubble tea making, to reflect on the scavenger hunt where young people shared honest views on island life, including challenges, opportunities and contradictions.

Culture vs Heritage Quick Round

Participants were given thinking questions around the distinction between lived culture and external representations of heritage, considering how both shape identity and economic narratives.

“Island Insta” Activity

A critical exercise examining who controls the narrative of island life, how islands are portrayed externally, and the implications for communities.

Scottish Government Presentation

Presentation from the Islands Team to update the new National Islands plan and implementation.

Informal Evening Discussion (Relationships and Safety)

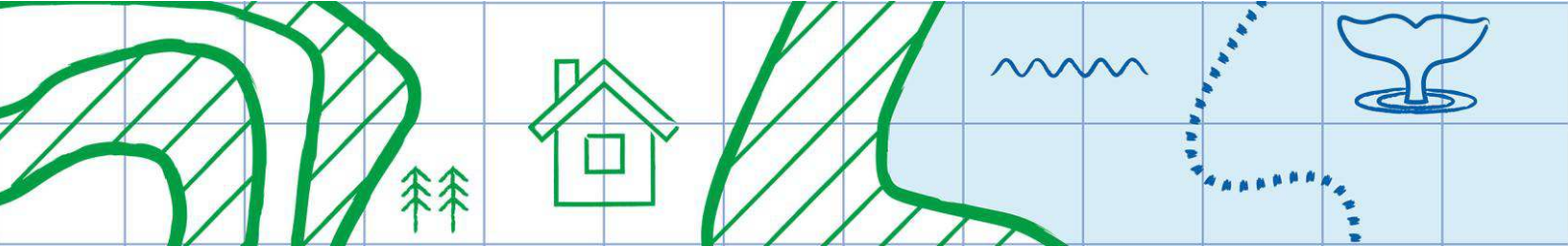
A facilitated but informal conversation focused on relationships, behaviour, and safety across island contexts, including wider themes linked to violence against women and girls.

Field Trips

Skara Brae, Ring of Brodgar, Standing Stones of Stenness, Brough of Birsay, Earl’s Palace Birsay, and Wideford Hill Cairn.

Social Activities





Including bowling, tie dye and a meal together

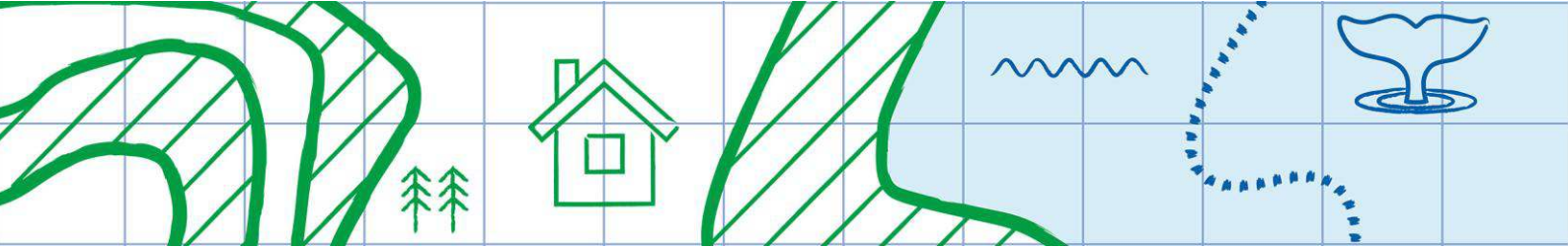


Standing Stones of Stenness



Brough of Birsay



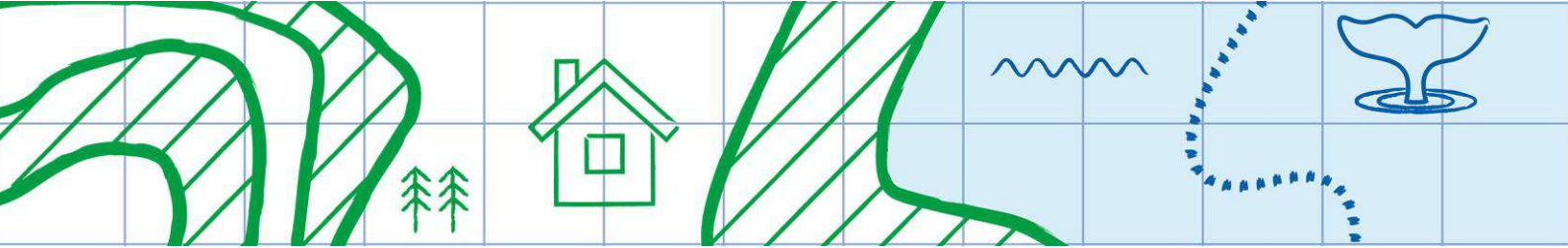


Ring of Brodgar



Orcades Hostel





Earl's Palace, Birsay

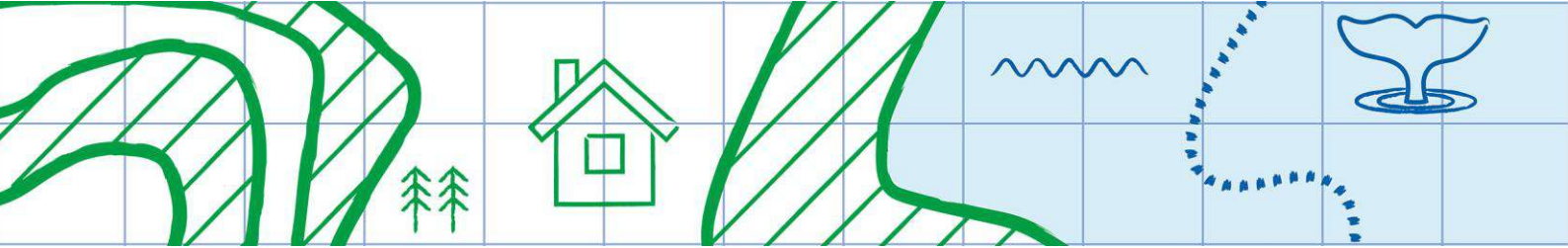


The Old Library



The Old Library coworking space



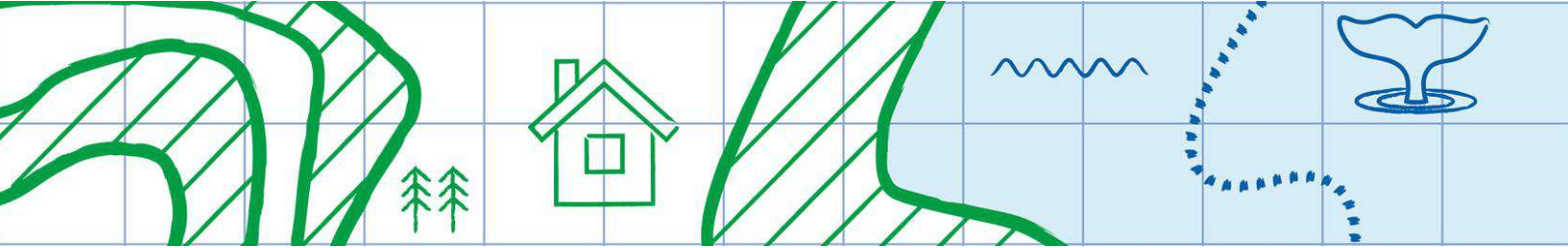


Lanes bowling, Garden Square



Kirkwall Bay





Key findings

While there is clear alignment with the priorities of the National Islands Plan, the findings highlight a gap between policy intent and lived experience, particularly in how issues are connected and delivered in practice.

1. Representation vs Reality

Young people identified a disconnect between the outward image of islands (focused on tourism, heritage and landscape) and the realities of daily life, including housing pressures, limited opportunities and social challenges. This influences both perception and decision-making.

2. Interconnected Systems

Housing, transport, education, employment and wellbeing are experienced as a single, interconnected system rather than separate issues. Transport was identified as a key barrier, directly impacting access to education, skills development and wider opportunities. Access to Mainland was seen as a barrier due to restrictions imposed rather than freedom of movement that would encourage young people to remain.

3. Mental Health as a Cross-Cutting Theme

Wellbeing is shaped by broader social and cultural conditions, including community dynamics, visibility, stigma and access to safe spaces. Cultural and social environments were identified as both protective and, at times, contributing to risk.

4. Culture, Relationships and Safety

Cultural identity and community events are central to island life but can also present challenges around behaviour, inclusion and safety. Young people highlighted the need to retain culture while enabling it to evolve.

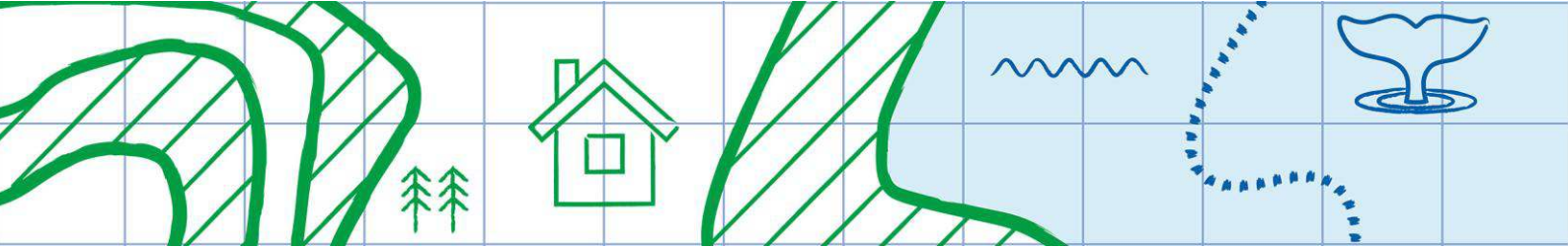
5. Strong Appetite for Meaningful Participation

Participants demonstrated a high level of awareness, systems thinking and willingness to contribute to solutions. There is a clear expectation that engagement moves beyond consultation to ongoing involvement in decision-making and delivery.

6. Variation Across Island Contexts

While common themes exist, experiences differ across island groups (e.g. social dynamics, structural barriers, rural livelihoods), reinforcing the need for locally responsive approaches within national frameworks.





Outputs

Evidence Base

A comprehensive set of qualitative insights drawn from workshops, discussions and activities, providing a foundation for future delivery and stakeholder engagement. This can be viewed in our [Residential Analysis](#).

Policy Alignment

Direct alignment with National Islands Plan priorities, particularly in relation to population, connectivity, wellbeing and community sustainability.

Youth Capacity & Recognition

All participants achieved a Dynamic Youth Award, recognising development in leadership, communication and participation.

Strengthened Networks

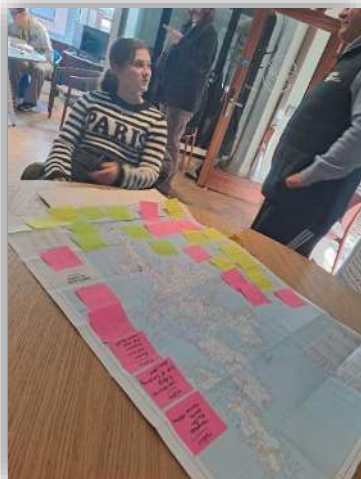
Increased connection between young people across island groups, particularly strengthening relationships across northern isles.

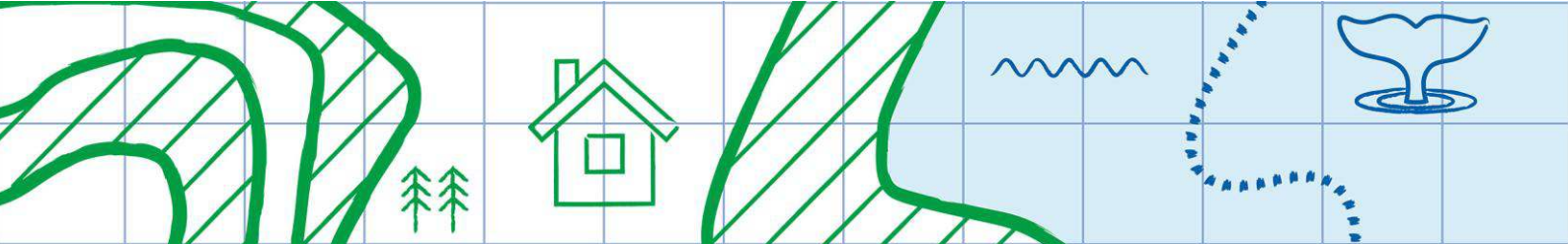
Co-production in Practice

The residential functioned as a live model of co-production, with young people actively shaping analysis, priorities and next steps.

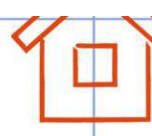
Foundation for 2026–27 Delivery

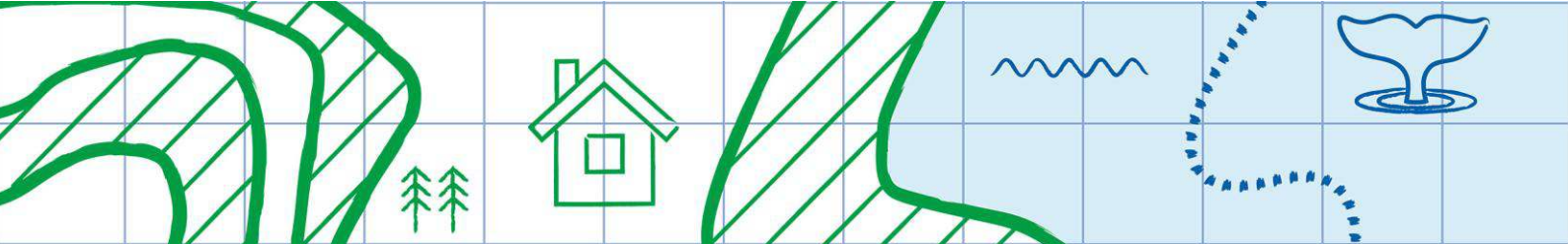
Clear, actionable themes to inform Young Islanders Network delivery as a named partner within the National Islands Plan Implementation Route Map.





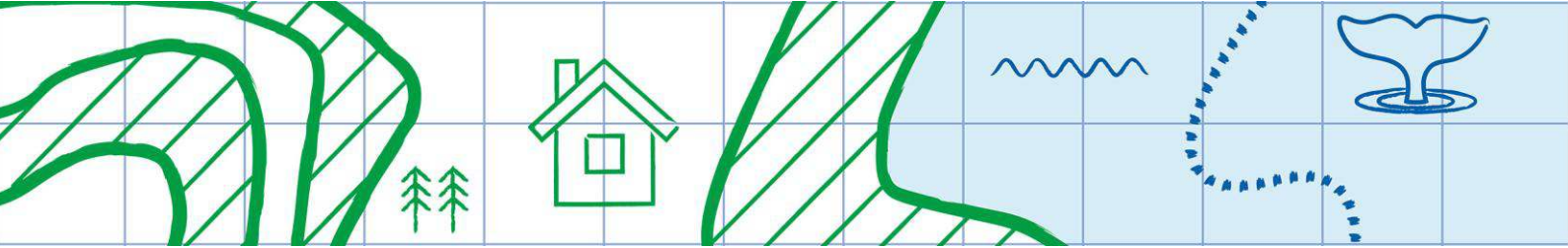
Findings (What young people told us)	Implications (What this means)	Actions (What we will do 2026-2027 delivery)	NIP alignment	YIN delivery role
Disconnect between island image and lived reality.	Decisions and investment may be based on incomplete or overly positive narratives.	Youth-led storytelling; work with partners to present balanced narratives from young people; position representation as part of delivery.	Population retention; Sustainable economic development; Promoting Island communities.	Co-produce insight through creative consultation and engagement, digital content and community challenges; mobilise young people as content creators; feed into reporting, residentials and decision-maker engagement. Outcomes 1 and 3
Housing, transport, education and employment are interconnected.	Single-issue approaches will not address root causes of inequality or depopulation.	Support joined-up, youth-informed planning across housing, transport and skills, input to place plans and regional strategies.	Population; Connectivity; Economic development; Fair work.	Co-ordinate thematic working groups; generate joined-up youth insight; feed into place plans and regional/national strategy through structured engagement and reports. Outcome 1
Transport is a key barrier to access and opportunity.	Limits education, social participation and confidence, particularly for outer islands.	Continue youth input into transport policy and ferry decisions; evidence lived experience impacts.	Connectivity; Transport; Access to services.	Gather lived experience through thematic sessions and challenges; support direct engagement with transport forums and decision makers; maintain feedback loops. Outcome 1
Education pathways are limited or unevenly accessible.	Constrains future options and contributes to outward migration.	Strengthen links between education, skills and local opportunities;	Skills; Education; Economic development.	Embed YIN in schools through networks, challenges and programmes; link to DYW, E-Sgoil and





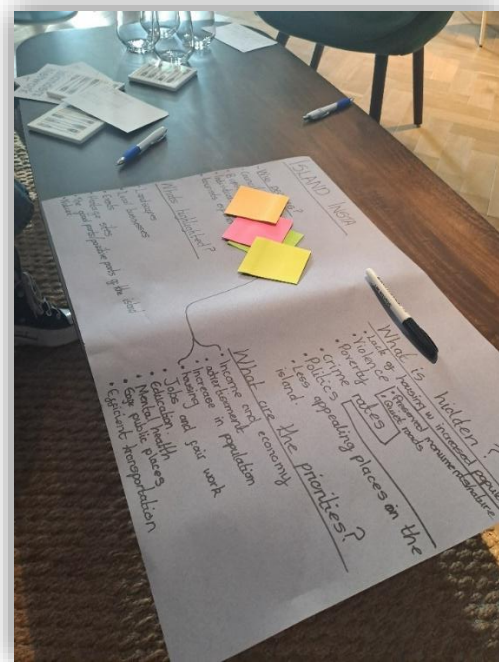
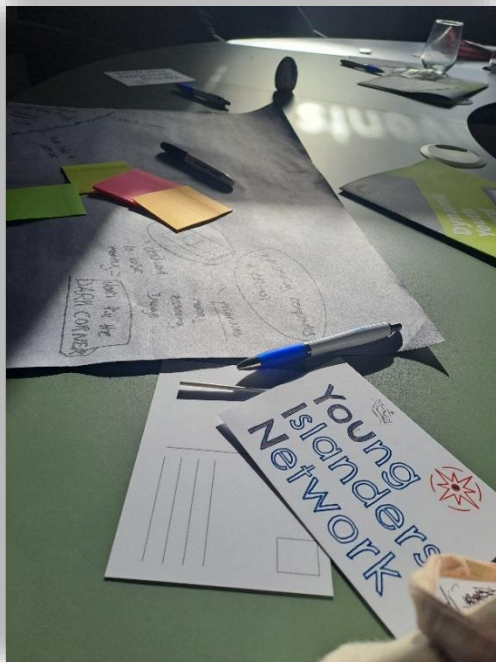
		support place-based learning.		employability pathways; support place-based learning, provide opportunities for capacity building digitally, on and off island. Outcomes 2 and 6
Mental health is shaped by wider systems.	Wellbeing cannot be addressed through services alone; requires systemic approach.	Embed wellbeing across all delivery areas; youth-led safe spaces; integrate into policy discussions.	Health and wellbeing; Community empowerment.	Integrate wellbeing across all activity; deliver safe spaces, community challenges and residential experiences; embed insight into policy discussions, embed into delivery of island based programmes through co-design. Outcome 5
Culture and community are both protective and pressurising.	Cultural spaces can both support belonging and enable exclusion or risk.	Youth-led dialogue on safe, inclusive cultural participation ; support evolution of traditions.	Arts, culture and heritage; Community cohesion.	Facilitate dialogue through events and residential; use creative consultation and storytelling; influence cultural understanding through lived experience and opportunities to grow and celebrate it. Outcomes 1 and 5
Concerns around relationships, behaviour and safety (incl. VAWG)	Gaps between awareness and accountability; limited trust in systems.	Develop youth-informed relationships and safety work; strengthen links between community, education and services.	Health and wellbeing; Safety; Equalities.	Co-design programmes with young people; use network meetings and partnerships to surface issues; connect to services and embed into training and activity Outcomes 5 and 6





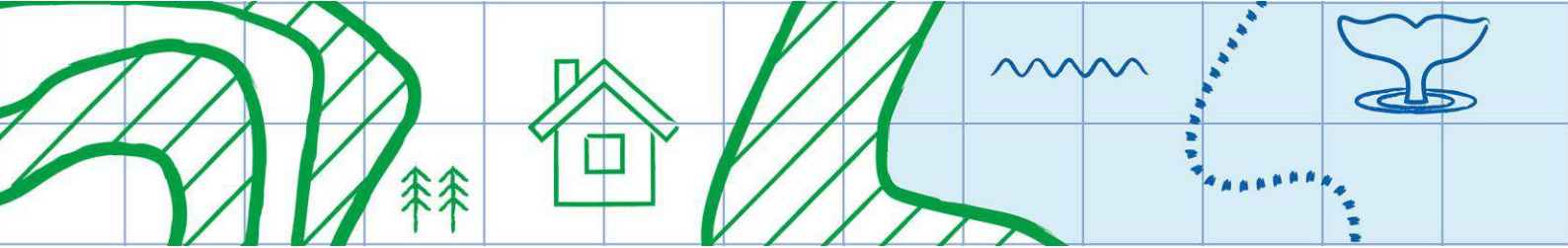
Feedback

“I really enjoyed sharing my opinions and what matters to me.”

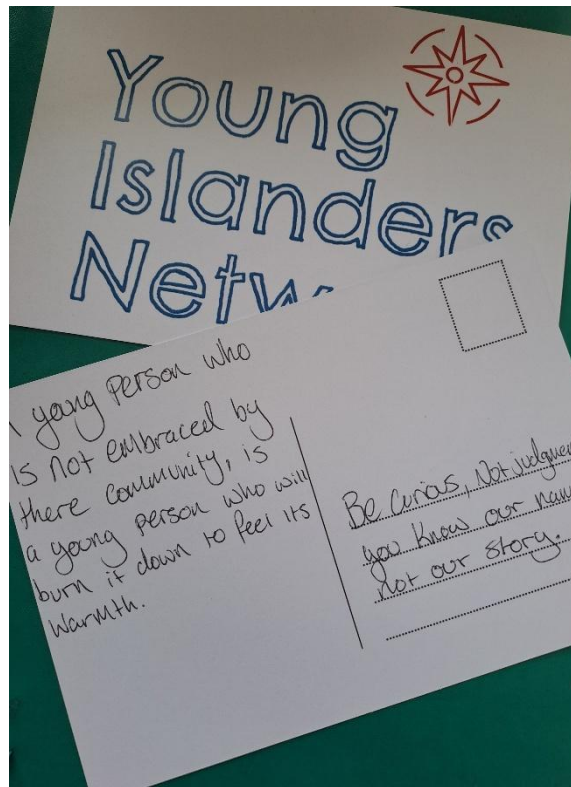


“I have a new perspective of Orkney!”



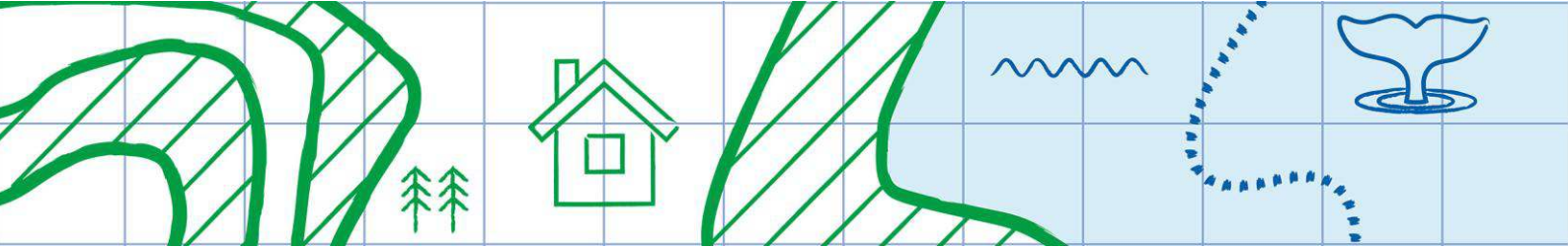


“It would be great to do this in Shetland. I feel that we have bridged the gap of where Shetland and Orkney were seen as enemies and would love to see this progress and work together more.”

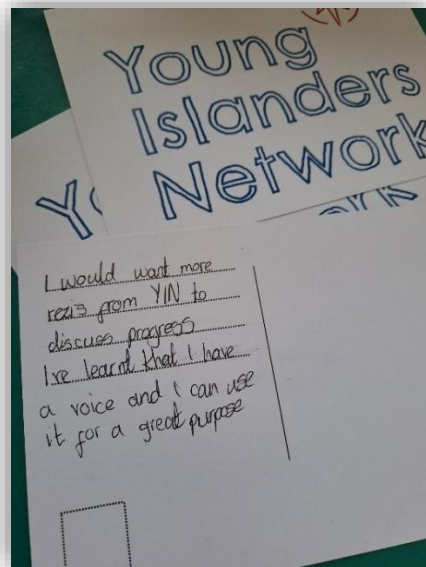
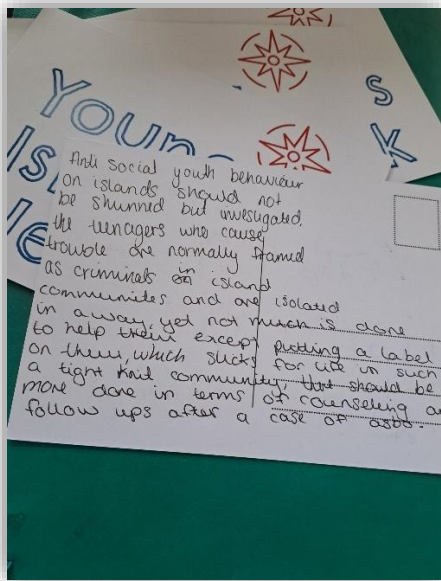


“I want YIN to focus on transportation and to spread the YIN so everyone knows about it.”



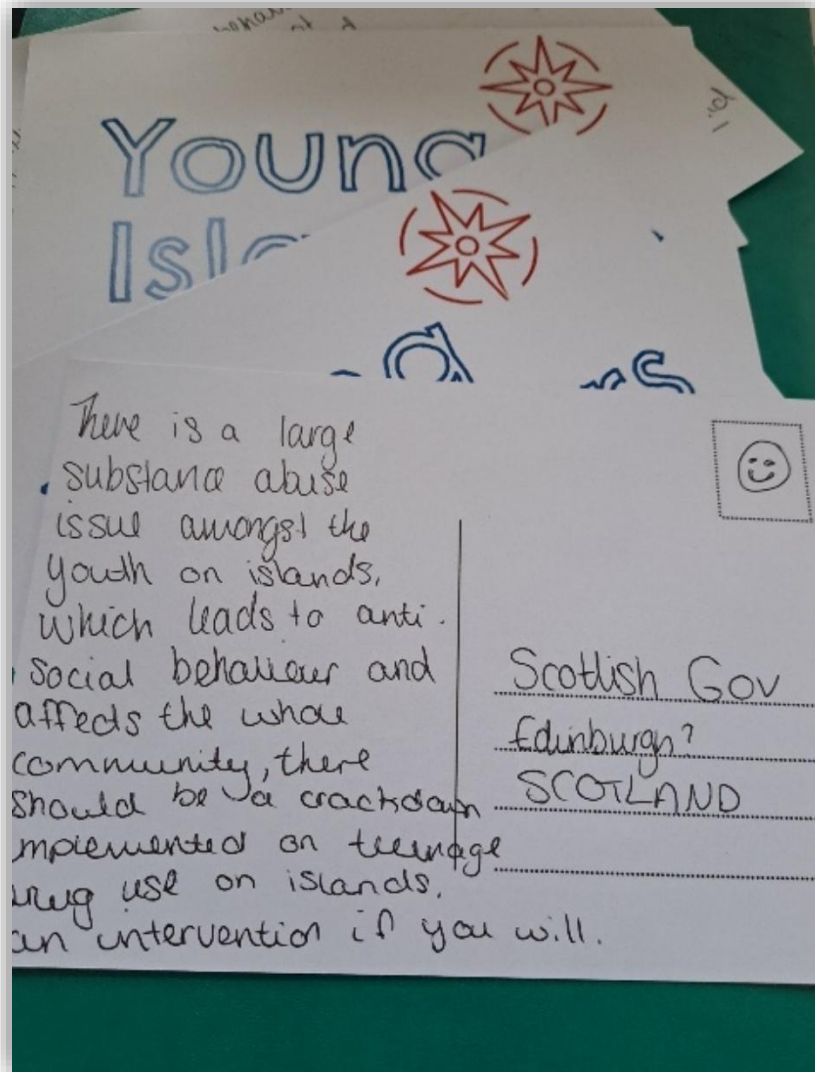
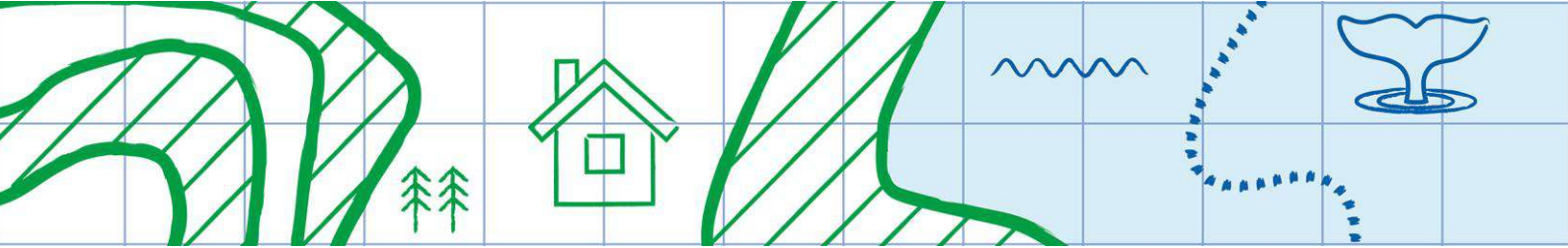


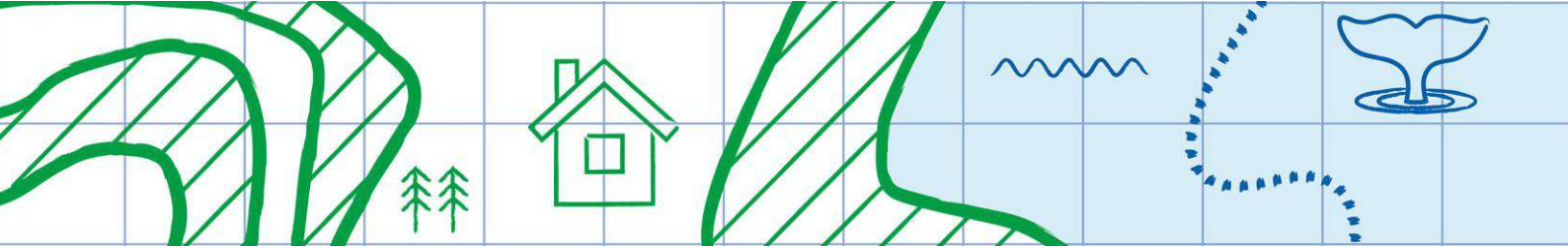
“I learned I have a voice and can use it for great purpose.”



“I learned to bring my best state even if my mental health was crashing.”







Thank you

Thanks to everyone that made this event possible and supported YIN over the weekend.

Scottish Government, Loganair, Orkney ferries, Craigies Taxis, The Kirkwall Hotel, The Orcades Hostel, Lanes Garden Square, The Old Library and Youth Scotland.

