

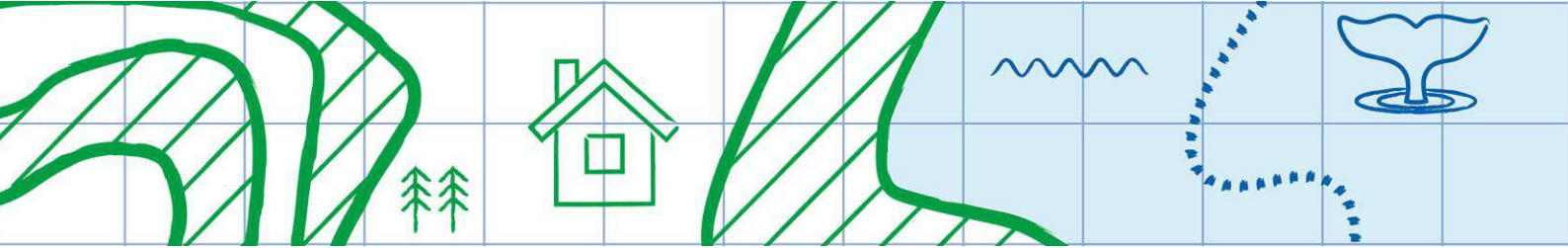


Young Islanders Network

Lewis and Harris Youth Conference Report 19 May 2026



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Event Context

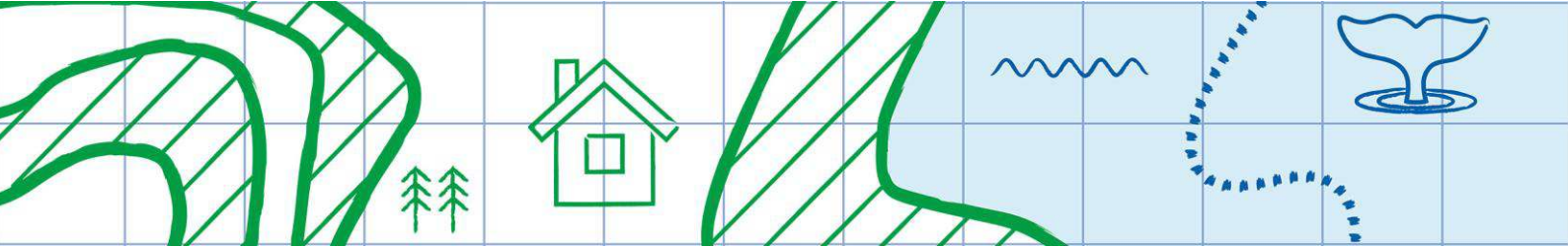
The Lewis and Harris Eilean Siar Youth Conference was held on Tuesday 19 May 2026, bringing together almost 100 S2 and S3 pupils from Sir E Scott School and the Nicolson Institute for a day focused on youth voice, island life and direct engagement with local decision makers.

The event, organised by Community Learning and Development and Education at Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, gave young people space to share their experiences and opinions in their own words. The wider programme included input from Young Scot, Scottish Youth Parliament and the Young Islanders Network, with a panel discussion with NHS Western Isles and Police Scotland representatives.

The Young Islanders Network workshop focussed on exploring the themes and commitments of the National Islands Plan with a broad focus on transport and how that connects with other challenges. Young people highlighted how transport affects education, education affects jobs, jobs and housing affect whether people can stay, and cost and connectivity affect whether young people can fully take part in island life.

Young people were not only identifying problems; they were suggesting practical changes shaped around the realities of island living and having meaningful conversations with decision makers in the room.





Findings by theme

1. Connectivity

Young people spoke about connectivity as much more than whether there is a ferry or flight available. For them, connectivity means the whole experience of getting on and off their island. This includes ferry frequency, vessel size, reliability, online booking, gangway access, bus links, cost, digital signal and internet.

A strong theme was frustration with ferry services. Young people raised issues around disrupted travel, technical faults, weather delays, limited sailings, the need for bigger ferries and practical problems such as the gangway needing fixed. They also expressed disappointment in the current level of service and asked that ferries run more often and are better suited to island needs.

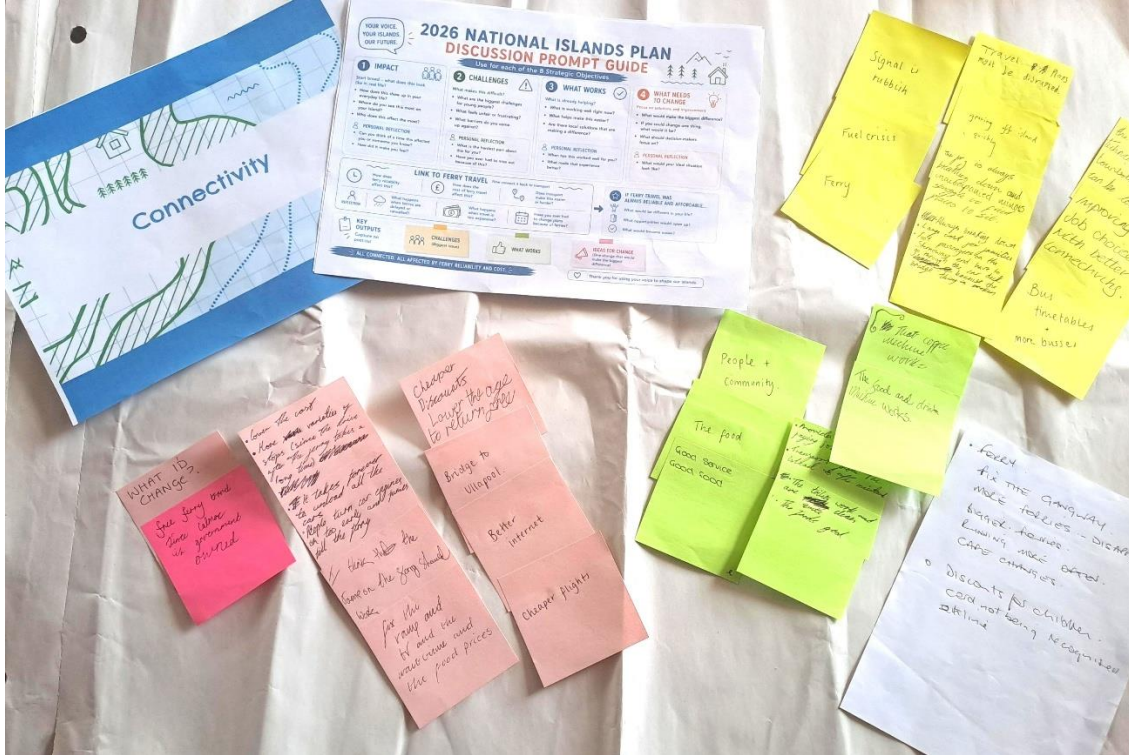
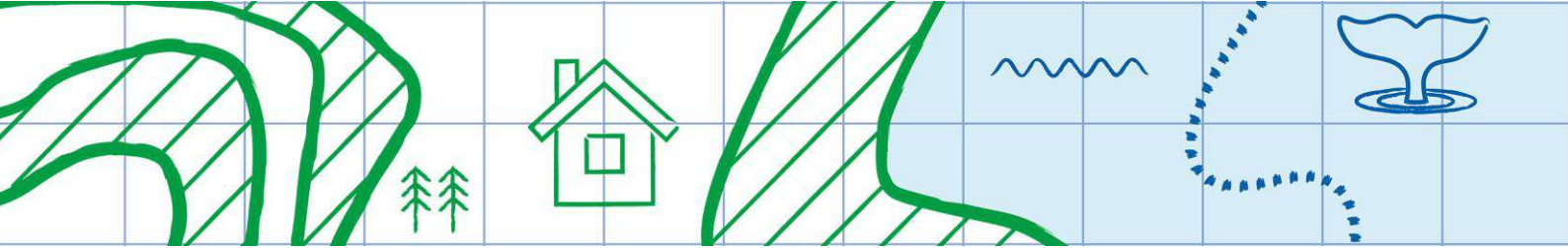
Reliability and capacity are not abstract transport issues for young islanders. They affect everyday planning, family life, confidence, access to education, access to activities and whether young people feel able to take up opportunities or not. When a ferry is unreliable, full or difficult to access, it can make the whole journey feel uncertain.

Cost was also a clear concern. Young people mentioned cheaper flights, lower ferry costs, discounts for children and wider affordability for families. High travel costs can make young people feel more cut off from opportunities, services and social experiences that may be easier to access elsewhere.

Digital connectivity was raised alongside transport. Young people spoke about poor signal, poor internet and the need for better connection. This matters because young people are not separating physical and digital access. Being connected means being able to travel, communicate, study, work, book things online and take part in wider life beyond the island.

There were positives too. Young people identified community, people, food and good service on the ferries. While there are real frustrations with systems and infrastructure, there is still a strong sense of local value and pride.

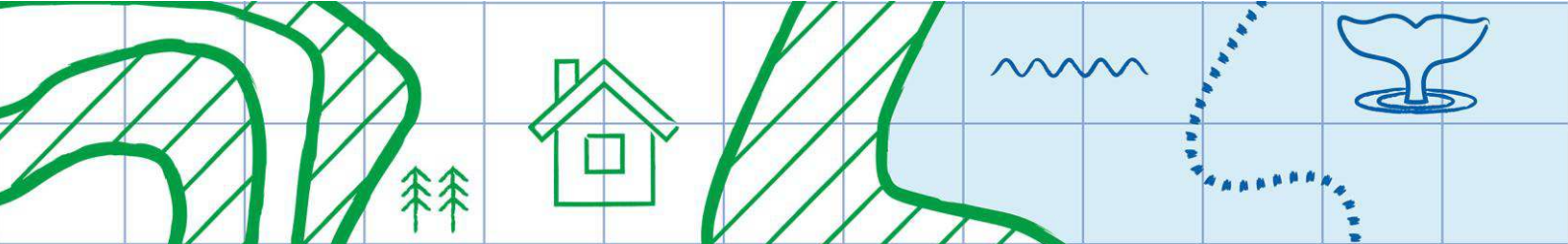




Summary points for decision makers

- Young people described connectivity as a whole system made up of ferries, flights, buses, booking systems, digital signal, cost and reliability.
- Young people expressed frustration with ferry capacity, gangway access, online booking, disruption and cost, particularly for children and families.
- They want connectivity that is more affordable, more reliable, easier to use and better matched to island life.





2. Education

Young people's comments show a strong link between education, fairness and access to opportunity. A repeated concern was that smaller island schools can mean fewer subject choices, fewer options and less access to specialist learning. Young people spoke about not getting certain subjects, limited subject categories, higher education choices and the need for more funding for training and learning.

The message from young people is that island pupils should not miss out simply because of where they live. This connects strongly to wider questions of rural fairness and equal access.

Support and staffing were also important. Young people asked for more support for learning staff, consistent teaching staff and more help to understand subjects when they become difficult. Relationships with teachers matter, but consistency matters too. Where staff explain things well, use kind voices and support personal learning, this is seen as something that works well.

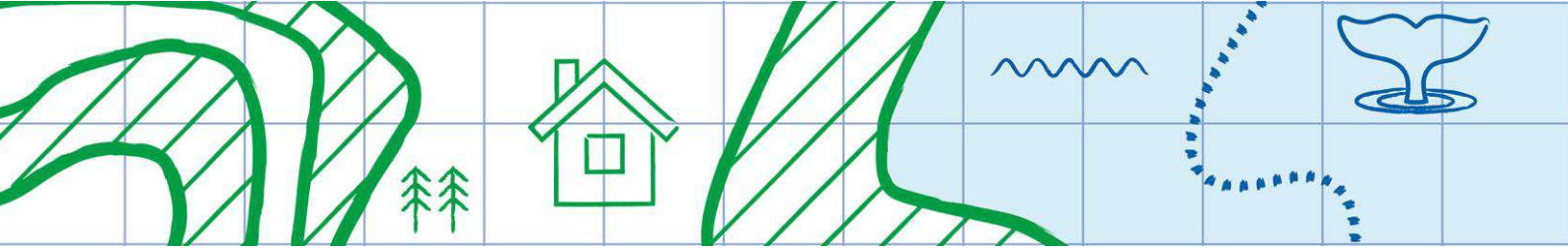
Young people from Harris valued smaller classes, especially where they allow for more personal learning and better support. At the same time, they noted that this impacts access to opportunities and they want a fairer education offer that includes more subject choice, practical learning and access to opportunities beyond what a small school can provide on its own.

A key theme came through around practical and relevant learning. Young people asked for more practical classes and better access to training and learning opportunities. They also raised the need for more equal opportunities for ASN pupils, including opportunities outside of the classroom. This suggests they want education to feel useful, inclusive and connected to real life, not only focused on traditional subjects or academic routes.

Young people also spoke about the school environment and wellbeing. They mentioned needing more break spaces, free rolls during morning break, food at break time and easier transport. These may seem like small practical details, but they affect whether young people feel comfortable, supported and ready to learn.

Technology and AI came up in a more challenging way. One note said "No AI", while another raised concerns about deepfake videos of people in classes. This suggests young people are aware of the risks around technology, privacy and safety in school spaces. The comments point to the need for clearer boundaries, safer use and support to understand how digital tools affect young people.





3. Economy

The economy discussion was less detailed than some of the other themes, with young people finding the theme difficult to understand in the time given. There are still clear messages about how young people linked the local economy to the everyday cost of living, transport, access to services, jobs, housing and whether money stays within the island community.

Affordability was a repeated concern. Young people mentioned the cost of fuel and heating, energy prices, food costs, expensive accommodation and the need for more affordable housing. This shows that young people understand the economy through real daily pressures: whether families can afford to live, travel, heat homes, buy food and stay on the island.

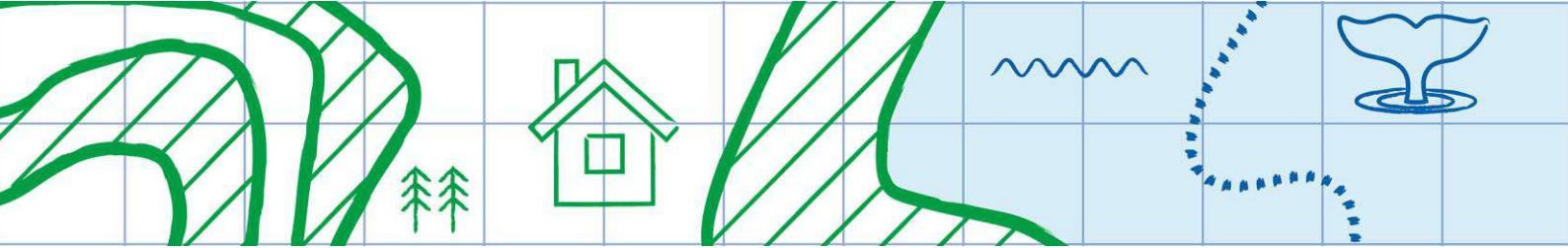
Housing came through strongly. Young people spoke about there not being enough housing for everyone and homes not being affordable. This links directly to whether young people and families can see a future in island communities.

Young people also linked the economy to local opportunity. They noted that there are not as many jobs as in the city and that there are not as many job opportunities. Island life can limit choices around work, training and future pathways. This connects with the education and connectivity themes too. If transport is difficult, housing is expensive and job options are limited, it becomes harder for young people to imagine staying or returning.

Transport was mentioned as something that works well in one group, and young people referred to young people's cards reducing the cost of travel and shopping. There was also a positive comment about school being good at advertising employment opportunities and helping people find jobs. This shows that local information-sharing and trusted places such as schools can support young people into work.

Some comments also show that young people are thinking about wider community investment. They mentioned wind turbines giving money to communities, the need for more focus on youth in community councils and local groups creating opportunities, raising funds and making an economic contribution. Young people are not only thinking about personal costs. They are also thinking about how island communities can generate income, support local projects and involve young people in decisions.





4. Empowered Communities

The empowered communities responses show a strong overlap between community voice, housing, youth spaces, cost of living, sport, transport and access to opportunities. Young people interpreted 'empowered communities' in a practical way: can people take part, be heard, afford to live here and access the things that help a community feel active and fair?

Housing and affordability were clear concerns. Several young people mentioned needing more houses, more affordable housing and appropriate housing for people who need it. Young people also raised housing being used as second homes or holiday accommodation, showing that they understand how housing pressures affect whether local people can stay in the community.

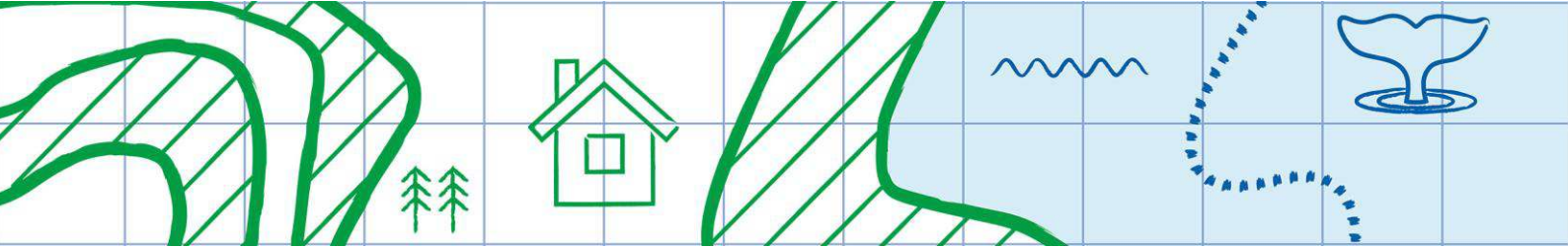
There was a lot of discussion around youth participation and spaces. Young people asked for more focus on youth in community councils, more youth spaces after school, transport to local youth clubs, free activities for teens and more opportunities to take part in sport, groups and cultural activities.

The message is not just that young people want "things to do". They want to be able to access community life properly. Some comments suggest that young people feel excluded by age restrictions, costs, transport, timing or a lack of suitable spaces.

Cost came through again as a barrier to participation. Young people mentioned the cost of living, paying for clubs or activities, gym access and the need for free or discounted activities, including gym membership with a Young Scot card. Empowerment is not only about having a voice. It is also about being able to take part without cost excluding people.

There were positives too. Young people recognised that smaller communities can make it easier to get involved. They identified opportunities such as swimming and football, and local groups or organisations that help create activities and raise funds. This shows that young people can see the strengths in their communities, especially where people work together and create opportunities locally.

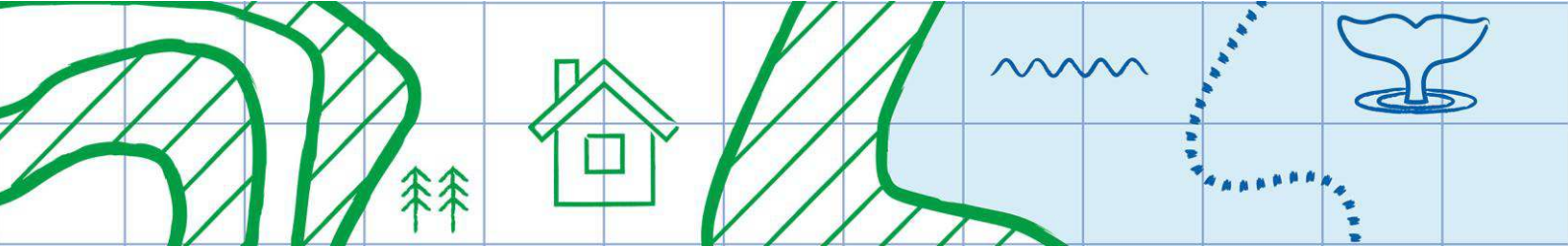




Summary points for decision makers

- Young people linked empowered communities to the practical things that allow people to take part including affordable housing, youth spaces, transport, free or low-cost activities, sport, community councils and local decision-making.
- They recognised the strengths of smaller communities, but were clear that young people need better access, more say and fewer cost or transport barriers if they are to feel fully included in island life.



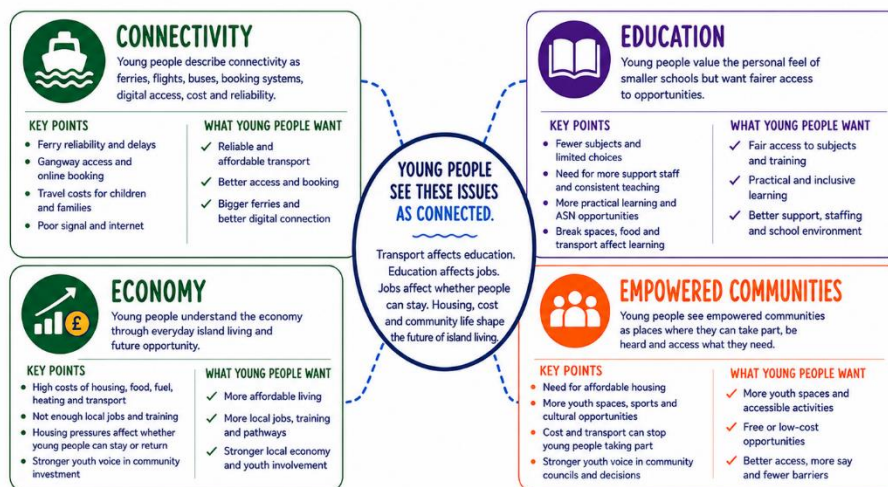


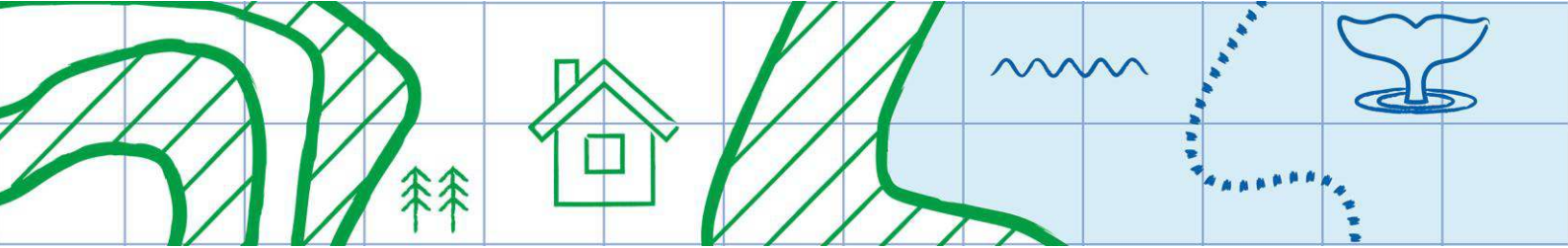
Overall message from young people

Across all themes, young people are asking for island life to be made more possible, more affordable and more inclusive. They are not separating issues into neat boxes. For them, transport affects education. Education affects jobs. Jobs affect whether people can stay. Housing affects whether families and young people have a future on the island. Cost affects whether they can take part. Digital connectivity affects school, work, social life and access to wider opportunities.

The strongest message for decision makers is that young people understand the systems around them. They are asking for practical changes that would make a real difference: reliable and affordable transport, fair access to education and subjects, more jobs and training, affordable housing, better digital connection, youth spaces, free or low-cost activities and genuine involvement in local decision-making.

Young people want island communities where they can live, learn, travel, work, take part and be heard. Their feedback shows that connectivity, education, economy and community empowerment are deeply connected, and that decisions need to be shaped around the real experiences of young islanders.





Key asks from young people

- Connectivity that is reliable, affordable, accessible and joined up across ferries, flights, buses, booking systems and digital access.
- Fairer access to education, including subject choice, practical learning, ASN opportunities, consistent staffing, food, break spaces and transport.
- More local opportunities for work, training and future pathways, alongside better information and support for young people to access them.
- Affordable housing and stronger action on housing pressures so young people and families can see a future in island communities.
- More youth spaces, free or low-cost activities, sport and cultural opportunities that young people can actually access.
- Clear routes for young people to be involved in community councils, local decisions and investment choices that affect their lives.

