

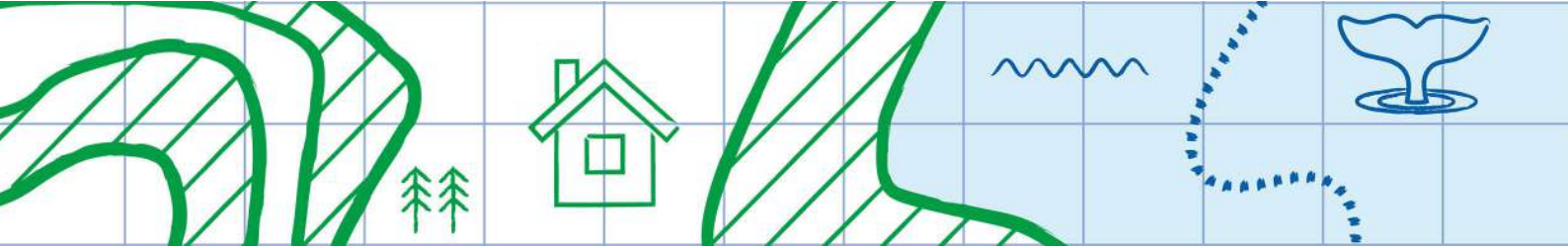


# Young Islanders Network

**Our commitments  
April 2026**



Scottish Government  
Riaghaltas na h-Alba  
gov.scot



# YOUTH VOICE, POPULATION & FUTURE SUSTAINABILITY

Sustaining Scotland's island populations is not only a question of infrastructure, housing or economic development, it is a question of whether young people can realistically build their futures within island communities.

Across Scotland's islands, young people express a strong sense of identity, belonging and long-term commitment to island life. However, this is increasingly in tension with structural barriers including limited connectivity, unequal access to education and opportunity, and restricted housing pathways.

Depopulation is not driven by a lack of desire to stay, but by a lack of viable routes to do so. Young people often leave to access education, training and employment, with a clear intention to return. Without the conditions that enable return; affordable housing, accessible transport, and meaningful local opportunities, this cycle is disrupted.

Youth voice is therefore not a parallel consideration but central to population sustainability. The experiences of young islanders provide real-time insight into how policy is functioning in practice. Ensuring that these perspectives are embedded within decision-making is essential to designing solutions that support not only retention, but return, resilience and long-term community viability.

## YOUNG ISLANDERS: LIVED EXPERIENCE & EMERGING THEMES

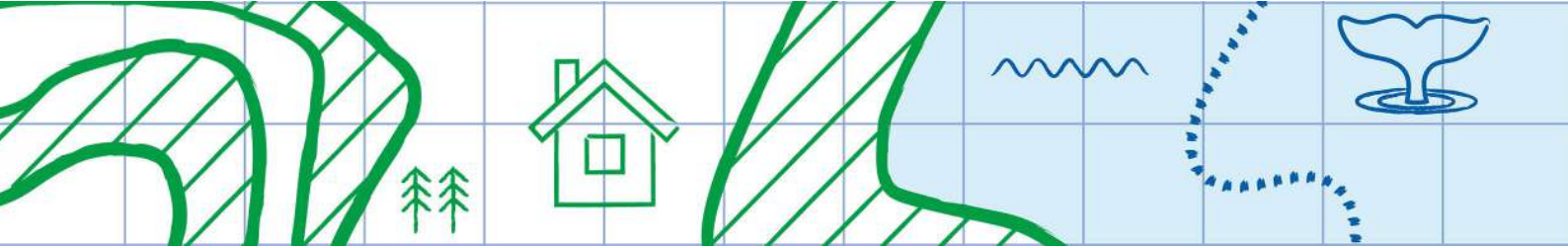
Island life is not being rejected by young people.

What is being challenged is the experience of limited access, restricted movement and reduced opportunity.

Across Scotland's islands, young people describe a consistent tension:

They want to stay but need the ability to leave in order to come back.





# YOUNG ISLANDERS NETWORK

## Who are we?

The Young Islanders Network (YIN) has evolved from a pilot initiative into a nationally recognised mechanism for youth participation within island policy.

Initially established to test approaches to engaging young people in the National Islands Plan, YIN has since moved beyond consultation and influence. It now plays an active role in supporting delivery of the National Islands Plan, working alongside partners to ensure that policy translates into meaningful, place-based outcomes for young people.

YIN connects young people aged 5–25 across Scotland’s island communities, providing structured opportunities to engage with decision-makers, contribute to policy development, and participate in governance. Through partnerships with Community Learning and Development, local authorities and community organisations, YIN anchors youth voice within existing systems.

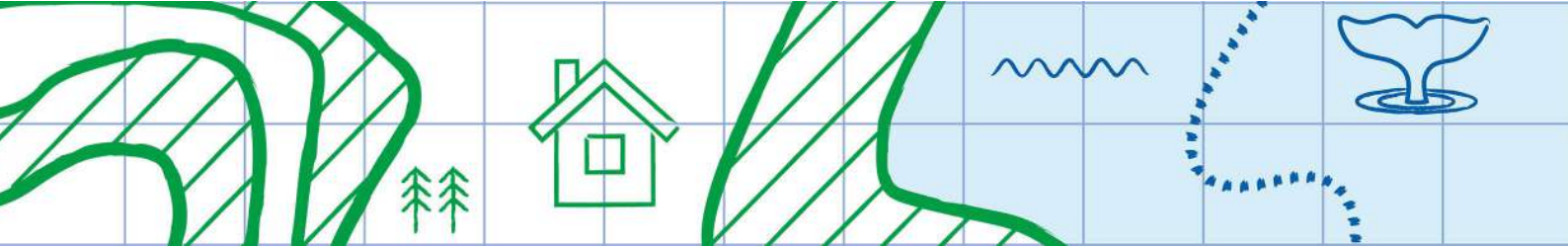
This shift from pilot, to influencing policy, to delivery partner, reflects both the demand from young people to be meaningfully involved, and the growing recognition that sustainable island policy must be co-produced with those it most directly affects.

YIN’s role now extends beyond engagement. It supports:

- embedding young people within decision-making structures
- building capacity for participation and leadership
- connecting local youth voice to national policy processes
- ensuring that lived experience informs implementation, not just design

Through this approach, YIN contributes to a more participatory and accountable model of island policy where young people are not only heard, but are part of how change happens.





# ACTIONS

## 1. CONNECTIVITY IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SURVIVING AND THRIVING

Young people consistently describe connectivity as access to life chances. Where it is unreliable or inequitable, it shapes decisions about education, wellbeing and whether staying is viable. Improved connectivity is not seen as a threat to island identity, but as the condition that enables island life to continue.

We ask decision-makers to:

- Extend under-22s ferry travel to all routes, ensuring equitable mainland access
- Commit to reliable, frequent and affordable ferry services aligned to education and employment needs
- Integrate transport planning with education, health and employment policy
- Support access to off-island opportunities, including events, training and peer networks

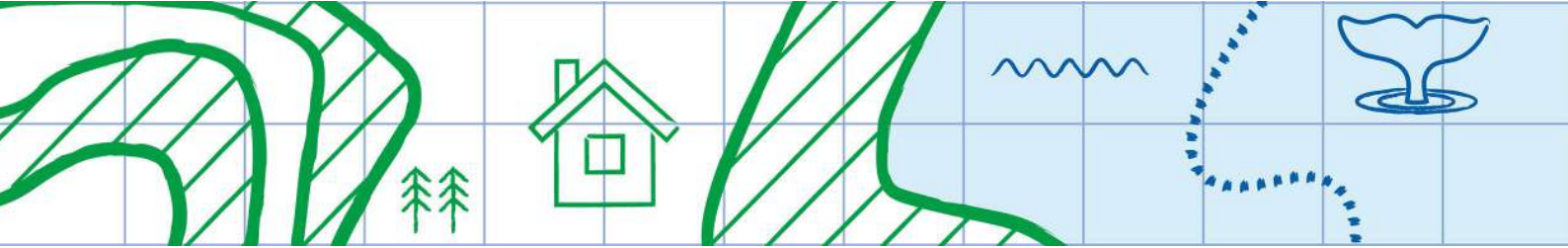
## 2. EDUCATION AND OPPORTUNITY IS SHAPED BY GEOGRAPHY

Access to education and opportunity remains uneven. Young people describe limited subject choice, restricted vocational pathways and a disconnect between learning and local economic opportunity. There is a clear appetite for earlier, stronger links between education and island industries.

We ask decision-makers to:

- Strengthen partnerships between schools, employers and communities to embed local industry pathways
- Expand vocational and skills-based learning within island contexts
- Ensure parity of subject choice regardless of geography and integrate accommodation for young people to study
- Invest in hybrid and place-based learning models





### 3. MOBILITY AND FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT: BUILDS, RATHER THAN WEAKENS, ISLAND COMMUNITIES

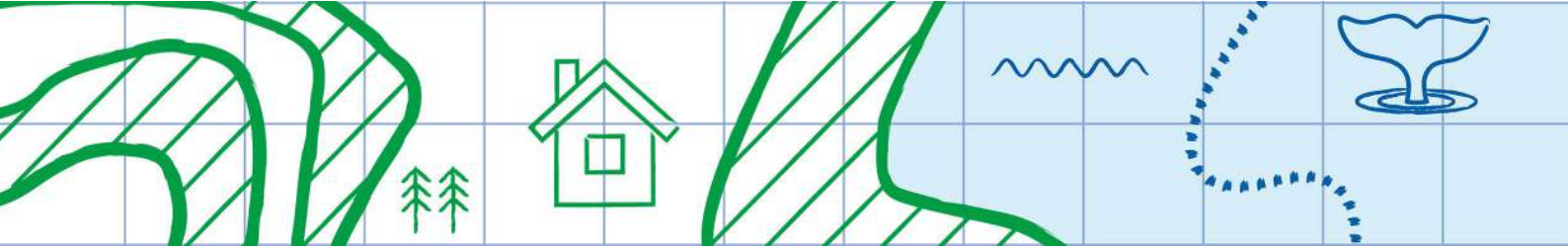
Young people are clear in their desire to remain connected to island life. However, this is not based on staying in one place. Freedom of movement underpins long-term retention. It allows young people to shape their own pathways while maintaining a meaningful connection to their island. In doing so, it supports not only individual wellbeing, but the renewal of community skills, leadership and capacity.

Where movement is enabled, it strengthens island communities: building skills, confidence and networks that return and contribute to local life. Where access to education, employment and wider experience is limited, however, retention can be felt as restriction rather than choice. Sustainable populations are not achieved by holding young people in place, but by enabling a cycle of mobility, return and contribution. Structural barriers disrupt this cycle. Mobility should be understood as part of a sustainable island system.

We ask decision-makers to:

- Support clear pathways for young people to return to island communities
- Develop targeted opportunities linked to local workforce needs
- Fund off-island exchange and national connection opportunities
- Recognise mobility as central to population sustainability
- Ensure equitable access to off-island opportunities, including education, training and employment
- Support clear and accessible pathways for young people to return to island communities
- Invest in connections—physical, social and economic—that maintain relationships between young people and their islands over time
- Fund and support off-island exchange, events and national opportunities for young islanders
- Avoid policy approaches that prioritise retention without addressing the conditions that make staying a viable and positive choice





## 4. INFRASTRUCTURE AND HOUSING: ENABLING PEOPLE TO STAY AND RETURN

Young people are clear that the challenge is not island living itself, but the systems that sit around it. Infrastructure shapes whether island life is viable. They are not supporting systems but foundational. Without them functioning effectively and in alignment, efforts to retain and attract population will continue to be undermined.

Transport reliability, digital connectivity, access to services and the availability of suitable housing all intersect to determine whether young people can remain in, or return to, their communities. Where these systems do not function effectively, they create cumulative barriers, limiting access to opportunity, increasing cost of living, and reducing long-term stability.

Housing is a particularly immediate constraint. Limited availability, affordability and suitability restrict pathways for young people at key transition points like leaving school, returning after education, or starting families. This is not only a housing issue, but a workforce, community sustainability and population issue.

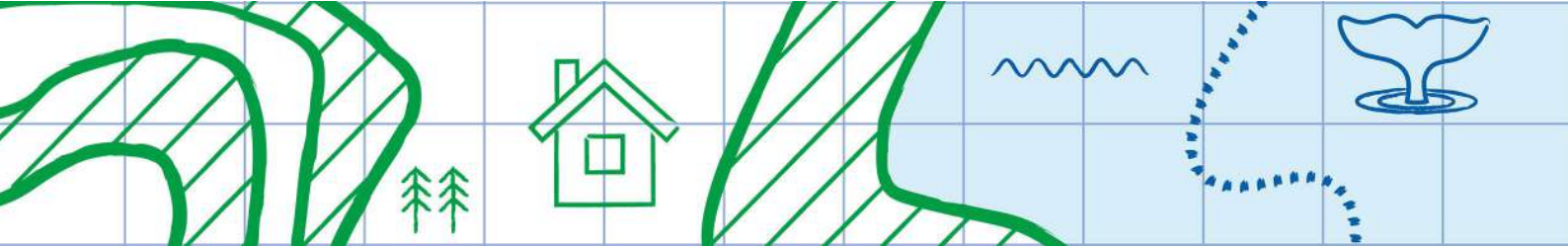
We ask decision-makers to:

- Prioritise infrastructure and housing as core population sustainability measures
- Increase delivery of affordable, accessible and suitable housing for island communities
- Address the impact of second homes and under-occupied properties on housing availability
- Support community-led housing solutions that reflect local need
- Ensure transport, digital and service infrastructure are reliable, affordable and aligned with real-life use
- Strengthen Island Community Impact Assessments to reflect lived experience of infrastructure and housing challenges
- Align housing, infrastructure and workforce policy to support retention and return

## 5. HERITAGE AS LIVING PRACTICE: BALANCING TRADITION AND CHANGE

Young people do not see heritage as something fixed or preserved at a distance. It is lived through land use, farming and crofting, language, community roles and everyday practices. There is a strong respect for generational knowledge and the industries that have shaped island life.





At the same time, young people want to actively shape what heritage becomes. This includes adopting new methods, responding to modern challenges, and finding ways to sustain traditional practices within contemporary contexts. The tension is not between old and new, but in how both are held together.

There is a need to recognise heritage as something that evolves where learning from the past sits alongside adapting for the future. This balance is essential not only for cultural continuity, but for creating viable economic and social pathways that allow young people to remain connected to island life.

We ask decision-makers to:

- Recognise heritage as a living, evolving practice shaped by each generation
- Support pathways for young people to engage in and sustain traditional industries, including farming, land use and marine sectors
- Invest in skills transfer between generations, ensuring knowledge is not lost but adapted
- Enable innovation within traditional sectors, supporting new approaches that sustain long-term viability
- Avoid framing economic development solely around new industries, and instead balance investment across existing and emerging sectors
- Support young people to actively shape cultural and community practices, not only inherit them

## 6. PARTICIPATION MUST MOVE BEYOND CONSULTATION

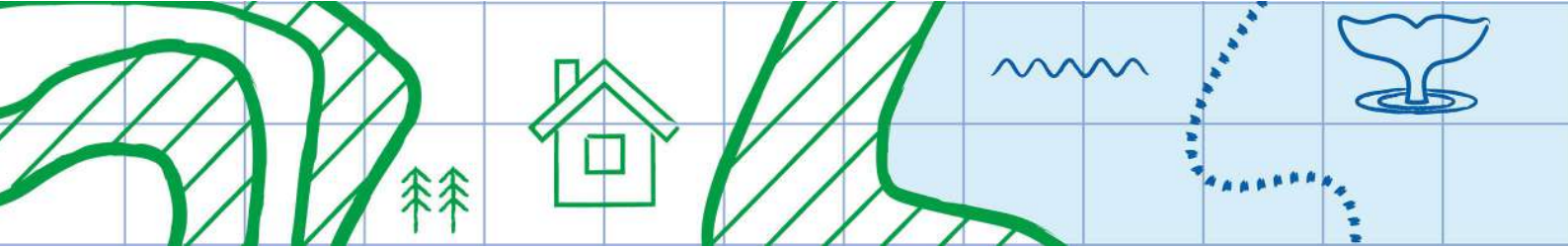
Young people report being consulted, but not always meaningfully included. There is a clear need to shift towards participation that leads to influence and shared decision-making.

Young people are seeing their voice being heard in wider structures and not as an addition. There are still gaps in addressing capacity for young board members, stigma and traditions, and gaps in island education policy where young people are consulted but not embedded in any decision making.

We ask decision-makers to:

- Embed young people within existing governance structures
- Move from one-off consultation to sustained participation
- Provide capacity building for governance and leadership
- Ensure visible feedback loops showing impact of youth voice





## 7. WELLBEING AND SOCIAL CARE INFRASTRUCTURE: ACCESS, STIGMA AND BELONGING

Mental health and wellbeing emerge consistently as a cross-cutting issue in young people's experiences of island life. This is not only about access to services, but about the wider conditions that shape whether support can be sought, offered and sustained.

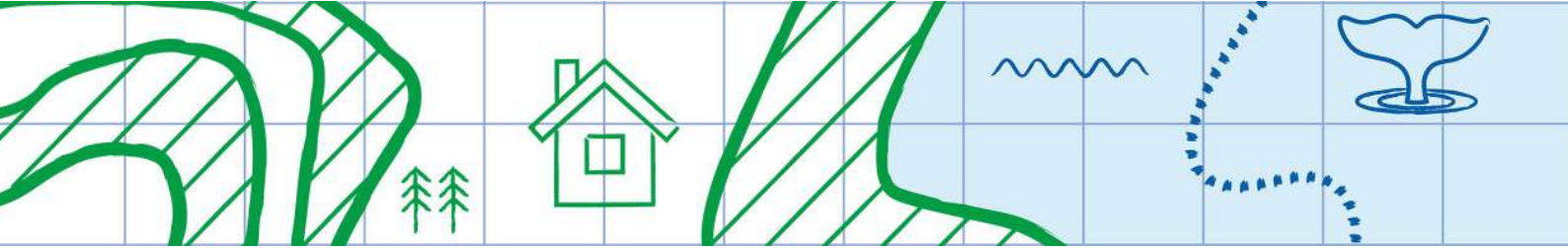
Young people describe a landscape where access to mental health support is limited and often inconsistent, particularly in relation to specialist provision. In small communities, concerns around confidentiality and visibility can act as a barrier to seeking help, with a perception that accessing support may not remain private. Alongside this, stigma continues to shape how mental health is understood and discussed, influencing whether individuals feel able to come forward.

These dynamics do not sit in isolation. They reflect the intersection between service availability, community context and wider economic and social structures. Addressing wellbeing therefore requires more than provision but environments where young people feel safe, included and able to access support without judgement.

We ask decision-makers to:

- Treat mental health and wellbeing as core island infrastructure, not an add-on service
- Ensure consistent, accessible and confidential mental health support across island communities, including digital and outreach provision
- Invest in services that are appropriate to small community contexts, where anonymity and trust are key considerations
- Support community-based approaches that reduce stigma and create safe spaces for young people
- Recognise and address the impact of social norms and accepted behaviours on wellbeing
- Embed wellbeing across policy areas, recognising its links to housing, transport, education and community life
- Involve young people directly in shaping wellbeing services and approaches





## CLOSING POSITION

Young islanders are not disengaging from island life. They are navigating systems that limit their ability to fully participate in it.

The shift from pilot engagement to delivery partnership with the Young Islanders Network demonstrates that young people are ready to contribute not only their views, but their capacity, insight and leadership.

If island policy is to succeed, it must move beyond sustaining place, and instead enable movement, access and agency with young people at the centre of how that future is shaped and delivered.



