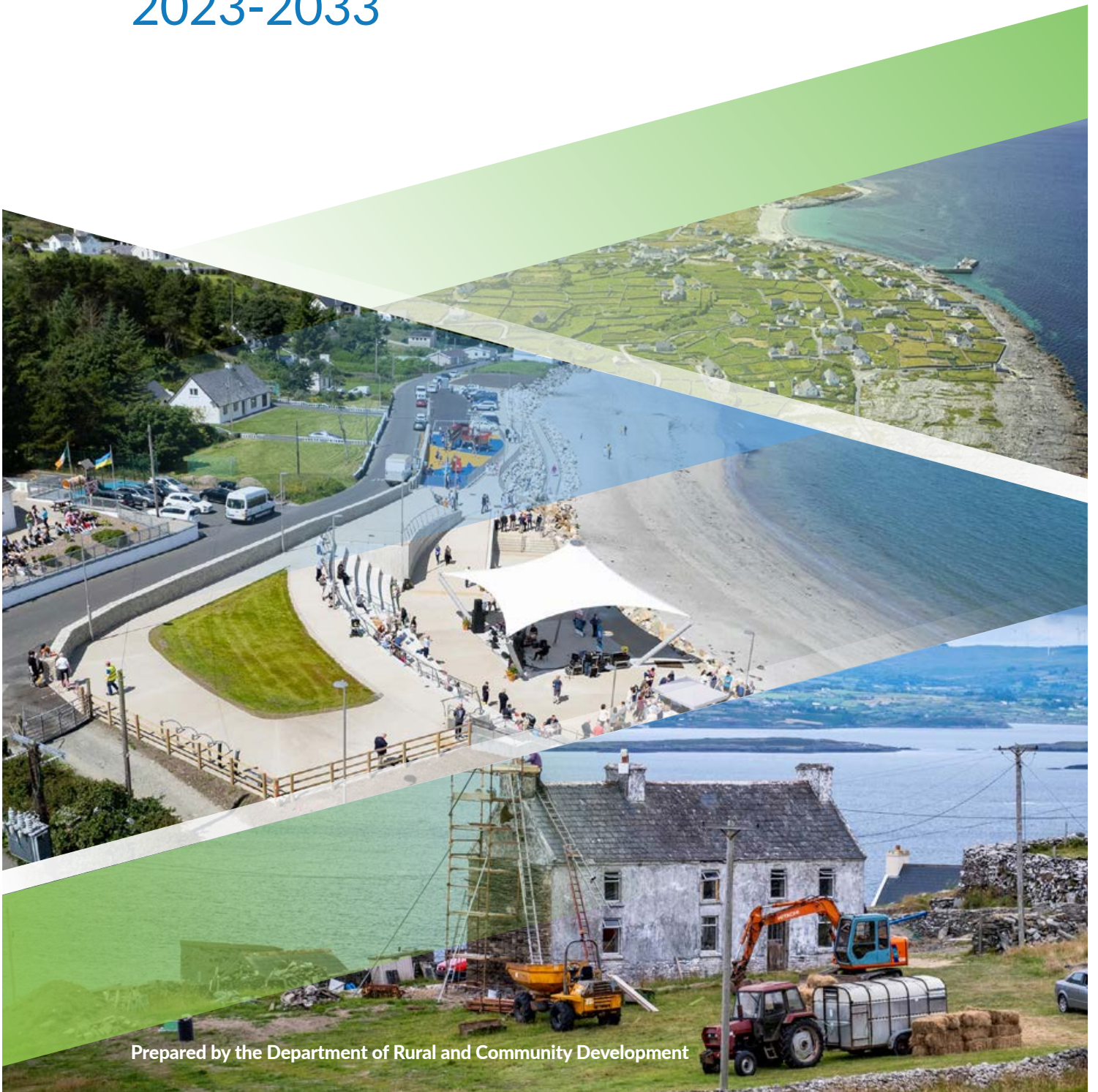




Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Our Living Islands

National Islands Policy 2023-2033



Prepared by the Department of Rural and Community Development



Contents

Ministerial Foreword	5
1. Introduction	6
Background	6
Developing a New National Policy	8
Consultation process	9
A cohesive approach	10
Investing in the future of the islands	11
2. Aims and Objectives of the policy	13
Policy aims	13
Strategic Objectives	13
Principles underpinning the policy	15
Links with UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)	15
Analysis of the islands	16
- Demographic profile of the islands	16
- SWOT analysis	17
Island support structures	19
International perspectives on islands	19
- Shared challenges	19
- Networking and Collaboration	20
3. Strategic Objective 1: Revitalise population levels on the islands	21
Context	21
Island access and transport services	22
Island Infrastructure	23
- Piers	23
- Roads and other minor capital infrastructure	23
- Community Infrastructure	24
- Water and Waste Water	25
Housing	26
Digital connectivity and telecommunications	28
Postal Services	29
Education	29
Childcare	31
Sustainable Development Goals for Strategic Objective 1	31

4. Strategic Objective 2 – Diversify Island Economies	32
Context	32
Opportunities for diversification	33
- Connected working	33
- Tourism	34
- Culture and Heritage	34
- Agri-food	35
- Marine Economy	35
- Design and Crafts	36
- Audio-visual Industry	37
- Renewable Energy	37
- Social Enterprise	38
- Skilled Trades	38
Enterprise Supports	39
Sustainable Development Goals for Strategic Objective 2	40
5. Strategic Objective 3 – Enhance Health & Wellbeing services	41
Context	41
Primary Care	43
Mental Health and Wellbeing	44
- Mental Health	44
- Wellbeing	44
Emergency Services	45
Environmental Waste	47
Sustainable Development Goals for Strategic Objective 3	47
6. Strategic Objective 4 – Empower Island Communities	48
Context	48
Local and Community Development on the Islands	49
Increasing engagement with national and local government	49
- Role of the Department of Rural and Community Development	50
- Role of Local Authorities	50
Participation of island communities in local government	50
- Local Community Development Committees	50
- Public Participation Networks	51
LEADER Programme	52
Island communities working in partnership	52
Supporting Inclusive Communities	53
- SICAP	53
- Community Employment and Rural Social Scheme	53
- Volunteering	54

Youth Participation and Youth Services	57
- Young people's participation	57
- Youth services	57
Supporting the Irish language	58
Sustainable Development Goals for Strategic Objective 4	58
7. Strategic Objective 5 - Build Smart Sustainable Futures	59
Context	59
Smart Islands initiative	60
Smart Villages	61
Green Energy	62
Research, Innovation and Development	63
Links to Smart Specialisation Strategy	65
Climate Change mitigation and adaptation	65
Protecting Biodiversity and the Natural Environment	66
- Context	66
- The islands and biodiversity	66
Natural Resources	67
- The role of the Seafood sector	67
- The role of the Agriculture sector	68
Sustainable Development Goals for Strategic Objective 5	69
8. Implementation of the Policy	70
Context	70
Implementation and Oversight	71
Funding Delivery of the policy	71
Continuous engagement with island communities	71
Appendix 1 - Consultation Process	72
Public Consultation	72
Island Youth Input	72
Key messages	72
Public Survey	73
National Islands Policy Inter-Departmental Committee	74
Whole-of-Government Approach	74
Appendix 2 - Island development groups	75
Appendix 3 - List of Departments and Stakeholders consulted	76
Appendix 4 - Island Primary and Post-Primary School Enrolment Numbers	78
Appendix 5 - Island Population changes 2011 -2016 (Census)	80





Ministerial Foreword

Our offshore islands and their communities are an integral part of the fabric of rural Ireland. The islands are also home to some of our most vibrant and culturally distinctive communities. They are an integral part of the State's heritage and have a special significance in Irish culture.

It is over 25 years since the last national policy framework for the islands was published. Irish society and lifestyles have changed significantly since then. The challenges affecting our islands are similar in many ways to those experienced in the rest of rural Ireland, whether they relate to employment opportunities, access to services, the provision of vital infrastructure or the social and economic impacts of COVID-19. However, these challenges can be even more pronounced on the islands due to their geographical isolation and separation from the mainland.

The aim of this policy is to ensure that sustainable, vibrant communities can continue to live - and thrive - on the offshore islands for many years to come. Related to that aim is our ambition that visitors to the islands can continue to experience and appreciate the unique culture, heritage and environmental richness that the islands have to offer.

This whole-of-Government policy has been developed following an extensive consultation process with the island communities and other stakeholders. Island representatives will also have a role in monitoring its implementation.

The policy will be supported over its 10-year lifespan by a series of Action Plans outlining the specific measures that will be taken to achieve its five high-level Strategic Objectives. The first of these Action Plans covers the period 2023-2026 and is published alongside this policy.

Our Rural Future, which I launched in April 2021, set out the Government's ambition in relation to a National Islands Policy. I am delighted to be delivering on that ambition now. I look forward to working with island communities and with all relevant stakeholders to ensure it is implemented.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Heather Humphreys".

Heather Humphreys TD

Minister for Rural and Community Development

June 2023



1 | Introduction

Background

The inhabited offshore islands are an integral part of the fabric of rural Ireland. Although they support a relatively small proportion of our population, they make an important contribution to our national economy, our culture and our heritage. They are home to approximately 3,000 people and are a destination in their own right for visitors, artists, and those interested in nature, history and heritage.

The economic value of the islands extends far beyond their own shores, with many towns and businesses on the mainland benefiting from the provision of services such as hospitality and accommodation to those en route to and from the islands. Over 300,000 people visit the islands each year, generating estimated revenue in excess of €20 million for the local economy from day trips alone¹.

The majority of Ireland's inhabited islands lie off the western seaboard of counties Donegal, Mayo, Galway and Cork.

Their economies have traditionally been dependent on tourism, agriculture and fishing, but there are opportunities to diversify into alternative economic activity.

Island communities are adept at self-reliance, grounded in their separation from the mainland, and have a very strong sense of community and identity. According to the Central Statistics Office, there are roughly 80 inhabited islands off the coast of Ireland.

1 Based on spend per person per day, see Fáilte Ireland Key Tourism Facts 2019 at https://www.failteireland.ie/FailteIreland/media/WebsiteStructure/Documents/3_Research_Insights/4_Visitor_Insights/KeyTourismFacts_2019.pdf?ext=.pdf

Over 30 of these islands have a bridge or causeway connection to the mainland so are not considered in the context of this policy. Almost half of the remaining islands have a permanent resident population. These islands are the focus of this policy.

The population of these islands varies considerably, from as low as two people on some of the smaller islands, to over 700 in the case of Árainn (Inis Mór), the largest of the Aran Islands in Co. Galway. Residency on some of the smaller islands can fluctuate from time to time, but generally, the islands listed below have a permanent resident population.

Figure 1

Offshore islands with an average population greater than 2 based on Census 2011-2016



In the context of this policy, islands are defined as islands that are cut off daily by the tide, are not connected to the mainland by a bridge or causeway, have permanent year-round populations and are not in private ownership.

* Gaeltacht islands

Developing a New National Policy

It is more than 25 years since a national framework for the development of the islands was last published. The 1996 Report of the Interdepartmental Coordinating Committee on Island Development provided a strategic framework for developing the offshore islands of Ireland.

The Committee, which was chaired at Minister of State level, made a series of recommendations across a range of areas including island access, physical infrastructure, health services, education, agriculture, fisheries, local development, energy and information technology. Significant progress was made in implementing the recommendations, particularly in relation to improved access to the islands.

Since 1996, society and lifestyles have changed fundamentally. Expectations are higher and island communities aspire to retain the next generation of islanders and to overcome issues that prevent them from participating in and contributing as fully as possible to our economic, social, cultural and environmental development. Connectedness between places has improved due to the growth of digitalisation and technology. This will continue to open up new opportunities for rural parts of Ireland, including the islands. It is timely, therefore, that a new policy should be put in place to enable island communities to be part of this progress.

Our Rural Future, Ireland's rural development policy 2021-2025, recognises that the offshore islands are an integral part of the fabric of rural Ireland.

Many of the challenges faced by island communities are similar to those in other parts of rural Ireland, but they are more pronounced and more complex to address due to the islands' separation from the mainland. Issues such as the provision of housing, the delivery of education and healthcare, access to high speed broadband and employment opportunities are magnified on the offshore islands. There is also an added challenge of retaining young people on the islands as the population profile is ageing. Additional support and attention is therefore required for island communities to supplement policy measures to support rural development generally.

This new 10-year policy, with associated shorter-term Action Plans, provides a pathway for building sustainable futures for island communities. It is forward-looking and ambitious and will be underpinned by a close working partnership with island communities and other stakeholders in its delivery. The measures to be delivered will, inter alia, assist in stabilising the population of the islands, diversify island economies and empower island communities.



Consultation process

The development of this policy has been informed by an extensive consultation process with communities living on the offshore islands, with island representative bodies, Government Departments, State agencies and other stakeholders (see Appendix 1 and Appendix 3).

In December 2019, a consultation paper was published by the Government, inviting submissions, observation and comments from the public to help shape the content of the new Islands Policy. Forty written submissions were received through this process.

Direct engagement with islanders was an important part of the consultation process. Officials from the Islands Unit of the Department of Rural and Community Development commenced a series of visits to the islands early in 2020 to meet with communities and listen to the issues and ideas, which they considered to be of greatest importance in the development of the policy. The visits to the islands were suspended in April 2020 due to the emergence of COVID-19, but on-line meetings were arranged with focus groups from the islands that had not been visited up to that point. Follow-up meetings in person with the communities on the remaining islands took place in 2022 as public health restrictions were lifted.

In total, workshops were held in person across thirteen islands as part of the consultation process. These workshops were in addition to focus group meetings held on-line. Separate consultations were held with students at two post-primary schools, on Árainn Mhór (Co. Donegal) and Árainn (Inis Mór) (Co. Galway), to ensure that the views of young people were heard.

The Department of Rural and Community Development also maintained regular engagement with Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann (The Islands Federation) in the course of the development of the policy. Comhdháil is the representative body for the islands.

Further details of the consultation process and the issues raised by islanders are contained in Appendix 1. In summary, the key issues raised through the consultation process related to:

- Depopulation of the islands
- Economic Development and Employment
- Housing
- Environment, Water and Waste
- Health and Wellbeing
- Emergency Services
- Culture and the Irish language
- Community Empowerment and Social Inclusion
- Transport access to the islands
- Digital Connectivity
- Island Infrastructure
- Education and Training
- Natural Resources

These issues are addressed in further detail throughout this policy. Many of them are inter-related. For example, the lack of availability of housing or employment opportunities on an island can lead to a drop off in population if people are required to move to the mainland to live or work.

In addition to the public consultation process, the Department of Rural and Community Development held bilateral meetings with other government Departments, State agencies and other public bodies who have a role to play in delivering the objectives of the policy. A new Inter-Departmental Committee for islands, involving senior officials from key Departments, and chaired by the Department of Rural and Community Development, was also established to support the development of the policy and associated Action Plans.

A cohesive approach

Ireland’s Well-being Framework, published in 2022, provides policy-makers and Government with a more holistic way of thinking about how Ireland is doing as a country. It focuses on quality of life, with a particular emphasis on equality and sustainability across economic, environmental and social issues. The well-being initiative is now being actively integrated across Government, including across the budgetary process.

The National Islands Policy is aligned with Ireland’s Wellbeing Framework. In particular, the Framework emphasises the interconnected nature of policy and the need for actions across a variety of policy areas to achieve desired outcomes. There is a focus throughout the Framework on outcomes important for the islands including environment, mental and physical health and community.

Figure. 2

Ireland’s Wellbeing Framework



Because of their self-contained geographical nature, many issues affecting the islands have an impact to an extent that is not generally experienced in mainland rural areas. These range from the fundamental requirement for safe access to and from the islands, to the provision of basic services that are often taken for granted on the mainland such as the availability of fresh water, the collection of waste, and access to GPs and emergency services. Arrangements for the provision of services such as housing, education and healthcare are more complex on the islands, while up to now employment opportunities have been more limited than on the mainland.

Island communities also face additional challenges such as the potential impact of climate change on rising sea levels, an ageing population and the challenge of retaining young people on the islands.

The interconnectedness of such policy issues is more pronounced, and in some instances more urgent, on the islands than on the mainland. No single policy initiative operates in isolation on the islands; they all have multiple knock-on impacts. For example, providing an extra teacher or nurse to an island might be contingent on planning policy enabling accommodation to be provided for that person in the first instance.

The interconnectedness of different policy or operational decisions such as these highlights the importance of an integrated and cohesive approach across national and local government to issues that affect islanders.

Ongoing dialogue between relevant government Departments, local authorities and island communities will therefore be an important part of delivering this policy and the associated Action Plans. Improved structures will be put in place to empower island communities and to strengthen ongoing engagement between national and local government and islanders. Details of these arrangements are set out in Chapter 6.

In 1996, when the last policy framework for island development was published, there were just three passenger ferry routes, in addition to one cargo and one air route to the islands. Now, the State is subsidising 26 passenger ferry routes, 9 cargo routes and 2 air services.

Investing in the future of the islands

This policy builds on the investment that has already been made in island communities and island infrastructure. Since responsibility for the islands transferred to the Department of Rural and Community Development in 2020, very significant investment has been made.

- In June 2022, the Government awarded a new €4.9 million Public Service Obligation air service contract for the Aran Islands, which will run for 4 years until 2026 and ensure essential mainland connectivity for the island communities with year-round services. For the first time, the contract provided for a direct service from the mainland to Inis Meáin and Inis Oírr, ensuring a faster service for those smaller islands.
- In July 2022, the Government announced funding for the construction of a new helipad on Inishturk, County Mayo. This will provide a vital resource for the Irish Coast Guard to access the island in an emergency.
- Under the Minor Capital works programme 2020-2022, almost €7.38 million was invested for works on the islands such as roads, piers, playgrounds, public toilets, recycling facilities etc., with Donegal receiving almost €2.4 million; Mayo € 1.95 million; Galway €2.4 million; and Cork €630,000.
- A long-standing issue in relation to the poor condition of many non-county roads on the islands in Donegal was resolved. Following agreement with Donegal County Council, over €2 million was approved for the upgrade of these roads. The criteria for qualification included that there was a public right of way and that the local authority would take the road in charge when the work was completed.
- Commitments in the National Development Plan (NDP) for major island projects were progressed, to improve works to piers on Inis Oírr, Inis Meáin and at Machaire Rabhartaigh serving Toraiigh.

- Significant investment has been made in the State-owned airport infrastructure serving the Aran Islands. In autumn 2022 the entire runway at Aerfort Chonamara was re-surfaced, while new storage buildings were constructed at the airports on Inis Meáin and Inis Oírr to house airport fire vehicles.
- A new funding stream was introduced under the CLÁR Programme in 2022, specifically to respond to the needs of island communities. This measure will fund outdoor community recreation facilities and community transport on the islands, with an emphasis on electric vehicles accompanied by the installation of solar panels. This measure was further built upon in the 2023 CLÁR Programme.
- A ring-fenced allocation for islands was introduced under the Local Improvements Scheme (LIS) in 2023, with €550,000 provided to support rural roads and laneways on the offshore islands.
- A new Community Centre Investment Fund was launched in April 2022, providing funding for the upgrade and refurbishment of existing Community Centres in both urban and rural communities. Altogether, five projects on four different islands have been allocated funding to date.
- Island projects approved to date under the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund include €1.9 million for Neart – Sherkin Island’s Enterprise, Creative and Digital Hub – and over €5 million to redevelop shorefront amenity infrastructure on Árainn Mhór and at Ailt an Chorráin, the mainland port serving the island.





2 | Aims and Objectives of the policy

Policy aims

The aim of this policy is to ensure that our offshore islands continue to support sustainable and vibrant communities through economic and social development and thus improve the quality of life of those who live on the islands. We also want islanders and visitors alike to be able to continue to experience and appreciate, in an environmentally sustainable way, the unique culture, heritage and environmental richness the islands have to offer.

The policy is forward-looking, with a 10-year timeframe. It seeks to maximise the unique strengths and assets of the islands and focuses on strengthening our island communities and economies as well as resolving issues created by their separation from the mainland. The policy also looks at how the islands can contribute to the delivery of other national policies in areas such as Tourism, Culture, the Marine Economy and Climate Action, as well as the opportunities that such policies offer for the economic, social and environmental development of the islands.

Strategic Objectives

The policy is built around achieving five high level Strategic Objectives that have been identified by islanders themselves as of key importance for the sustainable future of their communities.

These Strategic Objectives will be progressively addressed over the lifetime of the policy, supported by a series of 3 to 4-year Action Plans that will outline in greater detail how the high level Strategic Objectives will be achieved. The first of these Action Plans will run for the period 2023-2026.

The five Strategic Objectives are mutually reinforcing and, collectively, they combine to improve the quality of life and opportunity for island communities. Each objective is described in more detail in the following chapters.

Strategic Objective 1

Revitalise population levels on the islands

Our ambition is to halt population decline on the islands and, in collaboration with island communities, create the conditions that will encourage young people to remain on, or move to, the islands to live, work and raise families.

Strategic Objective 2

Diversify island economies

Our ambition is to see island economies diversifying into new areas, utilising their strengths and assets to capitalise on emerging opportunities that will underpin their future economic development.

Strategic Objective 3

Enhance Health and Wellbeing

Our ambition is to ensure that island communities have improved access to health, emergency and environmental waste services, to enhance the wellbeing of island populations.

Strategic Objective 4

Empower Island Communities

Our ambition is to empower all island communities to reach their full potential by building a shared understanding of their own needs and opportunities and by participating in and influencing the decisions that affect their future.

Strategic Objective 5

Build smart sustainable futures

Our ambition is to tap into the innovation, knowledge and resilience of island communities and help them to use their surrounding natural assets to support their future social, economic and environmental sustainability.

Principles underpinning the policy

The offshore islands are an integral part of rural Ireland, as reflected in Ireland's Rural Development Policy 2021-2025, *Our Rural Future*. The delivery of this policy is therefore underpinned by the same principles as *Our Rural Future* as we work to incorporate the islands in our efforts to provide equality of opportunity and participation by all communities in society, regardless of where they are located.

Figure 3

Our Rural Future principles

- **People-centred:** Recognising the centrality of people, to enable them to increase their capability and confidence to achieve progress together, based on their rights and aspirations.
- **Sustainable:** Promoting and developing sustainable rural communities, economies, and environment and linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goals.
- **Participative and Inclusive:** Building active participation, fostering social cohesion amongst all communities and prioritising the needs of those experiencing social or economic exclusion, including rural isolation.
- **Integrated:** Ensuring consistency with strategies across national and local government to achieve complementarity of objectives and actions and to ensure coordinated delivery.
- **Progressive:** Building on significant positive progress as well as retaining the flexibility necessary to capitalise on emerging opportunities.
- **Rural-Urban Interdependence:** Recognising the functional interdependence between urban and rural areas, and the economic and social interactions between the two. With this in mind, the policy seeks to reframe the narrative around rural Ireland to reflect the integral role that rural areas play and their economic and social importance to our national development.

These principles are consistent with the State's commitments to progressing human rights and equality in Ireland. The policy aligns in design and implementation with the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty.

Links with UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

Ireland has adopted a whole-of-Government approach to the SDGs, and adopted its first SDG National Implementation Plan in March 2018. The SDG National Implementation Plan includes an ambitious 2030 Vision for Ireland to fully achieve the SDGs at home and to support their implementation around the world.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also known as the Global Goals, were adopted by the United Nations in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity.

The 17 SDGs are integrated—they recognise that action in one area will affect outcomes in others, and that development must balance social, economic and environmental sustainability.

While governments hold primary responsibility for achieving the SDGs, responsibility does not lie with governments alone. The SDGs belong to everyone, in every community, in every country across the world. The Government strongly believes that partnerships between governments, civil society organisations, businesses and communities will be essential to achieving the SDGs.

A key commitment under the SDG National Implementation Plan involves mainstreaming the SDGs across national policies, so that when relevant sectoral policies are developed or reviewed, Ireland's commitments under the SDGs will be taken into account. The Strategic Objectives in *Our Living Islands* are linked directly to the SDGs, which are indicated at the end of each Strategic Objective chapter.

Figure 4

UN Sustainable Development Goals



Analysis of the islands

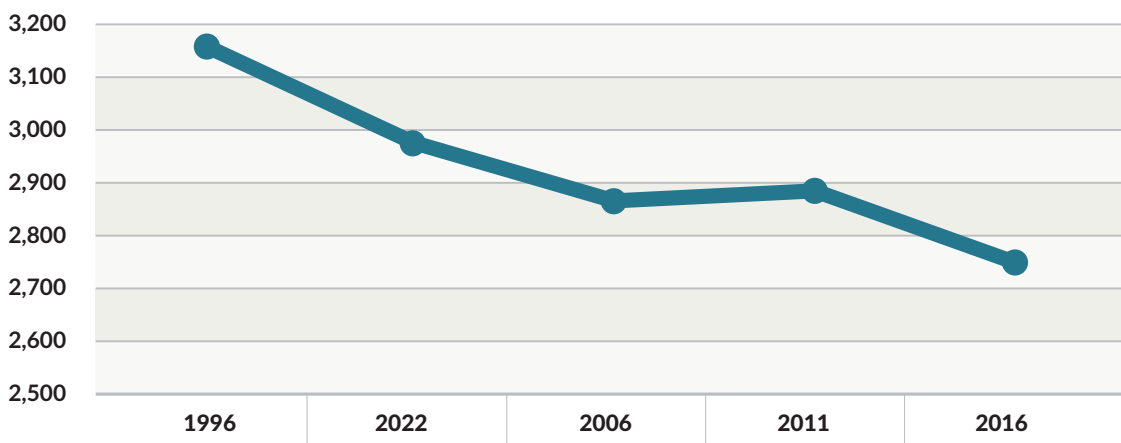
Demographic profile of the islands

An on-going concern for island communities both nationally and internationally is to maintain the population levels of their islands. Island communities generally have a higher than average age profile, as many young adults leave the islands to avail of further education or employment opportunities elsewhere.

Census data from 1996 to 2016 shows that the population of the islands covered by this policy decreased from 3145 to 2740, a drop of 12.8%.

Figure 5

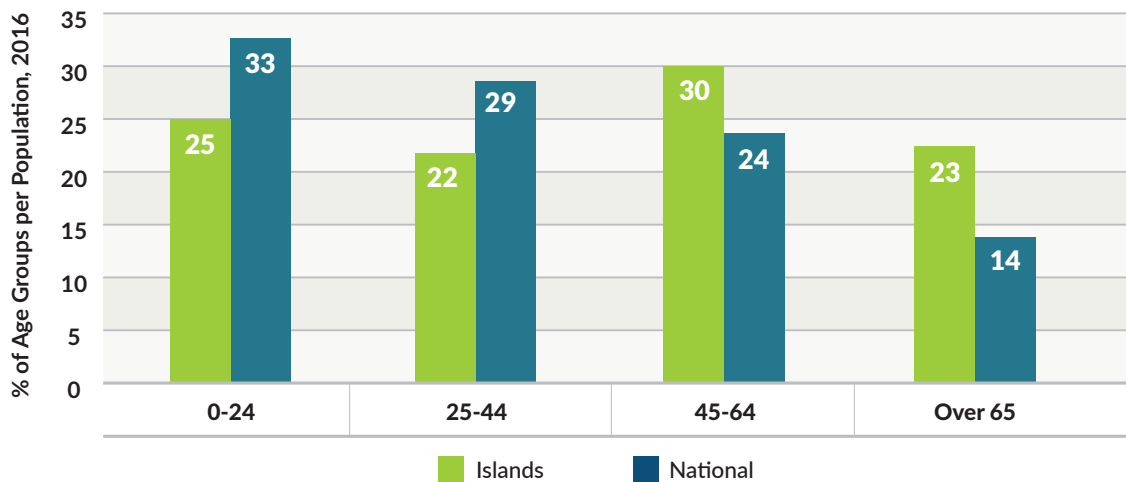
Ireland's Offshore Islands Population 1996-2016



Over 20% of the islands' population in 2016 were aged 65 years and older; this is considerably higher than the national average of 12% for that age cohort. Meanwhile, just 5% of the islands' population was under 4 years old in 2016, compared to an average of 8% nationally.

Figure 6

Offshore Islands population profile 2016



This age profile represents a challenge to the ongoing viability of the islands as places to live. Achieving a balanced population profile is essential for the sustainability of the islands, in terms of issues such as labour supply and the continued viability of schools and provision of other services, and is a key focus of this policy.

Full data from the 2022 Census in relation to the profile of the islands will be published by the CSO when available in 2023.

SWOT analysis

While each of the islands covered by this policy has its own strengths, as well as challenges, there are general characteristics across the islands as a whole that have been identified through the consultation process. These factors are set out in the following SWOT analysis, summarising the main Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats which will affect the islands' development. This policy aims to build on the strengths and opportunities of the islands while addressing the Weaknesses and Threats to the islands' future sustainability.

Strengths:

- Strong tourism industry
- Good access to/from the mainland through ferry and air services
- Rich cultural and heritage assets, including historic sites
- Resilience and self-reliance of island communities
- Strong innovation culture
- Strong community spirit
- Intergenerational harmony
- Safe place to raise children
- High quality of education through small classes
- Very little crime
- Clean air and water
- Abundant renewable energy assets
- Close connection with nature and biodiversity
- No light pollution

Opportunities:

- Rollout of high speed broadband and Broadband Connection Points
- Greater economic diversification
- Potential for Renewable Energy generation
- Greater tourism promotion and diversification
- Economic value of the Marine Economy
- Development of the Design and Craft industries
- Added-value in food production
- Islands as test beds for Research & Development
- Infrastructural improvements through annual Capital Works budget
- Improvements in water treatment plants to maintain high water quality
- More flexible ferry and cargo services
- Increased access to online education
- Inter-island networking

Weaknesses:

- Poor digital connectivity
- Lack of housing – both social housing and general housing
- Access to education – limited subject choice due to small student numbers
- Health Services lacking – need to travel to mainland for many services
- Ferry timetables not always sufficient to accommodate social life and workers' needs
- Lack of employment opportunities on the islands
- Reliance on Tourism for employment
- Lack of economic investment
- Island infrastructure (piers, roads, water) in need of improvement
- Poor internal transport on the islands
- Fire Services need improvement
- No vets on islands – agriculture suffers as a result

Threats:

- Aging Population
- Depopulation
- Young people leaving for work/ education purposes and not returning
- Continued lack of social housing availability on many islands
- Planning permission difficulties and environmental policies (e.g. SACs) leading to a block on housing development and contributing to population decline
- Delays in broadband connectivity
- High cost for fishing licences and boats
- High cost of fuel impacting on transport and on island life generally
- Lack of Third Level Education access
- Climate Change and Coastal Erosion

Island support structures

The island communities have a long tradition of community-based cooperation and local development. Each of the islands is supported by a Local Development Company or Co-operative (“Comharchumann” in Irish) which are funded by Údarás na Gaeltachta in the case of the Gaeltacht islands, and by the Department of Rural and Community Development in the case of the other islands (see Appendix 2). In addition, Comhar na nOileán provides centralised Local Development Company services for a number of inhabited offshore islands and part of the West Cork area.

These local organisations provide a range of services, including the delivery of national rural and community development programmes, social inclusion and labour market activation programmes, the provision of information on public services and, in some instances operate as social enterprise in the delivery of retail or other local services. The functions of the local groups can vary from island to island, but they are an integral part of the life of island communities.

Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann (the Islands Federation) is a representative voice for the islands which focuses on highlighting and progressing policy issues that need to be addressed to ensure the continued social and economic development of the islands. Comhdháil provides an important link between the island communities and local and national government structures.

International perspectives on islands

Shared challenges

Internationally, small islands such as those in Ireland face similar challenges concerning their development. A 2017 report by the European Economic and Social Committee² identified common challenges amongst a sample of EU islands reviewed in the context of the Smart Islands initiative³. Those challenges, which resonate with Ireland’s offshore islands include:

- overcoming the difficulties associated with geographical separation and distance from the mainland;
- solving the conundrum of public facilities that need to be able to meet peak demand during the tourist season but may be excessive and costly to operate for most of the year (such as information and communication technologies, energy, transport, waste collection and processing, sewage treatment, etc.);
- related to this, maintaining a balanced demographic make-up;
- organising necessary education structures and providing vocational training and jobs for local people;
- guaranteeing the livelihoods of people working in the tourist industry, who have short seasons and often perform several different jobs;
- protecting the coastal and marine environment that is put under significant pressure at certain times of year;
- finding the necessary funding to provide public services for the permanent population, which is often small and aging;
- providing affordable housing for young people when holiday homes, the protection of natural areas and limitations on areas approved for development, result in high housing costs.

2 See TEN Section Report on the “Smart Islands” Project, (European Economic and Social Committee, 2017), at <https://www.eesc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/resources/docs/qe-07-16-088-en-n.pdf>.

3 <https://www.smartislandsinitiative.eu/en/about.php>

Networking and Collaboration

Given the shared experiences and challenges of small islands, there is great merit in Ireland’s island communities networking with other island representatives internationally to identify solutions, best practises and opportunities to support the continued viability of our islands.

In this context, the European Small Islands Federation⁴ (more colloquially known as the European Small Islands Network or ESIN) is a forum for cooperation between small islands communities across Europe. ESIN islands have common features: there are home for permanent communities, they are surrounded by water and generally have no permanent links with the mainland. Ireland is represented on the ESIN through Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann, which was one of the network’s founding members.

ESIN’s main objective is to help small islands to remain as living communities. The network facilitates the circulation of information between its members, provides information on how different countries cope with issues and gives support to members through the sharing of knowledge.

ESIN also aims to inform relevant EU institutions and influence EU policies and rules by increasing awareness and understanding of small islands issues.

Ireland is also represented by Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann on the EU Smart Islands initiative that seeks to convey the significant potential of islands to function as laboratories for technological, social, environmental, economic and political innovation through a collaborative approach involving public authorities, businesses, academia and civil society actors from islands.

At governmental level, the Department of Rural and Community Development is also engaging bilaterally with other jurisdictions such as Scotland to share information on experiences, issues and opportunities facing small islands. The Department will continue to build its international networks throughout the course of this policy’s lifetime.



4 <https://europeansmallislands.com/>



3 Strategic Objective 1: Revitalise population levels on the islands

Our ambition is to halt population decline on the islands and, in collaboration with island communities, create the conditions that will encourage young people to remain on, or move to, the islands to live, work and raise families.

Context

Maintaining the population of the islands will be key to their future social and economic viability. Most islands have aging populations and, up to now, opportunities and incentives for young people to remain on the islands to live and work have been limited.

The fall in island populations is intrinsically linked to issues such as the lack of employment opportunities, restricted housing availability and limited accessibility of public and social services when compared to the mainland. Unless proactive measures are taken to refresh the demographic profile of the islands, the social, economic and environmental viability of the islands will be in jeopardy.

Central to the measures that need to be taken to encourage younger people to remain on, or return to, the islands are issues such as access to housing, reliable transport between the islands and the mainland, and investment in economic and social infrastructure.

A coordinated approach is therefore required across many different policy areas to facilitate people to continue to live on the islands, or to return to the islands if they wish to do so. This Islands policy will provide the framework for such an approach.

All of the measures taken through this policy will help to support the sustainability of the islands' population levels. However, at the most fundamental level, maintaining the population of the islands and enabling it to grow will require actions to:

- ensure and improve safe and regular transport connections between the islands and the mainland for both passengers and cargo,
- improve island infrastructure including piers, roads, community infrastructure and water/wastewater treatment,
- provide for the housing needs of those wishing to live on the islands,
- improve broadband and mobile phone connectivity, and
- offer the best possible access to childcare as well as primary and second level education to enable young families to continue to live on the islands.

These particular issues are addressed in more detail in this chapter.

Island access and transport services

The National Development Plan (NDP) 2021-2030⁵ recognises that good transport services and a developed infrastructure are important prerequisites for maintaining island populations.

Access between the islands and the mainland is the most fundamental requirement for those living on the islands and is a lifeline for island communities. Access impacts on every aspect of island life, including health and welfare services, education, employment, social and family life, and business.

Affordable, frequent and safe transport services, by both sea and air, and safe piers and airstrips, are vital to island communities. They provide links to the mainland without which islanders could not survive. Cargo services are also essential, bringing supplies to the islands as well as transporting commercial products from the islands to markets on the mainland and beyond.

Ferry, cargo and air services to the islands are operated by private operators all year round, although the frequency of service varies from island to island, reflecting issues such as population size and user demand. The State contracts with a number of these operators to provide subsidised ferry, cargo and air services for island dwellers who use those services. Considerable improvements and enhancements have been made over the last number of years to the State funded services to the islands. Government supports of this nature in 2022 amounted to over €8.539 million.

As a core commitment of this policy, the Government will continue to subsidise ferry, cargo and air services for islanders and will review all service contracts on a regular basis to ensure the best outcomes for islanders. The Government will encourage private operators to invest in new technology, cleaner vessels and alternative fuels in the years ahead.

Future contracts for subsidised transport services will include green procurement principles and criteria to incentivise and reward innovative operators that invest in more resource-efficient, less polluting means of transport.

During the consultation process on this policy, islanders identified further improvements to island connectivity that could help to secure the long-term viability of island communities.

5 <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/774e2-national-development-plan-2021-2030/>

These included the need for additional sailings, the cost of travel and cargo shipments, transport timetables and the need for ferries to facilitate farmers' needs with regard to the transportation of livestock. Ferry congestion at piers, improved facilities for wheelchair embarkation/disembarkation from ferries, and the need for improved provision of island bus services were also referenced. These, and other initiatives related to island transport services, will be progressed through the Action Plans accompanying this policy.

With regard to internal transport on the islands, the *National Electric Vehicle (EV) Charging Infrastructure Strategy 2022-2025*⁶ published by the Department of Transport and Zero Emissions Vehicles Ireland (ZEV) in January 2023 highlights the need for a just transition to electrified transport. The Strategy considers the different charging needs of urban and rural communities. Current ZEV grants for both electric vehicles and for home charging infrastructure are available to island communities. ZEV will work with relevant local authorities and representative groups to understand further and address the challenges of installing EV charging infrastructure on the islands and at carparks of the mainland piers/airports serving island communities, which will also be considered as part of the relevant Local Authority EV infrastructure strategies.

In addition, the *National Sustainable Mobility Policy (SMP) and SMP Action Plan 2022-2025*⁷, published by the Department of Transport in April 2022, highlights the need to improve and expand sustainable mobility options across the country by providing safe, green, accessible and efficient alternatives to car journeys. With both SMP and the *Climate Action Plan 2023*⁸ now enshrining targets for increased use of public transport and active travel options instead of private car journeys, this policy recognises the potential for expanding the availability of sustainable travel options on the islands.

Island Infrastructure

Island infrastructure encompasses harbours and piers, which are essential to connect island communities with the mainland. It also includes infrastructure such as roads, helipads, airstrips and smaller capital infrastructure.

Piers

Physical connectivity to the mainland depends on the availability of safe harbours both on the islands and on the mainland. Notable improvements have been made over the years through State investment in major pier construction projects, but pier safety needs to be improved at several locations.

The National Development Plan (NDP) provides funding for major capital projects, which include pier developments on Inis Oírr, Inis Meáin and at Machaire Rabhartaigh, serving Toraigh, Co. Donegal. Because of the nature of the projects, they require detailed planning, design, analysis and environmental impact assessments to be conducted. However, these NDP priority projects will be delivered over the lifetime of this policy.

In addition, an annual programme of minor capital works on the islands will continue to be delivered in conjunction with the relevant local authorities. This work programme includes investment in areas such as road improvements, repairs to slipways or coastal defences.

Roads and other minor capital infrastructure

Many island roads are in poor condition, not least due to their exposure to extreme elements. Progress has been made over the years with State investment in minor road construction and repair projects on many islands. Responsibility for County roads on the islands rests primarily with the relevant Local Authority. Funding is also available for the maintenance of public non-County roads through the Local Improvement Scheme (LIS).

6 <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/245072/25e5d45b-fca1-48b6-ae94-bd9ff8595759.pdf#page=null>

7 <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/848df-national-sustainable-mobility-policy/>

8 <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/256997/b5da0446-8d81-4fb5-991e-65dd807bb257.pdf#page=null>, p.193



Photo courtesy of Dominic Casey Photos

The consultation process with islanders highlighted the need for improvements in road conditions, particularly in relation to issues such as dangerous bends, the need for safety barriers on cliff side roads, the lack of road lighting or unsuitable road lighting, and road signage warning of black spots or setting speed limits. Small island roads can also become congested with multiple types of road user (such as drivers, jarveys, cyclists, walkers and machinery operators), especially during the tourist season. In parallel with improving road conditions, by local authorities, on the islands, education and information will be provided on road safety by the Road Safety Authority.

Minor infrastructure works which will be delivered as part of this policy to support islanders and visitors include, but are not limited to:

- Improved car parking facilities at mainland harbours, where required.
- Shelters for passengers waiting on piers for ferry services, both on the mainland and the islands.
- Construction of helipads on a number of islands.
- Improvements at the airports and airstrips owned or operated on behalf of the Department.

Community Infrastructure

Community infrastructure, such as community centres, sports and cultural facilities and play areas are an important part of the fabric of communities, and particularly rural communities.

Among the key messages to emerge from the consultation with islanders was the potential to increase the use of multi-purpose community spaces. Islanders proposed renovating and reusing vacant buildings and clustering of services to enable the community to use these spaces for a variety of purposes including leisure/ community/ services provision/enterprise hubs. Spaces where different generations, and new and established communities can interact for social events and community projects were particularly valued. Such spaces also have the potential to function as smaller-scale mobility hubs in which a variety of vehicle types and associated charging infrastructure could be co-located.

Funding for these types of facilities is available through schemes operated by various government Departments such as the Sports Capital Grant, LEADER and the Community Centre Investment Fund, which was launched by Department of Rural and Community Development in 2022.

Water and Waste Water

Water supply and wastewater treatment are significant concerns for islanders from environmental and public health perspectives. Some islands are entirely dependent on rainfall as their drinking water source and have to rely on regular tanked water supply from the mainland. In summer months in particular, high tourist numbers place an additional strain on water supply and wastewater treatment on some islands.

The *Water Services Policy Statement 2018–2025*⁹ - clarifies for Uisce Éireann (formerly Irish Water) and for others – the Government’s expectations for the delivery and development of water and wastewater services in the years ahead. It will also inform decisions on rural water services.

The long-term water supply strategy for Ireland is being developed under the *National Water Resources Plan Framework*¹⁰ and four associated regional water resources plans. All islands currently supplied by Irish Water have been included in the Plans.

Uisce Éireann undertakes a number of water supply initiatives that are particularly relevant to the islands. These are:

- **Leakage Reduction Programme:** under this programme Uisce Éireann has prioritised leakage works as a short-term measure to increase capacity on islands with public water services. For example, works have been completed on the Aran Islands and, more recently, mains replacement on Oileáin Chléire.
- **Water Conservation:** Uisce Éireann continues to work with island communities to deliver water conservation education and support at community, business and household level, including metering.

The Rural Water Programme of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, through Exchequer funding, delivers improvements to private domestic water services in areas of rural Ireland where there are no public water services provide by Uisce Éireann. The Rural Water Programme is administered by local authorities.

Grant assistance is also available through local authorities under the Multi-annual Programme for capital works for:

- Group Water Schemes
- Community Connections (water and waste water)
- Individual Domestic Water Supplies (more commonly called private wells)
- Domestic Waste Water Treatment Systems (more commonly called septic tanks)
- Waste Water Collection and Treatment needs for Villages and Settlements without access to Public Waste Water Services.

The Multi-annual Programme provides for priority investment needs, which will support proper planning and sustainable development in rural areas, including the islands. It will also help Ireland to meet its commitments under the Water Framework Directive.

There are three Domestic Waste Water Treatment System (DWWTS) grants available under the Programme to assist householders to carry out remediation, repair or upgrading works to, or replacement of a defective DWWTS. The aim of the grants is to minimise risks to human health and the environment by carrying out these works. These grants are demand-led and are focused on areas of greatest environmental priority, rather than general application.

9 <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/49364-water-services-policy-statement-2018-2025/>

10 <https://www.water.ie/projects/strategic-plans/national-water-resources/>

Grants are available under the Programme for the carrying out of improvement works to a private water supply. This means a water supply providing water intended for human consumption and domestic purposes that serves only one house.

Supported by the Rural Water Working Group¹¹, the Department will continue to build progressively on the success of the Rural Water Programme and its implementation infrastructure, by developing successor strategies that are integrated, action-focused and whole of society oriented in its input and application.

Housing

The availability of an appropriate mix of suitable housing is key to revitalising island populations and ensuring thriving and sustainable islands communities. Any imbalance between housing demand and supply can inhibit such development, potentially making it more difficult for younger generations to remain on the islands and to attract new residents from the mainland. The opportunity to build or refurbish a house on an island, particularly for young people who have grown up there, can contribute significantly to the long-term future of an island community.

While housing supply and affordability are key issues at national level, many of the factors affecting housing supply and construction generally are amplified on the islands, including the availability of land suitable for developing housing. Environmental designations cover parts of certain islands and meeting the statutory requirements that ensure the sustainable development of the islands potentially add to the challenges.

Consultation with island communities suggests there are dilapidated houses on most islands, which, if renovated, could be brought back into use to meet housing demand. It is suggested, for example, that owners have not been able to afford renovation costs with properties subsequently becoming derelict. Moreover, where houses have been vacant for many years, it can be difficult to ascertain ownership, title and succession in relation to the property.

Construction costs are also generally higher on the islands than on the mainland due in part to the cost of transporting materials and equipment to island sites. It can also be difficult to attract contractors to work on island projects due to the uncertainty associated with changing sea and weather conditions and higher labour costs for construction crews who are often required to stay over from the mainland. On this basis, many grant schemes already provide for higher rates or additional top-up payments to be granted for island-based projects, and will be extended to other grant schemes, particularly in relation to vacant and derelict properties.

Many island communities highlighted the number of holiday homes that may be occupied for only part of the year, including by people whose principal residence is on the mainland. The demand for holiday homes is cited as a cause for house price inflation, further driving many islanders out of the property market when houses do eventually become available.

A mix of housing types, including long-term private rental accommodation, is considered key to attracting families and essential workers, including teachers, nurses and GPs, to the islands. However, where rental property is available, the tourist market can present a more attractive offering to property owners, potentially curtailing supply of longer-term rental properties.

¹¹ The Rural Water Working Group was established in 2018 by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage to conduct a wider review of investment needs and rural water services.

This policy supports a targeted community-led engagement encouraging property owners to shift from short-term and holiday lets to longer-term rentals.

Consultation also alludes to limited social housing, which can also make it difficult for families and individuals to remain on, or move to, the islands. Allocating social housing on the mainland in lieu of accommodation on the islands can further exacerbate the population decline.

Delivering a mix of tenure types, whether private rental, private ownership or social housing, while at the same time maintaining a sufficient number of short-term lets, will help secure the long-term viability of communities and attractiveness of island living. A survey of all housing stock on the islands, including a mapping of vacant and retrievable derelict properties, and quantifying the level of existing and projected demand (including stimulated demand) across all housing tenures will be important steps.

While this work should be community-led in the first instance, it should be complemented by local authority input on unmet demand from social housing applicants on the respective waiting lists and social housing tenants already accommodated on the mainland. This will help inform the quantum and mix of housing needed to meet corresponding island population targets.

Consultation with island communities suggests derelict properties may be a rich first seam of additional supply, supporting delivery of private and public housing. Vacant Home Officers in Local Authorities will work with island communities to identify vacant and derelict properties on the islands and ascertain if those properties can be retrieved.

The Government aims to bring vacant and derelict properties back into use for long-term private accommodation through grant support under Croí Cónaithe, or for social housing by local authorities via the Repair and Leasing Scheme, the Buy and Renew Scheme, or through the use of compulsory purchase orders where necessary. This will complement and support a targeted programme of new build social homes by local authorities or Approved Housing Bodies through by the Government's Social Housing Investment Programme, Capital Assistance Scheme (CAS) and Capital Acquisition and Leasing Fund (CALF), as appropriate.

Consultation has identified a strong appetite among island communities to be centrally involved in the delivery of sustainable housing on the islands¹². An Approved Housing Body (AHB) with a specific focus on and understanding of island housing needs could also support delivery of sheltered housing for older people and other social housing¹³. Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann initiated a survey of island accommodation in 2022 to better understand the housing situation on individual islands and explore the potential to establish a dedicated AHB.

The Housing Agency will work in partnership with Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann and the relevant local authorities, and supported by the Approved Housing Body Regulatory Authority (AHBRA)¹⁴ to examine the potential role for an island-focused AHB, or other community-led island housing structure(s) to support the provision of gateway housing on islands, including medium-term accommodation to attract and cater for new residents, including essential workers, such as teachers, nurses and doctors, and other service providers.

12 This includes consultation led by the Department of Rural Community Development in developing the policy. It also reflected in recent research by University College Cork – Housing and Sustaining Communities on the West Cork Islands (Dr. Siobhan O Sullivan and Dr. Elaine Desmond).

13 Approved Housing Bodies are not-for-profit organisations which among other things provide social rented housing for people who cannot afford to pay private sector rents or buy their own homes and who meet the statutory eligibility and need criteria.

14 AHBRA was established by government to encourage and facilitate the better governance, administration and management, including corporate governance and financial management, of AHBs.

Digital connectivity and telecommunications

Communications technology permeates every aspect of modern living. It has become a key platform for commercial, retail, social and leisure activities. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the use of digital technologies in terms of how and where we work and learn and in how we connect with one another. However, fully availing of the opportunities that digital technologies offer requires reliable high-speed broadband connectivity.

Good digital connectivity has been a particular challenge for the islands. The lack of high-speed broadband connection to the islands restricts islanders' access to on-line services and limits e-commerce opportunities for businesses and consumers alike. In 2016, access to computers (58%) and broadband/internet (55%) on the islands was considerably lower than on the mainland where 73% of the population had access to a household computer and 72% had access to broadband/internet¹⁵.

Improved broadband and mobile phone access presents an opportunity to change the economic and social dynamic for island businesses and communities. Improved digital connectivity and the increased opportunity to work remotely for many employees will support a broader range of employment opportunities for people living on the islands, no matter where their employer is headquartered.

The National Broadband Plan (NBP) aims to deliver access to high-speed broadband to every premises in Ireland, regardless of location, including the offshore islands and this objective will be achieved in the first years of this policy. As an interim measure, a number of islands have benefited from Broadband Connections Points, which enable communities to access free public high-speed broadband at designated buildings such as community centres and sports clubs pending the full NBP connectivity. Some islands have been selected to pilot innovative approaches to services such as eHealth by using the connectivity and facilities at the BCPs.

Mobile phone coverage in any part of the country varies from provider to provider. The Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg) publishes an interactive map of mobile phone coverage¹⁶ for all of the main service providers in the country as a guide for consumers. Further improving mobile phone coverage in rural areas, including on the islands, is amongst the issues that will be examined in the work programme of the Mobile Phone and Broadband Taskforce.

The National Broadband Plan (NBP) aims to deliver access to high-speed broadband to every premises in Ireland, regardless of location, including the offshore islands

¹⁵ Census 2016

¹⁶ <https://coveragemap.comreg.ie/map>

Postal Services

While the improvement in communications technology has enabled island communities to access more services than ever before, there is still a need for traditional postal services. An Post remains committed to serving our island communities, keeping island post offices open and coming up with a variety of solutions to maintain mail services.

An Post currently has Post Offices on the following Islands:

- Árainn Mhór, Co. Donegal
- Toraigh, Co. Donegal
- Clare Island, Co. Mayo
- Inishbofin, Co. Galway
- Árainn (Inis Mór), Co. Galway
- Inis Meáin, Co. Galway
- Inis Oírr, Co. Galway
- Bere Island, Co. Cork

The importance of the local post office as an access point for cash for local communities and SMEs has grown considerably in the aftermath of a shrinking bank network. For many island communities the only access to local banking and financial services now lies directly through the local post office. An Post is also the largest access point for customers of the Department of Social Protection.

There are significant challenges to the sustainability of the post office network and provision of mail services on the islands. This is driven by the changing nature of the needs of island customers, both as individuals and SMEs, and the change in profile of mail carried by An Post, with a move away from letters to parcels prompted by the growth of eCommerce and online shopping.

An Post will continue to work with relevant stakeholders including island communities and sub-contractors to maintain and develop services for the islands.

Education

Establishing new generations of families on the islands is essential for the long-term sustainability of those islands. Without education facilities, it will not be feasible to raise children on the islands and the islands will face a steady decline in population.

While 10 islands have primary schools, only five islands have post-primary schools. For those islands without their own school, convenient access to mainland schools is essential to encourage young families to remain on the islands or for new families to locate to the islands.

Overall, the number of children attending island-based primary schools decreased by 18 between 2011 and 2021. Post-primary school numbers, however, increased from 168 to 197 in the same period. See Appendix 4 for total numbers of school enrolment between 2011 and 2021.

Concerns for island communities in relation to education include:

- the sustainability of the schools, particularly where pupil numbers are low;
- filling teaching posts on the islands, especially at second level;
- the limited choice of subjects at second level due to reduced student numbers and a consequent requirement for fewer teachers;
- the logistics and cost of access to mainland schools for islands which have no post-primary schools;
- the additional cost of school trips to events on the mainland, including participation by students in the Young Scientists exhibition and
- access to third level education and adult education from the islands.



As a fundamental part of supporting the sustainability of the islands under this policy, the Government is committed to keeping island schools open and ensuring that no island school will be closed because of a limit on minimum pupil numbers. The Department of Education will also continue to include a special provision for island-based schools in its formula for the allocation of teaching places. Island post primary schools get two extra teaching posts in the allocation formula.

Some island primary schools may also have additional teachers allocated, but this depends on the circumstances of the school.

Digital technology can play a transformative role in supporting the provision of education, including access to a wider choice of subjects for students on the islands. All second-level schools in the country have been provided with high-speed broadband under the Schools Broadband Programme, and broadband is being rolled out to almost 700 primary schools, including island-based schools, as part of the National Broadband Plan rollout.

The Department of Education commenced an e-Hub pilot project in 2019, in which Physics was taught through Irish using an interactive blended-learning teaching approach to students in Gaeltacht schools, including three Gaeltacht island schools.

The findings of an independent evaluation on the e-Hub project, carried out by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) Northern Ireland, were positive. The project was expanded to include Chemistry as a second subject from September 2022. Two of the five island post-primary schools have students participating in this project in the 2022/23 school year - Coláiste Naomh Éinne, Árainn (Inis Mór) and Coláiste Ghobnait, Inis Oírr.

For third-level education, further education and lifelong learning, the rollout of high-speed broadband across the State will create opportunities to access courses on-line, with a wider range of courses accessible nationally and internationally.

For third level courses focusing on special subjects related to the marine, the environment or archaeology/anthropology, the islands offer an ideal setting for practical fieldwork, research and pilot projects. There is scope for island groups to explore the possibilities in these areas with university partners.

There has been a number of changes to the eligibility criteria for the SUSI grant in respect of third level students. These changes should benefit island communities to a greater degree. Full information can be accessed at www.susi.ie

Childcare

Allied to education, early learning and care, including crèche services, is a significant issue for island communities and is an important service requirement to encourage young families to remain on, or move to, the islands to live. Access to affordable childcare can also facilitate greater participation in the labour market by parents and guardians of young children.

It can be difficult and uneconomical to provide viable childcare services on the islands due to the low number of young children living there. Provision of childcare through Irish on the Gaeltacht islands is similarly challenging, due to low population numbers.

However, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth’s Sustainability Fund supports Early Learning & Care and School-Age Childcare Services with a particular emphasis on supporting the viability of non-for-profit community run organisations. A specific strand of funding is available to eligible services on the islands.

The purpose of the Rural and Isolated Services Support strand is to support services in isolated rural areas, including islands, who may face revenue challenges due to sporadic levels of scheme uptake stemming from natural fluctuations in a small local population. Financial assistance under this strand is granted in respect of the ongoing operational expenditure and liabilities of a service facing and unable to deal with these challenges.

On the Gaeltacht islands, fully Irish-speaking Early-Years Services are currently provided by Comhar Naíonraí na Gaeltachta (CNNG). CNNG receives funding from Údarás na Gaeltachta as part of the organisation’s grant scheme to assist services with a low number of children by aiding them with payment of teacher’s wages as well as assisting with the overhead costs of running the services.

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, in collaboration with the Department of Rural and Community Development, has committed to undertake research on Early Learning & Care and School-Age Childcare needs of parents who work atypical hours or live in rural communities, including island communities. This research will aim to capture data on accessibility and uptake, including any potential barriers faced by different cohorts of parents, and will provide evidence to inform future policy-making.

Sustainable Development Goals for Strategic Objective 1





4 Strategic Objective 2: Diversify Island Economies

Our ambition is to see island economies diversifying into new areas, utilising their strengths and assets to capitalise on emerging opportunities that will underpin their future economic development.

Context

Traditionally, islanders have relied heavily on the tourism, agriculture and fishing sectors for employment, with limited alternative economic activities available. Many jobs in these traditional sectors are part-time and/or seasonal in nature. These sectors are also increasingly facing new challenges, driven by issues such as environmental sustainability.

As is the case with other parts of rural Ireland, island economies need to diversify into new areas, utilising their strengths and assets to capitalise on emerging opportunities that will underpin their future economic development.

Having access to good employment opportunities will encourage people to remain on the islands and sustain population levels.

Improved digital connectivity, the renewed value placed on environmental sustainability and remote working offer unprecedented opportunities for an expansion of the range of employment options for people living on the islands. Emerging sectors such as Renewable Energy, the Marine Economy and the Creative Industries, amongst others, offer potential for good quality jobs.

Greater diversification of island economies, as well as adding greater specialisation and value within traditional sectors such as Agri-food and Tourism, will be important for the future sustainability of island communities. Allied to this, coordinated branding and marketing of island products can help promote island businesses, especially in niche markets.

The arrangements for the 2023-2027 LEADER programme for the islands, set out in Chapter 6, will also make an important contribution to enterprise development and employment on the islands.

Over the last number of years, successive Governments have placed an emphasis on strengthening the regional enterprise ecosystem, supporting enterprise growth and job creation to achieve a more balanced regional development.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment oversees the development and implementation of nine Regional Enterprise Plans (REPs)¹⁷. Each REP is developed by regional stakeholders and focuses on undertaking collaborative initiatives that can help strengthen the regional enterprise ecosystem thereby realising enterprise growth and job creation in each of the nine regions across Ireland. There is potential for the islands to contribute to delivering the objectives of the Regional Enterprise Plans for the regions in which they are located, especially in areas such as the Marine Economy, Tourism, the Creative Industries and the Bioeconomy.

REPs to 2024 were launched in early 2022 across the regions.

The Plans are supported by a series of funds through Enterprise Ireland.

Opportunities for diversification

Connected working

Improved digital connectivity through the rollout of the National Broadband Plan (NBP), along with enhanced mobile phone access, presents an unparalleled opportunity to transform and diversify island economies. Improved connectivity, along with increased support for remote and hybrid working, will open up a broader range of employment opportunities for people living on the islands, regardless of where their employer is headquartered. It will enable them to pursue careers in non-traditional sectors and expand the range of skill sets on the islands. A number of islands have already reported examples of people moving to, or back to, the islands to live and work due to improved connectivity¹⁸.

Improved connectivity also offers scope for island-based enterprises, the self-employed and potential entrepreneurs to create and maintain sustainable and attractive jobs based on the islands, offer new services and reach new markets. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the level of on-line trading across the Irish economy and enabled many companies to expand their reach into new markets. This trend can be built on by island-based businesses as high-speed broadband is rolled out.

The Government has invested heavily in remote working hubs with high-speed broadband connectivity through the Connected Hubs initiative¹⁹ to support employees and entrepreneurs who want to work closer to where they live. Funding has been provided, or has been committed, for hubs on many of the islands covered by this policy. These include hubs on 6 Gaeltacht islands under the remit of Údarás na Gaeltachta.

Through these measures, remote working, whether from home or co-working facilities, will also provide an opportunity for greater labour market participation by islanders who may not otherwise be in a position to attend fixed workplace locations on the mainland.

17 <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/what-we-do/the-business-environment/regional-enterprise-plans/>

18 For example, see <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/2022/08/13/pandemic-provides-a-new-lease-of-life-for-offshore-islands/>

19 <https://connectedhubs.ie/>

Tourism

Tourism is a hugely important aspect of island economies. The offshore islands are a significant attraction for visitors, drawn by the unspoilt views of land and sea and the rich biodiversity that the islands support. Many people also visit the islands to experience the islands' culture and heritage, as well as the richness of the Irish language on Gaeltacht islands.

The economic value of tourism is not confined to the islands themselves, as towns and cities on the mainland benefit from island visitors through increased tourist footfall and the provision of services including accommodation, hospitality and transport to the islands. It is estimated that over 300,000 people visit the islands each year, generating in excess of €20 million for local economies from day trips alone.

However, high tourist numbers can also change the nature of an island and put a strain on local resources (e.g. water, medical care, rescue services and long-term housing availability), diminishing the benefits to residents and island communities as a whole. Striking a balance between conservation efforts and island development is essential to the sustainable growth of the tourism sector on the islands.

A move towards enhanced tourism offerings that encourage visitors to spend at least one night on an island could result in a better distribution of revenue across island services and place less of a strain on the island's resources. Investment in island infrastructure such as piers, water services, waste and public toilet facilities will also help better manage the impact of high footfall.

There is also an opportunity to develop outdoor recreation amenities and services on the islands, including in relation to walking trails, greenways and blueways. The new National Outdoor Recreation Strategy provides a framework to support the development of this sector, while the objectives of the National Sustainable Mobility Policy – with its emphasis on shared and active travel – provide good opportunities for alignment between new tourism offerings and wider objectives for decarbonisation of island environments and enhanced wellbeing among both locals and visitors.

Marketing and promoting the islands more widely as destinations in their own right through Fáilte Ireland and the use of social media can also help to extend the tourist season for the islands. Each island is quite different in character from the next and this can be a strength in marketing the islands, either as a collective experience or as individual destinations. Fáilte Ireland also offer a wide range of capacity building supports to those operating in the tourism sector.

Culture and Heritage

Our culture and heritage are closely aligned to the tourism offering on the islands. Archaeological sites, island histories and stories, traditional music and crafts, and historical buildings and monuments are all elements that make up the unique culture of the islands. These cultural assets can support further job creation through, for example, interactive visitor experiences, and classes and courses in areas such as arts, traditional crafts and the Irish language.

A number of islands have the potential to benefit from more actively marketing their geoheritage - sites or areas of geologic features with significant scientific, educational, cultural, and/or aesthetic value. Geological Survey Ireland promotes geoheritage through a Community Geoheritage Grant scheme, which provides the building blocks for local communities (including island communities) to incorporate geology into local initiatives, creating local employment, education, research and tourism offerings.

The Creative Ireland Programme is a culture-based programme led by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media to promote individual, community and national wellbeing. Its core proposition is that participation in arts, cultural and heritage-based activities drives personal and collective creativity, with significant implications for individual and societal wellbeing and achievement. Cultural and creative activities can also add to the tourism offering on islands.

The Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage provide funding to each of the 31 local authorities to enable them to implement individual Culture and Creativity Strategies 2023-2027. These strategies are unique to each local authority, reflecting the breadth of cultural and creative work being undertaken in each area as well as the strategic priorities identified by the local community, including communities on offshore islands.

The cross-functional Culture and Creativity Teams (including Arts Officers, Heritage & Biodiversity Officers, Librarians, Archivists, Conservation Officers, Irish Language Officers, Community Departments, and Local Enterprise Offices) is a unique model, providing local authorities with an agile and adaptable resource to address locally relevant priorities to deliver arts and cultural services to all local communities, including island communities.

Agri-food

Agriculture and fisheries remain a key contributor to island economies and will be an important source of employment. Food Vision 2030, Ireland's shared strategy for the agri-food sector, is an ambitious plan for its continued development, with environmental, economic and social sustainability at its core. Food Vision envisages there being a place in Ireland's agri-food sector for all types of primary producer, whether big or small, and states that a diversity of farming, fishing and forestry systems offers the best approach towards achieving all forms of sustainability. It foresees a greater diversification in production systems and incomes with opportunities in providing eco-system services, the bio-economy, horticulture, rural tourism, eco-tourism, artisan food production and renewable energy.

As with many other sectors, the Agriculture and Fisheries sectors will need to continue to innovate and diversify in response to the transition to a climate neutral and circular economy and better environmental performance overall. Increased value-added and bio-based product food processing, organic-based production, aquaculture and branding and marketing of high-quality

island-based produce (including cottage based produce) offer opportunities for island farmers, fishers and food processors to expand their reach into mainstream and niche markets.

In addition, Agri-tourism provides an opportunity for island businesses, farmers, producers and artisans to develop their products and services, and to connect further with visitors through Artisan markets and food experiences. For example, food trails could be created between groups of adjacent islands, with each island offering its own speciality dishes.

Bord Bia provide a wide variety of supports and services to food businesses to ensure that those businesses can thrive and flourish and is committed to bringing the most relevant and useful insight and services to clients.

Marine Economy

The identity of the islands is inextricably linked with the ocean, with seafaring and fishing comprising an important part of the economies and heritage of the islands. While traditional sea-fishing is undergoing changes due to the impact of Brexit and efforts to maintain fish stocks sustainably while protecting the environment, there is an increasing emphasis on opportunities in the broader Marine (or Ocean) Economy to support economic development.

The Marine Economy is defined as any economic activity that directly or indirectly uses the sea as an input or produces an output for use in a sea-specific activity. It includes a broad range of sectoral activities, but those most relevant to island economies include:

- Sea Fisheries
- Marine Aquaculture
- Seafood Processing
- Marine Tourism and Leisure
- Marine Renewable Energy
- Marine Manufacturing, Construction and Engineering
- Marine Advanced Technology Products and Services
- Blue Bioeconomy including marine Biotechnology and Bio based products

There is significant potential for island communities to benefit from the opportunities in these areas.

In 2021, Ireland's ocean economy had an estimated turnover of €4.98 billion and provided jobs for 32,100 full-time equivalent employees. The sector made a direct contribution to the economy (as measured by Gross Value Added) of €2.1 billion²⁰.

Brexit effects on trade and fisheries as well as disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly on marine tourism and the international cruise industry, resulted in an estimated 8% reduction in Ireland's ocean economy turnover in 2021 compared to the pre-COVID year of 2019. However, there was a rebound in terms of output and employment in 2021. Between 2020 and 2021, Ireland's ocean economy experienced year-on-year increases of 25% in turnover and 20% in employment.

The Programme for Government, *Our Shared Future*, commits to prioritising the development of the marine sector. It includes a commitment to develop a new integrated marine sustainable development plan as a successor to *Harnessing Our Ocean Wealth*. This latter strategy was published in 2012 as Ireland's first integrated marine plan, setting out a vision and roadmap to enable our marine potential to be realised. The successor plan will focus on all aspects of the marine, with a greater focus on sustainability and stakeholder engagement.

The National Marine Planning Framework (NMPF)²¹ published in 2021 outlines the Government's vision, objectives and marine planning policies for each area of marine activity. The NMPF is effectively the marine equivalent to the National Planning Framework and sets out, over a 20-year horizon, how our seas will be used, protected and enjoyed for more sustainable use of our marine resources.

Design and Crafts

There is a long tradition of creativity on the islands, including in the area of design and crafts. Irish designers and makers have become renowned globally for producing high quality jewellery, home and fashion items and collector pieces, blending tradition and modern methods. *Design and Crafts Council Ireland* (DCCI) is a publicly funded body that promotes the commercial development of the design and craft industry. It provides support to help makers develop and market their products.

Recognising the potential of design and crafts as a sustainable career on Ireland's offshore islands, DCCI will work with the relevant agencies to coordinate activities and new opportunities for the Design and Crafts community on the islands.

DCCI will facilitate the establishment of a special "Island Guild", a community-based design and craft network to focus on the development of the islands' designers and makers. DCCI will work with the Island Guild on their development of a 3-year strategy for the islands' craft designers and makers, which will deliver a concise mission, vision, and values statement, as well as brand development. This strategy will capture the current and potential value that the creative enterprises bring to the island communities from an economic, cultural, social and tourism point of view.

Other initiatives which DCCI will undertake as part of the Islands Policy will include hosting an annual exhibition of Ireland's island crafts highlighting island creativity, sustainability, and heritage; and promoting individual craft designers and makers through digital content and activity.

20 <https://oar.marine.ie/handle/10793/1807>

21 <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/60e57-national-marine-planning-framework/>



Audio-visual Industry

Ireland's inhabited offshore islands are situated along the Atlantic seaboard - an area that has featured in a number of major film productions. Ireland's exceptional landscape and scenery, along with its creative talent, has brought the country global recognition in the film industry.

The Western Development Commission operates the Western Regional Audio-visual Fund for Production support (WRAP), which offers investment of up to €200,000 to a feature film, television drama, animation or video game that undertakes a significant portion of its production in the WDC's region. This region includes counties Donegal, Galway, Mayo, and Sligo – counties in which islands covered by this policy are situated.

Given the high-profile success of Oscar-nominated *Banshees of Inisherin* which was filmed in part on Árainn (Inis Mór) (Co. Galway) there is an opportunity to explore the potential to attract new productions to the islands as locations for film/TV productions, showcasing the beauty and uniqueness of the islands and creating extra employment opportunities for islanders in providing support services.

Renewable Energy

Under the Climate Action Plan, Ireland has committed to produce 80% of its electricity from renewable sources by 2030. Delivering this objective will involve a substantial focus on offshore wind energy through the rollout of both fixed and floating turbines in Irish waters. Other elements of renewable electricity generation will involve solar power and micro-generation. The government has already introduced a Microgeneration Support Scheme and, as part of the Climate Action Plan 2023, a commitment to implement a small-scale generation scheme for farmers, businesses and communities. These schemes support the generation of both electricity for self-consumption and the potential to export back into the grid.

As our renewable energy infrastructure is developed over the period to 2030, a number of the islands are well placed to capture wider business opportunities associated with the development of offshore renewables. This could include supply chain opportunities as Ireland's offshore wind industry is developed. When combined with a greater emphasis on e-mobility in the transport sector (e.g. electric bikes, cargo-bikes, e-scooters, community cars, and so on), development of local renewable energy solutions also offers the opportunity for islands to become self-sustaining for a significant portion of their transport energy needs, particularly where renewable energy production is maximised through microgeneration and battery storage at a community level.

The islands can also be exemplars in the trialling and delivery of renewable energy, building on existing initiatives such as the Aran Islands Energy Co-operative in Co. Galway²², which aims to reduce and gradually remove the dependency of the Aran Islands communities on fossil fuels by replacing them with alternative and more sustainable sources of energy.

The initiative also aims to facilitate improvements in the energy usage of homes and other buildings on the three Aran Islands and to facilitate projects in research and development into sustainable energy. The Co-operative recognises the potential of the initiative to create, provide and encourage employment in sustainable energy projects.

Initiatives on other islands where experiences could be shared include a Clean Energy Transition scheme run by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) on Árainn Mhór, Co. Donegal, a wind energy project on Oileán Chléire, Co. Cork that could be expanded across the islands, and a pilot project for electric vehicles also on Oileán Chléire.

Social Enterprise

Social enterprises are an important part of the broader entrepreneurship ecosystem and often fill gaps in markets that are not attractive to commercially focused companies, particularly in rural areas. Like other businesses, social enterprises provide goods and services on an on-going basis, but their primary objective is to achieve a social, societal or environmental impact rather than maximising profit for their owners. Social enterprises are active in areas such as elder care, childcare, retail, catering, environmental services, social housing and specialist supports for groups at risk of marginalisation. They simultaneously create local jobs while supporting individuals and communities.

Social enterprise is a growing sector and a number of island-based groups have operated social enterprises for many years. There is potential for further expansion of the model on the islands.

In 2019, the Government published Ireland's first National Social Enterprise Policy to provide a framework for the development of the sector and increase its social impact. The initial four-year policy (2019-2022) focused on building awareness of the sector, growing and strengthening social enterprises and achieving better policy alignment across government in relation to social enterprise. Financial supports, along with workshops and training and mentoring for social enterprises, have been provided to help achieve these objectives.

Support for social enterprise will be re-enforced through a refreshed Social Enterprise Policy to be delivered in 2023.

Skilled Trades

The skilled trades' sector offers opportunities for increased employment/self-employment for young people who wish to remain living on the islands.

Whilst skilled tradespeople are in constant demand across the wider economy, island communities have a particular difficulty in sourcing tradespeople such as plumbers, electricians, carpenters and mechanics due to a shortage of skilled tradespeople on the islands. The cost of sourcing tradespeople from the mainland is often higher for islanders due to workers' additional travel costs or the need to stay overnight on the island.

As the vibrancy of the islands increases through the delivery of measures in this policy, the demand for skilled tradespeople will grow both for domestic work and in emerging sectors such as the Marine Economy and Renewable Energy/Energy Retrofitting, which offer employment potential for islanders.

The Government recognises the need to plan for the future and to increase the number of skilled tradespeople in the economy through the Apprenticeship system and through upskilling those already in employment. Apprenticeship is a work-based learning opportunity and apprentices are hired by an employer for the duration of their apprenticeship.

²² <https://www.aranislandsenergycoop.ie/>

While apprentices from the islands may have to conduct their training on the mainland for the most part (as would be the case for those attending a Higher Education course), the skills they learn will provide a basis for being able to work in employment/self-employment on the islands when they have qualified.

Through the Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021-2025, the Government aims to ensure that apprenticeships are seen as a viable and exciting path to skills and a qualification. The Plan sets a target of 10,000 new apprentice registrations per annum by 2025.

Enterprise Supports

The role of Government is to create the conditions for entrepreneurs and businesses to start-up, grow and create employment. There is a range of supports available through publicly funded bodies to support the diversification of island economies through entrepreneurship and enterprise development.

The **Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs)** are a first-stop shop for information and support on starting or growing a business in Ireland. Located in each Local Authority area, the LEOs provide advice, information, and, where appropriate, financial supports to help entrepreneurs to start up or for businesses to develop.

The LEOs offer support in the form of training and mentoring (e.g. a Start Your Own Business course) to small business, while also offering direct financial support to microenterprises operating in the manufacturing and internationally traded services sectors. Furthermore, the extension of the LEO Mandate, based on a framework developed by Enterprise Ireland, extends the existing LEO grant supports to clients with up to 50 employees operating in the manufacturing and internationally traded services sectors, who have the potential to begin exporting.

Key issues under the remit of the LEOs that are of relevance to island-based enterprise development include:

- Digitalisation
- Environmental sustainability/green agenda.
- Online trading

Enterprise Ireland is responsible for supporting the development of manufacturing and internationally traded services companies. The agency provides funding and supports for entrepreneurs with propositions for a high potential start-up, through to large companies expanding their activities, improving efficiency and growing international sales.

Enterprise Ireland will support activities on the offshore islands, including those covered by **Údarás na Gaeltachta**, to ensure that the information on enterprise supports is readily available through the most appropriate channels for the islanders.

Enterprise Ireland have committed to 3 and 10 year Action Plans in which island communities and SMEs can avail of Access to an Expert Mentor, specialised events and initiatives and access to Enterprise Ireland's Market Research Centre, as well as their Office Network.

Údarás na Gaeltachta carries out the work of the LEOs and Enterprise Ireland in Gaeltacht areas, and provides supports for enterprise development across a range of sectors, including Life Sciences, ICT, Tourism, Fish processing and aquaculture, Renewable Energy, Food, Manufacturing, and the Creative Industries. **Údarás** has been to the fore in establishing gTeic enterprise hubs on 6 Gaeltacht islands under its remit, providing enterprise space and hot-desking facilities at these centres.

Údarás na Gaeltachta has consistent communication with the community development groups on the various Gaeltacht islands. The groups are informed on a regular basis about any assistance or opportunities that the **Údarás** or other groups provide concerning enterprise work on the islands.

An tÚdarás is a member of the Comhar na nOileán steering committee, the organisation that deals with all the off-shore islands. An tÚdarás also work with business networks in various sectors on the off-shore islands and has consistent communication with them.

The **Western Development Commission (WDC)**, through the Western Investment Fund, provides seed and venture capital and loan finance to companies and community projects across Donegal, Sligo, Mayo, Galway, Leitrim, Roscommon, and Clare. Since 2021, the Fund has backed businesses in areas such high-tech innovation, tourism, food, natural resources, renewable energy, and agriculture. The WDC also supports community and social enterprises through their Community Loan Fund to give these groups access to the capital they need to help them develop their ideas.

Local Development Companies (LDCs) are multi-sectoral partnerships that deliver community and rural development, labour market activation, social inclusion, climate action and social enterprise services throughout the country. The LDCs are directly involved in the delivery of many programmes that support enterprises, including through the LEADER programme and targeted social enterprise programmes. All of the islands are covered either by a Local Development Company or Comharchumann in the case of Gaeltacht islands – in some cases they are based on the island itself.

Bord Iascaigh Mhara (BIM), Ireland’s Seafood Development Agency remit is to provide commercially relevant and innovative services to the Irish seafood industry that drive growth opportunities, add value, enhance competitiveness, and create jobs in a sustainable, natural resource-based industry for the benefit of coastal communities, including on the offshore islands.

The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine provides funding to BIM in support of fishers, aquaculture producers, seafood processors and sectors of the blue economy including small non-commercial harbour/pier activities, boat building and repair, coastal tourism, and marine leisure and sport.

Microfinance Ireland (MFI) assists businesses with fewer than ten employees. It provides vital support to microenterprises by lending to businesses that cannot obtain funding through traditional sources. It provides loans of €2,000 up to €25,000 to businesses that do not meet the conventional risk criteria applied by commercial lenders and applies interest rate charges for its lending which are not reflective of its credit risk.

Sustainable Development Goals for Strategic Objective 2





5 Strategic Objective 3: Enhance Health & Wellbeing services

Our ambition is to ensure that island communities have improved access to health, emergency and environmental waste services, to enhance the wellbeing of island populations.

Context

For island living to be attractive to the next generation of families, it is important to ensure that there is access to adequate health and social services and emergency services on the islands and that island communities are not disadvantaged by their separation from the mainland. Public health is also impacted by environmental standards and in this context, the management and responsible disposal of waste is an important factor in enhancing the health and wellbeing of island communities.

While health and social services are provided to all citizens based on assessed needs and eligibility, consultations with stakeholders noted that availability of services on the islands varies significantly from island to island.

While there are full time GPs on the three larger islands, Árainn (Inis Mór), Inis Oírr (Co. Galway) and Árainn Mhór (Co. Donegal), on other islands GP visits from the mainland can sometimes be less than once weekly.

Furthermore, some islands do not have a visiting GP service, with islanders attending GP services on the mainland as required. Community nursing for island populations can also vary, with some island nurses permanently resident on the islands and some who visit the islands on a regular basis.

The consultation process highlighted that island populations can increase considerably during holiday periods. This routinely results in an increased workload for GPs, island nurses and emergency services.

In terms of out-of-hours care for island communities, assistance may be required from the Irish Coast Guard helicopter service or Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) if transfer to the mainland is needed. Occasionally, the RNLI will facilitate an out-of-hours GP visit to an island. Such services are coordinated through the National Ambulance Service.

There is also a shortage of ancillary medical professionals such as dentists, podiatrists, physiotherapists, and speech and language therapists (including Irish language speech therapists) on the islands. Private providers of services to the islands, often charge higher fees than on the mainland due to the need to recoup transport costs to and from the islands. Similarly, where islanders need to attend a medical appointment on the mainland, they often incur additional travel and accommodation costs.

Overall, attracting healthcare professionals can be challenging, even for the larger islands. Healthcare professionals based on the islands are impacted by the need to attend regular training and rotation to mainland services to ensure that competencies are maintained and for appropriate clinical supervision. A focus on improved digital connectivity could allow healthcare professionals to undertake training and to attend team meetings remotely.

On average, the age profile of the islands' populations is higher than the national average, resulting in an increase in the need for services such as the Good Morning call service, rehabilitation, day services, and home support services.²³

Apart from a community-nursing unit on Árainn (Inis Mór), Áras Rónáin, there is limited availability of nursing homes on other islands resulting in those requiring in-patient rehabilitation, step-down care, convalescent care, long-term residential or nursing care services needing to take up residence in a facility on the mainland.

It is recognised that, as people live longer, there is an increased demand on health and social care services. Given the aging profile of islanders, access to community health services and home care is vital to enabling older people to remain in their own homes for as long as possible. In addition, it is likely that a disproportionate amount of care is being delivered by informal carers (family members and neighbours) and that the need for care will continue to increase. Ensuring that the health and wellbeing of these carers is protected requires the availability of carers' supports such as the provision of respite care.

In acknowledgement of the remote, rural, peripherality of islands, the consultation process highlighted that island communities must be supported to build on their strong community resilience and resources. During the consultation process, this strong resilience was noted with examples of the community response to incidents that required a medical evacuation via the Irish Coast Guard helicopter service (which includes paramedic level support), the National Ambulance Service (NAS), or the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI).

23 The Good Morning call service is a free confidential telephone community-based service, operated in parts of Ireland and Northern Ireland, which offers a regular telephone call from a volunteer to older people to check that they are safe and well.

Primary Care

Many of the issues affecting health services on the islands were identified in a 2017 Health Service Executive (HSE) review of Primary Health Care on the islands. The HSE report made a series of recommendations, covering areas such as workforce planning for health care professionals to service the islands, provisions for emergency care and out-of-hours care, the quality of primary care facilities, working with island communities to promote health and wellbeing, and the development of eHealth solutions.

While the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic delayed the implementation of the recommendations from the review, the HSE is committed to implementing in partnership with other Departments the recommendations, in line with funding availability. The implementation of the review's recommendations will make a significant difference for the health and wellbeing of island communities. As part of the implementation of the recommendations of the 2017 Island Review the HSE has appointed a Programme Manager and established the Joint CHO Islands Services Board with a programme of work underway.

Health and social care services have developed, particularly since the implementation of the Sláintecare Reform Programme, which is a cross government programme to:

- Promote health and wellbeing and prevent illness
- Enhance community care and capacity
- Improve hospital productivity and capacity
- Integrate care between settings
- Provide care based on need, not ability to pay
- Reduce waiting times
- Provide the Right Care in the Right Place at the Right Time

The Sláintecare Reform Programme is improving patient experience through alternative integrated patient care pathways, eHealth transformation solutions, and building on the learnings from the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Developments for delivering Sláintecare include the Enhanced Community Care Programme, Community Healthcare Networks (CHNs), Integrated Care Programme for Older Persons and Chronic Disease Hubs, and GP direct access to diagnostics, all of which will benefit the entire population including island residents.

With an average population of 50,000, CHNs deliver healthcare services based on population need, building health and social care services at a community level. The CHNs provide for more local decision-making and involve communities in planning to map identified health needs in their local area, including island communities. They also provide the foundation and organisational structures that enable integrated care with primary and acute care partners.

Furthermore, the Department of Health is actively progressing the implementation of six Regional Health Areas (RHAs) in partnership with the HSE, Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, and other stakeholders. Regional Health Areas (RHAs) will provide an alignment and integration of both the hospital and the community healthcare services at a regional level.

A key objective of RHAs is to ensure the delivery of health and social care services consistent with the needs and requirements of the local population. It is envisaged that this will permit a fresh approach to the provision of services in Irish and in other languages, for example, consistent with the evolving requirements of households and island communities at a regional level.

Mental Health and Wellbeing

Mental Health

The implementation of the national mental health policy, *Sharing the Vision – A Mental Health Policy for Everyone*²⁴, aims to enhance the provision of mental health services and supports across a broad continuum, from mental health promotion, prevention, and early intervention to acute and specialist mental health service delivery. In addition, the national suicide reduction strategy, *Connecting for Life*²⁵, provides a coordinated, multifaceted strategy to reduce deaths by suicide and self-harm. These strategies promote positive mental health for all living in Ireland, including those who live on our offshore islands.

Both policies underline the importance of improving access to services within the community. Digital mental health supports can be central to improving access for those living on our islands without requiring travel to the mainland. Since April 2021, therapist-supported online Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) programmes addressing depression and anxiety have been available via referral to SilverCloud²⁶ from GPs, Primary Care Psychology, the National Counselling Service and Jigsaw, which provides mental health supports for young people.

Wellbeing

This policy through its aims and strategic objectives will pursue sustainable wellbeing as a policy goal, focussed on evidence and outcomes, while promoting cross-government work beyond traditional Departmental silos and policy areas.

The Healthy Ireland Framework 2019-2025 is a roadmap for building a healthier Ireland where everyone can enjoy physical and mental health and wellbeing to their full potential and where wellbeing is valued and supported at every level of society and is everyone's responsibility.

The overarching aim of Healthy Ireland is to bring about a healthier population by supporting everyone to enjoy the best possible health and wellbeing.

As part of the Healthy Ireland Framework, several initiatives are working to build healthy communities throughout the country. The Sláintecare Healthy Communities Programme (SHCP) is led by Healthy Ireland in the Department of Health, in partnership with cross-sectoral, national, and local stakeholders. The initiative is aimed at integrating health and wellbeing services in communities and supporting a social determinants approach to health inequalities.

In addition, the National Sustainable Mobility Policy aligns with and complements both the Healthy Ireland Framework and the Well-Being Framework by promoting greater use of active travel modes which help to improve and maintain people's physical health, and by contributing to reductions in noise and emissions from fossil-fueled transport, thereby improving air quality, and making the public realm more attractive for locals and visitors alike. Well-being outcomes will be further improved by aligning the internal transport systems of the islands with the SMP.

24 <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/76770/b142b216-f2ca-48e6-a551-79c208f1a247.pdf#page=null>

25 <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/15758/e6c74742547a48428e4640e3596a3d72.pdf#page=null>

26 <https://www.silvercloudhealth.com/ie/hse-digital-mental-health>

Social isolation (which may affect island dwellers disproportionately) can have a detrimental effect on overall mental and physical health; the proportion of those reporting both poor mental health and social isolation rose significantly in the 2021 Healthy Ireland Survey, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Social Prescribing offers GPs and other health professionals a means of referring people to a range of non-clinical community supports which can have significant benefits for their overall health and wellbeing. HSE-funded Social Prescribing services are available in over 40 locations around Ireland and will be further mainstreamed and integrated within the HSE over the coming years.

The National Carers' Strategy recommends that family carers have access to a range of respite services to meet their needs including in-home, residential, and emergency respite services. The Programme for Government, *Our Shared Future* (2020) provides for a review and update of that strategy and the development of a 'Carers' Guarantee' to provide a core basket of services to carers across the country regardless of where they live.

Funding for the Carers' Guarantee has been channelled through Family Carers Ireland²⁷ to improve access to carer supports across the country. This funding is extending services to approximately 5,000 additional family carers through a mixture of individual and community support services, including peer support, online activities, education programmes, virtual clinics, and counselling supports.

Emergency Services

Access to emergency services on the islands is central to islanders' sense of security. The importance of a fast response is crucial in situations of collapse or trauma. As such, it is important that islanders are trained, equipped and supported and feel confident to assist when an incident occurs while awaiting assistance from trained professionals.

The emergency services include the National Ambulance Service (NAS), Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI), Irish Coast Guard helicopter services and fire-fighting services.

While there is no National Ambulance Service presence on the islands, the NAS have now trained 10 Community First Responder instructors for five of the six islands in the South West, with the sixth island to receive training from an instructor of one of the other islands. Five of the six islands now have Community First Responder (CFR) groups in the South West, which include members who have been trained and equipped to the higher skill level of Emergency First Responder (EFR).

Emergency First Responder is the highest responder level accredited by the Prehospital Emergency Care Council (PHECC) and allows for the treatment of trauma and medical emergencies such as fractures, falls, seizures, respiratory emergencies and cardiac arrest. The NAS intends to extend further CFR, CFR instructor and EFR training to all islands on the West coast by the end of 2023 and to provide EFR refresher training to members already trained on islands off the Donegal coast.

Automated External Defibrillator (AED) cabinets have been provided to all inhabited islands with year-round populations through both local funding and through funding by the NAS Out of Hospital Cardiac Arrest (OHCA) Strategy. In addition, funding provided by the OHCA Strategy, provided for eight wireless mobile device monitors to assist island nurses in transmitting ECG data to GPs.

27 See <https://familycarers.ie/>

The Coast Guard has volunteer members serving on three islands: Inis Oírr, Árainn (Inis Mór) and Toraigh. These volunteers are available to support emergency responses including arrival and departure of Coast Guard Helicopters. RNLI lifeboat services are also available to the island communities.

The Coast Guard provides day and night-time air ambulance service to the islands, conducting over 150 helicopter medical evacuations in 2022. These services are coordinated through the National Ambulance Service. The majority of these services are provided to the Galway, Mayo and Donegal islands.

The importance of access to suitable helicopter landing sites on the islands cannot be understated as the isolated nature of the offshore islands means that helicopter services can provide access to accident and emergency services on the mainland. Ensuring that these helicopters have a clear and safe area to land is a key element in providing fast and effective critical healthcare to both island residents and visitors alike.

In July 2022, the Government announced funding for the construction of a new helipad on Inishturk, County Mayo.

This investment from the Department of Rural and Community Development will provide a vital resource for the Irish Coast Guard to access the island in an emergency, underpinning the vital requirement to maintain and enhance such critical infrastructure.

Coast Guard Helicopter services are provided under contract to the Department of Transport and this policy aims to ensure that the Air Ambulance Services continues to be delivered to the highest standards possible.

The Government-approved business case for the next generation Coast Guard Aviation contract (i.e. post 2025) makes specific provision for delivery of day and night time Air Ambulance services to the island communities.

Other services included in the approved business case include Maritime and Inland Search and Rescue, Helicopter Emergency Medical Service, inter hospital transfers, environmental monitoring and other support to the Principal Response Agencies. Accordingly, Coast Guard aviation assets can be requested to support those agencies with other island emergencies and provision of humanitarian support.

The provision of fire services varies greatly across the islands. While some islands have retained or volunteer firefighters and appropriate vehicles, other islands rely on basic personal or household equipment such as fire blankets or extinguishers provided routinely by the relevant local authorities. It is proposed, as part of the implementation of this policy, to review and provide guidance on the management of fire and emergency response services on islands.

The Coast Guard provides day and night-time air ambulance service to the islands, conducting over 150 helicopter medical evacuations in 2022



Environmental Waste

Waste collection and removal has been identified as an issue that needs to be addressed on the islands. From a public health and environmental health perspective - and to continue to attract visitors the islands - it is important that there are good waste management systems on each of the islands. This requires appropriate facilities for waste disposal, including for visitors, through the provision of adequate litterbins and recycling points. It also requires regular collection and removal of waste, including large and bulky items, from the islands for recycling or further disposal treatment.

While the frequency of waste removal required varies from island to island, islanders have identified a need for service improvements in a number of locations. In particular, large items such as end-of-life vehicles, household appliances, white goods and old mattresses need to be collected regularly for recycling or to be environmentally disposed of. However, the cost of bringing commercial waste disposal skips to the islands can be prohibitive for islanders and large waste items are often left to decay or are disposed of in a non-environmentally friendly way, resulting in environmental and visual pollution.

The local authorities are responsible for ensuring adequate waste collection, recovery and disposal arrangements in their respective areas, as well as for the monitoring and inspection of waste activities generally.

For the purposes of waste management planning, Ireland is divided into three waste management regions: Eastern-Midlands, Southern and Connacht-Ulster. Each region has a Waste Management Plan, which is prepared by the local authorities of the relevant region. The Plans provide a framework for the prevention and management of waste in a sustainable manner, viewing waste as a resource as we make the transition to a Circular Economy. The Circular Economy also offers opportunities for the creation of employment on some of the islands.

In implementing this policy, the Department of Rural and Community Development will work with the local authorities and Regional Waste Offices to improve the collection and recycling of waste on the islands. While tourism brings vital economic benefits for the islands, high tourist numbers also place pressure on waste management systems. There is scope to encourage tourists to be part of the solution by promoting the Leave No Trace principles²⁸ prior to their arrival on the islands through information materials and on social media.

Sustainable Development Goals for Strategic Objective 3



28 <https://www.leavenotraceireland.org/education/education-introduction/>



6 Strategic Objective 4: Empower Island Communities

Our ambition is to empower all island communities to reach their full potential by building a shared understanding of their own needs and opportunities and by participating in and influencing the decisions that affect their future.

Context

Strong communities are essential to the continued wellbeing of our islands. Supporting island communities to develop socially, as well as economically, is integral to building vibrant, sustainable and inclusive communities and improving the quality of life of the people on the islands. Building on their diverse range of resources, opportunities, and skills, our ambition is to see every community across the islands reach their full potential, actively influencing, leading and shaping their own future.

The Government's commitment to supporting communities is set out in *Sustainable, Inclusive and Empowered Communities: a five-year strategy to support the community and voluntary sector*, published in 2019²⁹. The Strategy aims to create a vibrant and active civil society, developing opportunities for all communities to contribute, engage and participate in decision-making and policy implementation.

²⁹ *Sustainable, inclusive and empowered communities: a five-year strategy to support the community and voluntary sector in Ireland 2019-2024* (Government of Ireland, 2019), p.22

At its core, the Strategy recognises that infrastructural investment needs to be complemented by supports for social development, for building communities and, in particular, for enabling people and groups who are marginalised – economically, socially or geographically - to become more involved in decision-making processes which affect them.

Our ambition for island communities over the period of this policy is therefore similar to that articulated by Government in 2019 for all communities and to ensure:

- Island communities are enabled to build a shared understanding of their own needs;
- Community members are afforded the opportunity to participate in and influence the decisions that affect their communities;
- Government supports for island communities, at central and local level, are underpinned by a consideration of societal value and community need;
- Communities are supported by a vibrant and thriving community and voluntary sector and a thriving volunteering culture; and
- High-quality services based on a community-statutory partnership and delivered by sustainable, autonomous community development and local development bodies.

Local and Community Development on the Islands

Island communities were among the pioneers of local and community development in Ireland, with the establishment of island Co-ops in the 1970s. These Co-ops played a vital role in the development of modern infrastructure, employment and accessible transport for their communities and some have continued to serve their communities for almost 50 years.

Each of the offshore islands is now served by a Local Development Company (or Comharchumann), funded, in the case of the Gaeltacht islands, by the Department of Tourism, Gaeltacht, Sport, Arts and the Media through Údarás na Gaeltachta, and by the Department of Rural and Community Development in respect of the remaining islands (see Appendix 2).

The Local Development Companies administer a number of Government programmes on the islands that focus on community and rural development, local capacity building, social inclusion, and labour market activation. The Local Development Companies are also a source of information for islanders on wider public services. They will play a key role in supporting the delivery of measures to implement the Strategic Objectives of this policy, as set out in the accompanying Action Plans. In 2024, the Department of Rural and Community Development will carry out a review of its methodology for funding Local Development Companies on the non-Gaeltacht islands to ensure that the LDCs are supported more effectively to carry out their functions.

Increasing engagement with national and local government

The successful delivery of this policy will require a collaborative, participative and shared approach between government Departments, public bodies, local and community groups and islanders themselves.

A recurring theme during the consultation process with island communities was the need for more active engagement with government, at both local and national level. This policy aims to transform the engagement between island communities and local and national government, creating collaborative structures which will support a whole-of-Government approach to addressing their challenges and maximising their opportunities, drawing on the strengths and resilience of the island communities.

Role of the Department of Rural and Community Development

The mission of the Department of Rural and Community Development is *“to support rural and community development and to support vibrant, inclusive and sustainable communities throughout Ireland”*.

The inclusion of the islands within the remit of the Department since September 2020 has enabled a more integrated and cohesive approach to rural and community development policy for island communities. The closer policy alignment with the Department’s suite of programmes, which support community development, rural economic development and digital innovation, is already yielding dividends, as evidenced by the inclusion of an islands-specific funding stream in the CLÁR programme in 2022 and 2023, the ring-fencing of funding for island roads under the Local Improvement Scheme, and the development of Broadband Connection Points and digital hubs on many islands.

The Department of Rural and Community Development has a strong record of accomplishment in engaging and collaborating with communities across the country and regular visits to the islands and engagements with island communities are now a firm part of the business model for the Department’s dedicated Islands Unit. Joint visits to the islands with Local Authority officials will also be explored.

The Islands Unit provides extensive supports to the islands through the provision of subsidised transport services, grants for capital projects, minor capital works and supports for local development groups. Going forward, the Unit will also take the lead in fostering a whole-of-Government approach to island development, acting as a facilitator in strengthening the engagement between island communities and government Departments and agencies in the context of the implementation of this policy.

Role of Local Authorities

Local authorities will play a leading role in the regeneration and revitalisation of island communities. Five local authorities have inhabited offshore islands within their areas of responsibility – Donegal, Sligo, Mayo, Galway and Cork County. Separately and collectively, and working in partnership with central government, they will play a key role in the implementation of this policy and accompanying Action Plans.

Local authorities will play a leading role in the regeneration and revitalisation of island communities. The community function within local authorities is given strategic expression through the statutory Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP), which is developed and overseen by the Local Community Development Committee (LCDC) in each area. LECPs for the coming 6-year period are expected to be adopted by each Local Authority during 2023/2024. Those local authorities which have offshore islands within their remit will be required to reflect the priorities for island development in their plans.

Participation of island communities in local government

It is important that the voice of islanders be heard in discussions at local government level, not just through political representation, but also through the active participation of island residents in decision-making structures. The Local Government Reform Act, 2014, provided for the greater participation by, and involvement of, local communities in decision-making processes through structured approaches.

Local Community Development Committees

Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) are independent committees of the local authorities, who draw on the expertise and experience of public and private individuals and organisations in each Local Authority area.



LCDCs are responsible for:

- co-ordinating, planning and overseeing local and community development funding;
- bringing a more joined-up approach to the running of local and community development programmes and interventions;
- pursuing an integrated approach to local community based services across providers and delivery structures;
- promoting meaningful citizen and community engagement in the planning and evaluation of development programmes;
- pursuing a more cost-efficient administration of local and community development programmes and delivery structures, matching resources to priorities;
- ensuring better value for money in the management and delivery of programmes;
- focusing on learning and feedback, enhancing the links between services delivery and policy development; and

- pursuing opportunities for additional funding for the area, whether exchequer, EU, private or other sources.

From 2024, guidelines will be issued by DRCD encouraging the appointment of island representatives to the LCDC in counties that have islands in their areas.

Public Participation Networks

A Public Participation Network (PPN) is a structure that brings together volunteer-led groups in each Local Authority area to represent the Community and Voluntary, Environment, and Social Inclusion sectors. The PPN's primary function is to provide representation for the community sector in Local Authority policymaking structures, giving local volunteers a greater say in local government decisions that affect their own communities. They are also active in building the capacity of member groups to carry out this role.

PPNs also act as networking and information hubs for volunteer-run groups. They keep the community informed of relevant local issues, events and supports through regular e-newsletters and events.

They also provide space for community groups to grow and develop through training on topics such as governance, social media, communications, and specific policy issues.

PPNs have been established in all Local Authority areas, and over 18,000 groups nationwide are currently members of a PPN, islands included. Where they are not already engaged with their local PPNs, island-based community and voluntary groups will be actively encouraged to become members and will be provided with supports and training to do so.

LEADER Programme

LEADER is a rural development programme co-funded by the EU, which has promoted and advocated a local community-led approach to rural development for over 30 years. It plays an important role in supporting communities and social enterprise initiatives in progressing job creation, social inclusion, capacity-building and environmental projects at local level. There are many examples of LEADER-funded projects on the offshore islands covering these thematic areas.

Ireland's LEADER programme for the period 2023-2027 recognises that island communities have particular needs and priorities. The programme includes a number of important elements to support the islands and to ensure that their communities are a part of the decision-making process at local level. In this regard, the LEADER programme is delivered through Local Action Groups in sub-regional areas of the country, which essentially correspond with county boundaries. Under the 2023-2027 LEADER programme, a representative of the island groupings in each relevant sub-regional area (i.e. county) must be included in the decision-making body of the Local Action Group.

Furthermore, any Local Action Group in an area that includes island communities will be required to identify in its LEADER Strategy specific actions developed in consultation with island communities themselves and to include an indicative budget in their Strategy to implement such actions.

Island communities working in partnership

Although all of the islands covered by this policy share many common issues, each island is unique. Even where islands are in close proximity (e.g. the Aran Islands), every island has its own distinct set of opportunities, attractions, assets and challenges.

While this policy addresses high-level strategic issues that are shared by most islands, it is important that the needs and opportunities of individual islands are addressed to the greatest extent possible. There is also merit in islands that are geographically or functionally close combining their assets and resources to maximise the benefits that can accrue to them acting collectively.

The key to community development, as set out in *Sustainable, inclusive and empowered communities*, is to support communities to identify their own needs and develop actions based on these needs, and to empower them to take ownership of initiatives that strengthen their capacity in meeting emerging challenges.

The seven offshore inhabited islands of West Cork have led the way in this regard, as they developed an Integrated Development Strategy³⁰ in 2010, which set out a Vision and goals for the development of their islands. It formed a framework for agencies, organisations and the island communities to work in partnership to achieve the goals for both the islands as a collective group and to meet the particular needs of the individual islands.

Building on this work, funding will be made available to groupings of islands to develop a Vision and an integrated Island Development Plan for their island group. It will be a matter for island communities to decide the composition of a particular group, based on the best geographical, economic, or functional synergies between the relevant islands.

30 <https://www.corkcoco.ie/sites/default/files/2022-02/west-cork-islands-strategy-pdf.pdf>

Where groups of islands within a Local Authority area decide to work together, funding will also be provided to assist the islands to engage in the process. Annual events, such as an Island Forum in each Local Authority area will also be explored in that context.

Supporting Inclusive Communities

A commitment to social inclusion is one of the values adopted by Government for collaboration with the community and voluntary sector in the context of the implementation of *Sustainable, inclusive and empowered communities*. Social inclusion means prioritising the needs of communities experiencing social or economic exclusion, including rural isolation. Within communities, inclusion means ensuring that vulnerable or marginalised groups, such as people with disability, older people or migrants are included and involved in community activities.

The Government operates a range of programmes aimed at supporting social inclusion and cohesion, including the Social Inclusion Community Activation Programme (SICAP), Community Employment (CE), the Rural Social Scheme (RSS) and the Community Services Programme (CSP). Island communities avail of these programmes, which contributes to enhancing community cohesion.

SICAP

SICAP is the Irish Government's primary social inclusion programme. It aims to reduce poverty and promote social inclusion and equality in Ireland by supporting communities and individuals through community development, engagement and collaboration.

SICAP resources concentrate on supporting community groups and social enterprises, as well as supporting individuals to gain employment and/or complete education or training. Most SICAP actions on the islands concentrate on these areas and are tailored to the specific needs of islanders.

Some distinctive island-specific actions which have been funded under the programme include:

- Supporting the habitability and sustainability of island communities; and
- Active Citizenship Measures for Local Residents, New Communities and New Arrivals across the West Cork Islands.

Community Employment and Rural Social Scheme

The Community Employment (CE) programme (more commonly known as the 'CE Scheme') is designed to help people who are long-term unemployed (or otherwise disadvantaged) to get back to work by offering part-time and temporary placements in jobs based within local communities.

Enhanced flexibility is applied to eligibility criteria for inhabitants of offshore islands to qualify for CE. This includes the requirement for islanders to only have been in receipt of a CE-qualifying payment for 6 months rather than 12 months prior to availing of CE. In general, the qualifying age is 25 but this is reduced to 18 for island inhabitants. Offshore island residents are also exempt from the "lifetime participation" limits, subject to the availability of places on island-based CE schemes.

The Departments continues to promote the flexibility Community Employment criteria that exists for people who live on the Islands with the aim of increasing the number of participants.

The Rural Social Scheme (RSS) is aimed at low-income farmers and fishermen/women. To qualify for the RSS a person must be engaged in farming or fishing and in receipt of a relevant social welfare payment. In return, people participating in the RSS provide services that benefit rural communities.

- The type of work carried out by RSS participants includes:
 - Maintaining and enhancing various walking routes (that is, waymarked ways, agreed walks) and bog roads
 - Energy conservation work for older people and those at risk of poverty

- Village and countryside enhancement projects
- Social care and care of older people
- Community care for pre-school and after-school groups
- Environmental maintenance work - maintenance and caretaking of community and sporting facilities
- Projects relating to not-for-profit cultural and heritage centres
- Community administration or clerical work
- Any other appropriate community-based project

Volunteering

A key policy instrument in building inclusive communities is to encourage volunteering. Volunteering is not only about civic participation, it also makes an important contribution to the health and well-being of our communities, as well as providing a way of integrating and involving those most marginalised within our society.

The impact of volunteering is extensive and intrinsic to the social fabric of our daily lives. Volunteering assists people of all ages, social backgrounds and abilities to have a healthier, happier and more inclusive life. It contributes to the development and sustainability of communities, not least in remote areas such as islands where access to social and health services can be limited.

The National Volunteering Strategy, published in December 2020, puts in place initiatives that will:

- Increase participation and diversity in volunteering;
- Facilitate, develop and support the Volunteering Environment so that it contributes to vibrant and sustainable communities; and
- Recognise, celebrate and communicate the value and impact of volunteers and volunteering.

Every county in Ireland now has a Volunteer Centre, which gives access to support and resources for both volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations. The Volunteer Centres in counties that have inhabited offshore islands will be encouraged to reach out to the island communities to explore opportunities for supporting volunteers on the islands.

Working in partnership with the local authorities, community volunteer programmes are in place in a number of counties including those with islands to provide a trained cohort of volunteers to assist with, and respond to, emergency events such as Covid-19 and the Ukraine crisis, as well as supporting local events and programmes.

A key policy instrument in building inclusive communities is to encourage volunteering. Volunteering is not only about civic participation, it also makes an important contribution to the health and well-being of our communities



“Sherkin Island welcomed a large group of Ukrainian residents to the island in August 2022. There is a huge community effort and spirit to ensure that the Ukrainians are welcomed. The island has embraced this increase in population. Communication is both verbal and visual. Our dances class that struggled to get numbers was full for the winter of 2022. A recent rope making activity saw how everyone could work together to build a rope out of the natural resources on the island. There is a community WhatsApp group set up to cater for the needs of the new arrivals.

Sherkin island is keen to ensure our residents are well looked after with islanders volunteering time to practise English, giving lifts, helping with local knowledge - it is a two-way street - as the Ukrainians come with their own set of skills such as hairdressing, bakers and mechanics.

There’s also a children’s group that is run by parent volunteers who arrange many activities such as a weekly gathering, Halloween parties, Christmas parties and they created the best float at this year’s St. Patrick’s Day parade.” - Received from Sherkin Island Development Society



“13 people from Ukraine have been living on Toraigh, Donegal, for the past year. They are settling in well on the island and taking part in the many activities that Toraigh has to offer. They attend dinner each Wednesday in the Day Centre, which is hosted by the islanders.

The islanders also organise weekly English and Irish language classes for the Ukrainian residents. The community opened up the gym to them as well as a separate room to do yoga.

Dance classes on the island are attended by Toraigh islanders and the Ukrainian residents, with the youth club and art classes similarly reflecting the new makeup of the island.

Since moving to Toraigh Island, the Ukrainians have shown a keen interest in fishing and walks around the island. A multi-cultural night was held on the island where the islanders were able to taste different types of Ukrainian food. Overall, they have blended in well with the local community.” – Received from Comharchumann Thóráí

Youth Participation and Youth Services

Young people's participation

This policy has emphasised the importance of encouraging young people to remain on, return or move to the islands to halt population decline and support a more balanced demographic profile.

Young people are the future of rural communities, including island communities. It is important that they are empowered and that their voices are heard at an early stage as an integral part of the decision-making processes at local and national government level. There are a number of participative structures for young people to support this objective.

Comhairle na nÓg are child and youth councils in the 31 local authorities across the country which give children and young people the opportunity to be involved in the development of local services and policies. They provide a platform for young people under the age of 18 to have their voices heard on the services, policies and issues that affect them in their local area. The participation of young islanders on the Comhairle na nÓg groups of the local authorities with a remit for the islands will be encouraged as part of this policy.

As part of the initiatives under *Our Rural Future* to encourage the participation of young people in the future development of rural policy, the Department of Rural and Community Development, in collaboration with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, organises an annual Rural Youth Assembly.

To ensure that the views of young islanders are heard at this event, measures will be taken to ensure that young people who live on the islands are represented at the annual Rural Youth Assembly and that they are consulted in other decision-making processes of relevance to their lives on the islands.

Youth services

Our Rural Future highlighted the fact that some of the issues which affect people living in rural areas generally are more pronounced for young people. For example, access to help networks and supports can be harder for young people in rural areas, as these services are often located in the cities or other large urban centres. Access to such supports will be even more difficult for young people living on the islands.

Facilities for young people in rural communities tend to be generic in terms of age provision (covering 5-18 years of age), and sufficient consideration is not given to different categories of age-appropriate facilities, i.e. separate tailored amenities for the younger age group, young teenagers, and the older teenage group. Stakeholder consultations have highlighted that there is also often a gap in the diversity of activities available in rural areas for young people, outside of sports.

The Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSCs) are a key structure identified by Government to plan and co-ordinate services for children and young people up to 24 years of age in every county of Ireland. Their overall purpose is to improve outcomes for children and young people through local and national interagency working. The Committees bring together the main statutory, community and voluntary providers of services to children and young people and provide a forum for joint planning and co-ordination of activity to ensure that children, young people and their families receive improved and accessible services.

In the context of this policy, the relevant CYPSCs will consider data and information on the needs of children and young people living on the islands in drawing up their Children and Young People Plans and will identify actions that are required according to identified needs.

Supporting the Irish language

For many people on the islands and for those on the Gaeltacht islands in particular, the Irish language is an essential part of community identity and heritage. However, the Irish language as a community language is under pressure on all the Gaeltacht islands. This is due to a number of factors, including aging and declining populations.

According to the 2016 Census:

Of total offshore islands population,

64.4%
speak Irish.

Of the Gaeltacht Islands,

79%
of the total islands population speak Irish.

Of the non-Gaeltacht Islands,

22%
22% of the total islands population speak Irish.

As islanders become increasingly engaged with wider economic and social networks that use English as their main working language, the challenge is to maintain Irish as a living language within the island communities.

One way to meet this challenge is to facilitate native Irish speakers who wish to live or work on the islands to do so. With the phased rollout of high-speed broadband to rural areas, including the islands, and a willingness on the part of many employers to facilitate remote working, there is an unprecedented opportunity to attract Irish speakers to the islands. The establishment of the gTeic remote working hubs by Údarás na Gaeltachta on the Gaeltacht islands is a further practical development which supports entrepreneurs and employees to work from the Gaeltacht islands.

The Gaeltacht Act, 2012, provides the statutory footing for the language planning process to support the overarching aims of the 20 Year Strategy for the Irish Language. The *5 Year Action Plan for the Irish Language* has further supported the implementation of both the Strategy and the Act, complementing the rollout of the language planning process. Under this process, Gaeltacht communities including the communities of the Gaeltacht Islands have been afforded the opportunity to prepare and implement language plans at a community level with ongoing State support. Such communities are therefore being offered the opportunity to play a key role in addressing the challenges facing the Irish language as identified at community level.

The actions and objectives of each plan varies according to the specific circumstances of the community that prepared it. To support these objectives an approved plan is given annual funding for a seven-year programme, which includes funds to support the hiring of Language Planning Officers who are recruited to work full time on the implementation of the plans and to support the Irish language in the communities. Language Plans have been approved for the six Gaeltacht islands designated under the Act and funding has been provided to employ Language Planning Officers on the six islands.

The implementation of relevant provisions in the Official Languages (Amendment) Act 2021 will improve and increase the provision of public services through the medium of Irish on Gaeltacht islands, as well as create significant employment opportunities for those with a competency in the language.

Sustainable Development Goals for Strategic Objective 4





7 Strategic Objective 5: Build Smart Sustainable Futures

Our ambition is to tap into the innovation, knowledge and resilience of island communities and help them to use their surrounding natural assets to support their future social, economic and environmental sustainability.

Context

Adapting to transformative global issues such as climate change, the transition to a digital society and protecting the sustainability of our natural resources will be hugely important for the long-term viability of island communities.

Anticipating and adapting to these structural transformations (or “megatrends”), which will influence how our societies live and work into the future, will be grounded in an approach based on research, development and innovation.

While large-scale research, investment and technological development is being applied at national and international level to the issues that will affect the future of our shared planet, the OECD points out that local place-based policies will become increasingly important because the effects of global megatrends will vary from region to region, and even within the same country³¹.

31 See: https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/urban-rural-and-regional-development/oecd-regional-outlook-2019_9789264312838-en

Photo Courtesy of Máire Ní Chéadagáin

Islands are often amongst the first areas to experience the adverse impact of issues such as climate change, environmental degradation or digital inequality, so it is important that they develop localised plans at an early stage to mitigate or respond to the effects of emerging trends.

Importantly, the OECD points out that transformative megatrends bring opportunities as well as challenges³². The aim of this Strategic Objective therefore is to support island communities to tap into opportunities they can capitalise on by applying their knowledge, innovative skills and utilising their surrounding natural assets to create smart, sustainable and resilient futures. This chapter highlights a number of areas and initiatives that the islands can build on to support their economic, social and environmental sustainability in the longer-term. Moreover, because islands are a microcosm of larger rural areas, the knowledge that can be gained from testing new technologies and approaches on the islands can be scaled-up and transferred to other rural areas or towns.

Smart Islands initiative

The concept of islands aspiring to build sustainable futures based on innovation and technology has gained increased interest in recent years at European level.

The Smart Islands Initiative³³ is an example of a collaborative approach to developing the smart management of island resources and infrastructure at European level. It is a bottom-up effort on the part of European island authorities and communities which seeks to convey the potential of islands to function as “living laboratories” for technological, social, environmental, economic and political innovation. In 2016, the members of the initiative drafted and published the *Smart Islands Declaration*³⁴, which outlined the challenges and potential opportunities facing islands.

The Smart Islands initiative advocates a place-based approach that makes the most of each island’s competitive advantages to create local growth and prosperity while contributing to the EU’s policy objectives in fields such as energy, climate mitigation and adaptation, innovation, blue growth and the digital agenda. It places a strong focus on sustainable and equitable development and, in addition to energy, addresses transport, ICT, water, waste, diversification of economies, and citizen participation and inclusion.

The approach proposes that through the deployment of smart, integrated solutions and with the use of cutting-edge technologies, islands can transform into smart territories offering higher quality of life to local communities.

The Smart Islands initiative encourages public authorities, businesses, academia and civil society actors to work together to devise a development agenda that captures the potential of islands, generates local growth and drives their transition to smart, sustainable and inclusive economies. Ireland is currently represented on the initiative through Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann.

The principles and objectives of the Smart Islands initiative will be adopted as a template for building smart sustainable futures for Ireland’s islands under this policy. In addition, the scope for deeper involvement by Irish public bodies (e.g. local authorities, Regional Assemblies and State agencies), business and academia in the Smart Islands initiative at European level will be examined.

32 See: <https://www.oecd.org/rural/rural-development-conference/13th-Rural-Agenda-EN.pdf>

33 <https://www.smartislandsinitiative.eu/en/about.php>

34 See: http://www.smartislandsinitiative.eu/pdf/Smart_Islands_Declaration.pdf

Smart Villages

At a more localised level, the Smart Villages³⁵ approach to local and community development provides islands with a framework to make the best use of their strengths and assets.

Smart Villages are defined as rural areas and communities that build on and enhance their existing strengths through creative thinking and by embracing innovation to create better places in which to live and work. The Smart Villages concept does not have to be confined to areas that meet the formal definition of a “village”, but can work well in relation to a townland, an island, or even a group of islands working as a single unit. For example, the Aran Islands Energy Co-op is an initiative that displays many of the features of a “Smart Village” approach.

While digital tools and connectivity are closely associated with the “smart” concept, the use of digital technologies is not what defines a Smart Village project, nor is it the only way to achieve local development objectives.

For example, community groups and individuals often overcome local challenges by implementing innovative solutions to the delivery of service deficits through a social enterprise model.

More significantly, the Smart Village concept is founded on a participative approach to developing and implementing strategies to improve economic, social and environmental conditions. It is therefore fully aligned with the long-standing practice of island communities working together.

The LEADER programme 2023-2027 provides funding for Smart Villages projects and affords an opportunity for island communities to develop and implement their own Smart Villages projects. A six-module training programme on Smart Villages was provided to island communities in the autumn of 2022 and provides a good basis for those communities to develop Smart Villages projects.



35 https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/smart-and-competitive-rural-areas/smart-villages/smart-villages-portal_en

Green Energy

Despite having access to renewable sources of energy, such as wind and wave energy, many Irish islands depend on expensive fossil fuel imports for their energy supply. Moreover, around 50% of the electricity imported from the mainland is lost in transmission. Therefore the potential to produce energy locally from renewable sources offers multiple benefits in terms of reducing energy costs, improving efficiency and reducing carbon emissions. The grid network on the islands also needs to be strengthened to support the utilisation of energy produced from renewable resources.

Arising from the Smart Islands Initiative, the Clean Energy for EU Islands initiative³⁶ was launched in 2017 to provide a long-term framework to help islands reduce their dependency on energy imports by making better use of their own renewable energy sources and embracing modern and innovative energy systems.

It is envisaged that this initiative will result in:

- reduced energy costs and greatly increased production of renewable energy by island communities;
- the construction of energy storage facilities and demand-response systems, using the latest technologies;
- better energy security for islands, with less reliance on imports;
- improved air quality, lower greenhouse gas emissions, and less impact on islands' natural environments; and
- the creation of new jobs and business opportunities, boosting islands' economic self-sufficiency.

The Clean Energy for EU Islands initiative was underpinned by the Valetta Declaration³⁷, signed during the Maltese Presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2017 by the European Commission and 14 EU countries with island populations, including Ireland.³⁸

As a follow-up to the Valetta Declaration, the parties also signed a Memorandum of Understanding in June 2020 (the Memorandum of Split³⁹) to establish a working framework for cooperation to advance energy transition and identify best practices on challenges that cannot be addressed at island-level. A Clean Energy for EU Islands Forum takes place each year, which focuses on the dissemination of best practices, solutions to challenges and an exchange of experience on the setting of priorities.

Part of the work stream of the *Memorandum of Split* involves the identification of legal, regulatory and other barriers to the development and implementation of the energy transition of islands and the development of a road map to tackle those barriers. In this context, in 2022, the Clean Energy for EU Islands Secretariat conducted a study on regulatory barriers and recommendations for clean energy transition on the islands of Ireland. The methodological approach to this study included two Focus Group meetings and a National Stakeholder event, which involved stakeholders from government Departments, other public bodies, energy providers, regulators and island representatives.

The study - which was published at the end of 2022 - and its recommendations will be reviewed by the relevant Departments, public bodies and other stakeholders as part of this policy, with a view to responding appropriately to support the transition of the islands to renewable energy.

36 https://energy.ec.europa.eu/topics/markets-and-consumers/clean-energy-eu-islands_en

37 Available to download at [Documents \(europa.eu\)](#)

38 The full list of signatory countries is: Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden.

39 [eu2020_mou_split_en.pdf \(europa.eu\)](#)

Research, Innovation and Development

The underlying thread running throughout this chapter to underpin smart sustainable futures for island communities is innovation, underpinned by research, development and collaboration. Ireland's island communities have an inherently innovative mind-set and a willingness to test and apply new solutions to the challenges they face. Some of the offshore islands have already been to the fore in testing new technologies, including electric vehicles, renewable energy and remote health care.

For example, the **Aran Islands Energy Co-operative** (Comharchumann Fuinnimh Oileáin Árann Teo)⁴⁰ was set up in 2012 as a non-profit, member-owned organisation with the aim of securing the future energy and economic security of the three Aran islands by generating their own energy requirements from renewable resources and owning their energy infrastructure.

The Co-op's goals include creating decarbonised, sustainable places to live, work and thrive; developing new and diverse employment opportunities in areas such as sustainability, renewable energy and biodiversity; increasing the comfort, energy efficiency and sustainability of island homes and transport; and offering inspiration, support and examples of best practice to other communities in Ireland and beyond. The Co-op recognises the importance of achieving these aims while simultaneously protecting the biodiversity and cultural heritage of the three Aran islands.

Since its establishment in 2012, the Co-op has been involved in a range of projects, including in areas such as energy retrofitting, electrification of transport and heating, generation of renewable energy, and micro-grid development. The Co-op has engaged with Government Departments, State Agencies, the Third Level sector and EU partners in the implementation of these projects.

Retrofitting of homes and public buildings is a key measure to increasing efficiency and reducing the energy requirements for islands. SEAI provides additional grant supports to homeowners on islands through the Better Energy Homes Scheme. Communities will be supported to prepare Energy Master Plans for their islands to increase sustainability and reduce their reliance on imported fuels.

In terms of digital transition, the **Home Health** project on Clare Island in Co. Mayo, led by researchers at the University of Galway, combines video consultations with remote physiological monitoring, including blood pressure, weight and blood sugar, to deliver virtual health care to the islanders.

The researchers use state-of-the-art medical device technology such as remote sensors and Artificial Intelligence software in a bid to improve patient care management. The project will also evaluate novel health promotion interventions, drone delivery of medications and robotic triage simulation. The Home Health project has multiple stakeholders, including the island community, University of Galway, the HSE, Science Foundation Ireland, the Western Development Commission, and Cisco Ireland.

There is scope for the islands to share more widely, within Ireland's island network, their experience and learning from innovative projects such as those outlined above. In this regard, the Department of Rural and Community Development will work with Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann to establish an Islands Innovation Forum which will facilitate the regular exchange of information by island communities on innovative projects that could be replicated on different islands.

The islands should also engage with other rural-based innovation projects, such as Dingle Peninsula 2030⁴¹, to benefit from learnings in areas such as smart farming, renewable energy, and sustainable travel.

40 See: <https://www.aranislandsenergycoop.ie/aims-and-objectives/>

41 <https://dinglepeninsula2030.com/>

There is scope, too, for the islands to build on and expand their collaboration with Third Level institutions, Research Centres, State agencies and industry partners to act as test-beds and early adopters in areas such as:

- Climate Action
- Sustainable farming practices, bioeconomy and living labs
- Renewable Energy production and storage, including in solar, offshore wind, anaerobic digestion, geothermal⁴², and green hydrogen
- Testing of floating solar and wind turbine platforms
- Micro-grids
- Biodiversity
- The Marine Economy (Aquaculture, fish stocks, blue bioeconomy, seabed mapping, underwater technologies, etc.)
- Next-generation Autonomous Vehicles (whether on land or at sea)
- The Circular Economy & Bioeconomy
- Resource efficiency
- Sustainable Tourism⁴³

Island representative organisations and Local Development Companies are encouraged to actively seek out opportunities to collaborate with research partners, as well as private sector innovators, to identify value-added projects in which the islands can utilise their strengths to pilot and trial new technologies, whether on land or marine-based. The islands should also continue to explore the opportunities to participate in projects at EU level.

Regular and timely socio-economic data related to the islands will also be needed over the lifetime of this policy to support its implementation and the development of public services in areas such as housing, education, healthcare and infrastructure. In this context, the Department of Rural and Community Development, in consultation with island representatives and other stakeholders, will identify priority socio-economic issues for data collection and research in relation to the islands and will support the relevant research.

42 Geological Survey Ireland and Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland have been supporting research, development and innovation in the geothermal sector with input from the Irish Centre for Research in Applied Geosciences (iCRAG), universities and the SME sector.

43 In 2022, the Atlantic Technological University commenced research on how tourism has affected six islands off the West coast of Ireland - Inis Oírr, Inis Meáin, Árainn (Inis Mór), and Inishbofin in Co Galway, and Árainn Mhór and Toraigh in Co Donegal. Data will be gathered to examine, inter alia, the economic value, environmental impact, energy usage, carbon footprint, and the social and cultural impact of tourism on these islands. The intention is to conduct this research on an annual basis and to extend the data collection to more islands off the Irish coast from 2023.

Links to Smart Specialisation Strategy

Smart Specialisation is an innovation policy concept developed by the European Commission which aims to boost regional innovation, contributing to growth and prosperity by helping and enabling regions to focus on their strengths. It will provide a 'bridge' between regional and national innovation strategy building and decision-making, bringing coherence to Research, Development and Innovation planning for the benefit of enterprise and advancing the RD&I agenda regionally and nationally.

Ireland's *Smart Specialisation Strategy for Innovation 2022-2027*⁴⁴ (S3) was informed through an 'entrepreneurial discovery process'. This entrepreneurial discovery is an interactive and inclusive process in which the relevant actors identify new and potential activities and inform the government. The government assess this information and empowers those actors most capable of realising the potential. For Ireland's S3 this process formed part of the Regional Enterprise Plans and was also supported by a national level online consultation.

Smart Specialisation will be supported by a national Implementation Group. It will oversee the delivery of S3 national and regional strategic priorities by bringing together relevant policy leads, as well as related agencies and bodies directly involved in implementation as required. It will focus on prioritisation and action planning to identify emerging regional consensus on cross-sectoral economic and innovation developments, ensuring continued alignment between national enterprise and innovation policies and S3.

Smart Specialisation is an important concept for island communities. The entrepreneurial discovery process methodology enables a deep exploration of enterprise strengths of the island communities and emerging areas of opportunity.

Furthermore, engagement with regional and national level innovation and enterprise policy will help the islands build a thriving and diverse economic base into the future.

Climate Change mitigation and adaptation

Climate change is the most urgent issue facing our generation and future generations. In May 2019, Dáil Éireann underscored the urgency of the climate change crisis by declaring a climate and biodiversity emergency.

Climate change is expected to have diverse and wide-ranging impacts on Ireland's environment, economic development, and society as a whole. The immediate risks are predominantly those associated with changes in extreme weather conditions such as floods, droughts and storms. Because of their heightened exposure to weather extremes such as these, the impacts which climate change can have on local landscapes, ecosystems and livelihoods can quickly become apparent on the islands.

The impact of global warming in raising sea levels will affect many coastal areas of Ireland, including the offshore islands, over the next 30 years. In the long-term, this rise in sea levels may create difficulties in accessing the islands, cause damage to heritage sites and result in a reduction in the availability of land for agricultural or housing purposes. There are many tools now available on-line⁴⁵ which show the projected extent of future coastal erosion and flooding if mitigating and adaptation actions are not taken to address the phenomenon.

It is important that island communities are aware of the implications of the projected impact of climate change on their individual islands and that they commence planning now to mitigate and adapt to the worst impacts of this development.

44 <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/publications/national-smart-specialisation-strategy-for-innovation-2022-2027.html>

45 These include, for example, the OPW's flood information portal <https://www.floodinfo.ie/>, and the international Climate Central organisation's website <https://www.climatecentral.org/>.

There are already a number of projects, which can be drawn on to inform this planning. For example, Geological Survey Ireland (GSI) has been a key partner in the Ireland-Wales CHERISH project (Climate, Heritage and Environments of Reefs, Islands, and Headlands)⁴⁶ which is co-funded through the EU's Ireland Wales Co-operation Programme 2014-2020. The project began in January 2017 and will run until the middle of 2023.

The main objective of the CHERISH project is to increase capacity and knowledge of climate change adaptation for the Irish Sea and coastal communities, including island communities. The data collected from the areas within the remit of the project will help to support sustainable community initiatives including in the areas of heritage, tourism, local economies, and jobs. The CHERISH project is due for completion in 2023. However, the scope to extend the tools and techniques developed as part of the project to island areas more widely, to inform their climate change plans and actions, will be explored.

The Marine Institute will also continue investment in research calls to address climate change issues such as rising sea level, ocean acidification, fish distribution and abundance changes, blue carbon storage and sequestration, coastal erosion and flooding, and extreme storm events.

Protecting Biodiversity and the Natural Environment

Context

Over the last two decades in particular there has been an increased global understanding and awareness of the importance of the nature-based ecosystems which surround us.

These ecosystems are important not only in relation to the natural environment, but to our economies, society and to each individual's quality of life. Nature's ecosystems provide us with water, clean air and food, as well as raw materials for energy, medicines, and shelter.

However, the rate of change in our natural world during the past 50 years is unprecedented⁴⁷ and the rate of species extinction and habitat decline is accelerating. The loss of biodiversity (the natural world around us and all the plants, animals, insects and micro-organisms that live on our planet) is driven greatly by human activity, including changes in land and sea use and the over-exploitation of natural resources. It is estimated that of the species that have been assessed in Ireland, 20% are threatened with extinction here⁴⁸.

In May 2019, Dáil Éireann declared a National Climate and Biodiversity Emergency, recognising the importance of addressing these inextricably linked twin issues. In April 2022, the Government convened a Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss to examine how the State could improve its response to the issue of biodiversity loss and to bring forward proposals in that regard. The *Report of the Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss*⁴⁹ was published in April 2023 and includes over 150 recommendations for consideration by the Government. This report is timely, as the Government intends to publish Ireland's fourth *National Biodiversity Action Plan* in 2023, covering the five-year period from 2023 to 2027.

The islands and biodiversity

The offshore islands support an extraordinary range of flora, fauna and wildlife. Islanders have worked with and respected their natural environment for centuries and will continue to do so.

46 <http://cherishproject.eu/en/>

47 See *Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services* at <https://zenodo.org/record/3553579#.ZEzx6nbMI2y>

48 <https://biodiversityireland.ie/ipbes-irelands-biodiversity-crisis/>

49 https://citizensassembly.ie/wp-content/uploads/Report-on-Biodiversity-Loss_mid-res.pdf

Protecting the rich island biodiversity, promotion of wildlife and better protection of habitat is seen on many islands as essential to support sustainable tourism and to preserve the natural heritage of the islands for future generations. Many of the islands attract visitors who have a particular interest in the wealth of biodiversity and wildlife the islands have to offer.

At the same time, the islands' environments are fragile ecosystems and increased tourist numbers are having a significant impact on the ecology of several islands, exacerbating relatively scarce water supplies, exposing an insufficient capacity in the island sewerage systems, as well as waste disposal and recycling capacity. The measures to be taken throughout this policy, including in relation to island infrastructure, environmentally-focused Agriculture schemes and sustainable tourism, will enable islanders to protect their natural resources and biodiversity for the future.

Natural Resources

The role of the Seafood sector

The islands are surrounded by an abundance of marine resources and, traditionally, fishing has underpinned the livelihood of many island families. There is a heightened awareness globally of the need to manage the sustainability of fish stocks to protect both food security and ocean biodiversity and ecosystems.

At EU level, the overarching policy for sea-fisheries is set down in the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP). Ireland receives quotas for a number of species through the CFP annually. Quota amounts, which are intended to support the conservation of fish stocks, are dependent on the status of the stocks of the species concerned and quota allocations vary annually.

Quotas are managed by the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine following recommendations from a stakeholders' Quota Management Advisory Committee, which includes representation from island fishers.

The European Maritime, Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund (EMFAF), which runs to 2027, supports innovative projects that contribute to the sustainable exploitation and management of aquatic and maritime resources. Ireland's EMFAF Operational Programme 2021-2027 places a strong emphasis on sustainability, with one of the Programme's priorities focusing on "Enabling a sustainable blue economy in coastal, island and inland areas, and fostering the development of fishing and aquaculture communities".

Amongst other actions, islands fishers will benefit from the development and implementation of the Seafood Development Programme, which will support a wide range of initiatives targeting job creation, social inclusion, tourism, community regeneration and market development around our coastline.

The rise in sea temperatures brought about by global warming will have implications in the future for the sustainability of existing stocks and for changes in the species of fish that can be caught or farmed off our shores. Together with national authorities, fishing communities – whether on the islands or the mainland – need to anticipate and adapt to these developments and find opportunities which will strike a balance between protecting biodiversity and maintaining livelihoods.

Aquaculture has been identified as having the greatest potential for global expansion as a sustainable food-producing sector⁵⁰.

50 See *Food from the Oceans - How can more food and biomass be obtained from the oceans in a way that does not deprive future generations of their benefits?* - Report of a High Level Group of Scientific Advisors to the European Commission (2017), available at <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/Oe91f9db-f4f2-11e7-be11-01aa75ed71a1>.

In line with EU and national policy objectives, sustainable Aquaculture in Ireland can play an important role in delivering: (i) nutritious and healthy seafood with a limited environmental footprint; (ii) economic development and job opportunities for coastal and rural communities; (iii) reduced pollution; (iv) the preservation of ecosystems and biodiversity; and (v) contribute to the fight against climate change. Aquaculture will provide opportunities for island communities as this sector is developed in line with Ireland’s forthcoming *National Strategic Plan for Sustainable Aquaculture Development 2030*.

The role of the Agriculture sector

Farming is a traditional sector of employment for many islanders. The geological and topographical profile of the islands around our coast will influence the type of farming (e.g. beef, sheep, dairy, poultry, and tillage) which is carried out on any individual island, but farmers have worked and managed the land on the islands for centuries.

The Agriculture sector as a whole faces many challenges and changes in the coming years, including the need to respond proactively to the climate and biodiversity emergency; changes in consumer preferences; diversification of farming enterprises to support farm viability; sustainable approaches to land-use; succession planning; and the role of women in agriculture. These changes also bring opportunities for innovation and for trialling new methods and new technologies, as well as product diversification.

The Government is committed to moving to a climate-resilient and climate-neutral economy by the end of 2050 and has enshrined this objective in law through the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021. Agriculture remains the single largest contributor to overall emissions in Ireland, at approximately 35% of the total emissions. The sector has been set a target of reducing its emissions by 25% by 2030.



Achieving the transition to a more sustainable farming model with reduced emissions will require innovation in the sector. Given the innovative culture embedded in island communities, the islands can play a role in adapting and piloting new ideas and methods in Agriculture, working collaboratively with research partners. The *Climate Action Plan 2023* includes a range of actions with specific and challenging targets aimed at reducing the environmental footprint of farming and further building on the strong credentials of Irish agriculture, from primary producer through to processor.

The EU's Common Agricultural Policy 2023-2027 places a strong emphasis on environmental and climate objectives while supporting stable farming livelihoods and long-term food security. These objectives are reflected in Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027⁵¹ which contains a range of new measures that will be accessible and beneficial to island farming communities, including:

- An intervention for Areas facing Natural Constraints (ANC). Under this intervention, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine will implement a dedicated support for island lands. Farmers in eligible areas will be able to avail of a financial support that compensates them for all or part of the additional costs and income foregone related to the natural and specific constraints in the areas concerned.
- The Agri-Climate Rural Environment Scheme (ACRES), a new environmentally ambitious agri-environment climate measure which will deliver significant long-term environmental improvement through participation by farmers on the most appropriate lands. Farmers with land holdings on islands will be eligible to apply for the Co-operation stream under ACRES and can engage with advisors and a Co-operation Project Team to identify the most appropriate management tools to maintain and increase on-farm biodiversity, including water quality and specific regional conservation objectives.

- Strengthened conditionality requirements for the receipt of direct payments, which inter alia introduce new requirements for the protection of permanent pasture and environmentally sensitive permanent grassland.

In addition to these core elements of the CAP Strategic Plan, additional funding to support farmland biodiversity quality and quantity will be available through several funding streams such as the European Innovation Partnership (EIP-AGRI) mechanism and the EU's LIFE programme on the environment and climate action.

Sustainable Development Goals for Strategic Objective 5



51 <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/76026-common-agricultural-policy-cap-post-2020/>



8 | Implementation of the Policy

Context

This policy reflects the Government's ambition, first set out in *Our Rural Future*, to “ensure our offshore islands continue to support sustainable and vibrant communities and that visitors have an opportunity to experience and appreciate the unique culture, heritage and environmental richness the islands have to offer”.

Each of its five Strategic Objectives is directly linked with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, to align with Ireland's SDG commitments and to facilitate complementarity in reporting.

The inter-connectedness of different sectoral policies across government which impact on island communities has been evident throughout the policy. A whole-of-Government approach has been taken in the development of the policy and a coordinated and cohesive approach across a range of Government Departments will be required for its implementation.

Implementation and Oversight

The commitments in this policy will be delivered progressively over its lifetime. Implementation will be underpinned by 3 year Action Plans the first of which - covering 2023-2026 - is published alongside the policy. Each Action will be led by a nominated Government Department, State Agency or other body.

The publication and implementation of this policy was a key commitment in *Our Rural Future* and its implementation will be overseen within the same framework. Oversight will be by the Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Investment, chaired by the Tánaiste and supported by a Senior Officials Group. Progress reports on implementation will be provided to the Cabinet Committee as appropriate alongside the periodical reports on *Our Rural Future*.

Monitoring implementation of the policy on behalf of the Government will be coordinated by the Islands Unit in the Department of Rural and Community Development.

Funding Delivery of the policy

Funding of the commitments contained in this policy will be met from the Votes/ budgets of the relevant Government Departments, agencies and other bodies responsible for the delivery of the relevant actions and policy measures.

Funding for Departmental commitments will be subject to the annual Estimates process and will be reflected in the published allocations in the Revised Estimates Volume each year.

All expenditure incurred will be subject to the terms of the Public Spending Code and the Capital Works Management Framework where appropriate.

Continuous engagement with island communities

The Government recognises that the people who live on the islands should be key participants in the development and delivery of any initiatives to develop their own communities. This policy is therefore underpinned by the principle of the full engagement by island communities in its implementation and monitoring.

As outlined above, monitoring implementation of the policy on behalf of the Government will be coordinated by the Islands Unit in the Department of Rural and Community Development. In that context, a Monitoring Committee will be established to which representatives of island communities will be appointed by the Minister. The role of the committee will be to engage with key Government Departments, agencies and local authorities in relation to progress on implementation and to report to the Minister and the Cabinet Committee.

The Islands Unit will also continue to strengthen its relationship with Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann, the representative body for island communities, and will continue to provide financial assistance to Comhdháil to support its work on behalf of the islands.

Appendix 1: Consultation Process

The process of developing The National Islands Policy 2023-2033 involved a series of consultations with key stakeholders (including Government Departments, agencies, offshore islands stakeholder groups and the island communities) to inform the development of the policy. This engagement was extremely important in order to gather inputs and insights on key issues affecting the offshore islands, and to obtain agreement on the implementation of actions to be included in the policy.

An outline of some of the consultations that were held is set out below.

Public Consultation

From January to April 2020 public meetings were organized on 11 islands. However due to the risks posed by the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department was obliged to suspend the consultation process.

Due to the pandemic, the Department was unable to organise meetings on four islands, Toraigh (Co. Donegal), Inishturk and Clare Island (Co Mayo) and Inishbofin (Co Galway).

Inishturk and Inishbofin had their consultation meetings held virtually while Toraigh and Clare Island opted to wait until an in-person consultation could take place. The consultations on Toraigh and Clare Island took place in May 2022.

Island Youth Input

In addition to the public consultations events, meetings with post-primary school students were held to obtain the views of young people living on the offshore islands. There was a consultation session held with students on Árainn (Inis Mór), Co Galway and Árainn Mhór, Co Donegal. In addition, a discussion was held with a small group of second level students on Oileáin Chléire, Co. Cork.

Key messages

Some of the key messages, issues and ideas that emerged from these consultations included:

- The changing island demographics and the implications arising from an ageing population.
- The challenge of retaining young people in island communities.
- Value of an inter-generational mix in island communities.
- The need for good quality jobs and career opportunities in order to retain young people on offshore islands, and to attract graduates back to the islands.
- The requirement for more coherent implementation of policies, programmes and funding streams being delivered by the Department of Rural and Community Development and other Government Departments and agencies.
- Increasing focus on sustainable development and climate adaptation.
- The necessity of high-speed broadband for work, study and social interactions.

- Recognition of opportunities to optimise use of digital connectivity and emerging technologies (e.g. digital services such as e-Health, remote working, co-working/ multi-purpose spaces) in light of the rollout of the National Broadband Plan.
- Access to housing and social housing on the offshore islands.
- Promoting the Irish Language (on Gaeltacht Islands), cultural landmarks and heritage sites, and utilising these assets to increase tourism.
- Potential to increase use of multi-purpose community spaces: renovating and reusing vacant buildings and clustering of services to enable the community to use these spaces for a variety of purposes including leisure/community/ services provision/enterprise hubs.
- Incentivise individuals, businesses and enterprises to the islands with tax incentives and lower commercial rates on the offshore islands.
- Strategies to enable people to both live and work on the offshore islands: childcare, local services, skill matching between residents and local industries.
- Promote remote working on the offshore islands.

Public Survey

In addition to direct engagement with island communities, feedback from the public was invited on the challenges and opportunities facing people living and working on the offshore Islands. The survey was open for input for the duration of the consultation process. The Department received 646 responses between in-person consultations, individual islander submissions and responses to questionnaires and surveys.

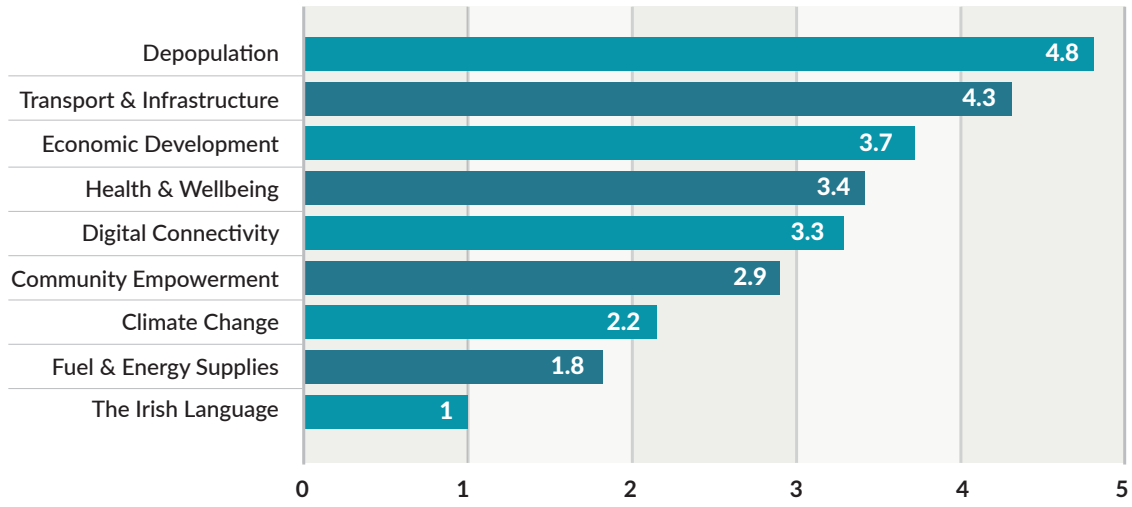
Respondents ranked the top challenges/ safety issues facing off-shore islands as follows:

1.	Depopulation
2.	Transport & Infrastructure
3.	Economic Development
4.	Health & Wellbeing
5.	Digital Connectivity
6.	Community Empowerment
7.	Climate Change
8.	Fuel & Energy Supplies
9.	The Irish Language

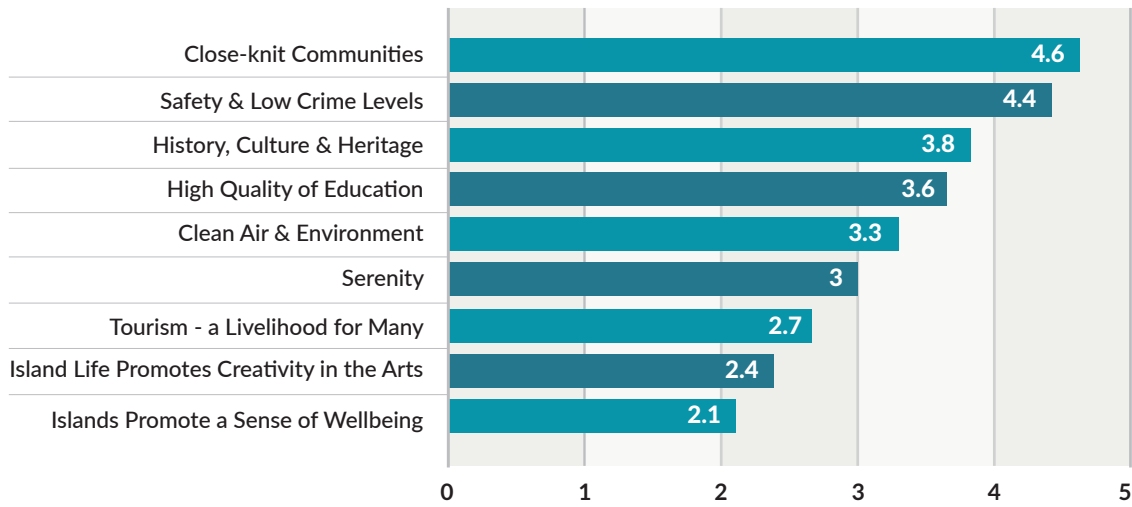
Respondents ranked the positive aspects which off-shore islands could maximise the potential of over the coming years as follows:

1.	Close-Knit Communities
2.	Safety/Low Crime Levels
3.	History, Culture & Heritage
4.	Education
5.	Clean Air/Environment
6.	Serenity
7.	Tourism
8.	Island Life promotes creativity in the Arts
9.	Islands promote a sense of wellbeing

Respondents' views on the main challenges facing island life, ranked in order of priority



Respondents' views on the main opportunities available to the offshore islands, ranked in order of priority



National Islands Policy Inter-Departmental Committee

The National Islands Policy Inter-Departmental Committee was formed to engage all relevant Government Departments with the National Islands Policy and to provide a forum for the discussion and exchange of ideas to benefit and improve the policy. The Committee met regularly while the drafting of the policy took place.

Whole-of-Government Approach

A number of bilateral meetings took place with key Government Departments and agencies to ensure that synergies with key Government policies are reflected in the policy.

Appendix 2: Island development groups

Organisation	Island(s) served	County	Funder
Comharchumann Thoráí Teo.	Toraigh	Donegal	ÚnaG
Comharchumann Oileán Árann Mhór CTR	Árann Mhór	Donegal	ÚnaG
Comharchumann na nOileán Beag	Gabhla, Inis Bó Finne, Inis Fraoigh, Oileán Ruaidh, Inis Oirthear, Inis Caorach, Inis Mhic an Doirn	Donegal	ÚnaG
Clíara Development Company DAC	Clare Island	Mayo	DRCD
Inishturk Development Company	Inishturk	Mayo	DRCD
Inishbofin Development Company Ltd	Inishbofin	Galway	DRCD
Comharchumann Forbartha Árann	Árann (Inis Mór)	Galway	ÚnaG
Comhlacht Forbartha Inis Meáin	Inis Meáin	Galway	ÚnaG
Comhar Caomhán Teo	Inis Oírr	Galway	ÚnaG
Bere Island Project Group	Bere, Dursey, Whiddy	Cork	DRCD
Sherkin Island Development Society	Sherkin, Long, Heir	Cork	DRCD
Comharchumann Chléire Teo.	Cléire	Cork	ÚnaG

In addition, Comhar na nOileán provides centralised Local Development Company services for the inhabited offshore islands and part of the West Cork area, funded by DRCD.

Appendix 3:

List of Departments and Stakeholders consulted

In addition to the consultations with island communities set out in Appendix 1, the following is a list of other stakeholders who were consulted in the development of this policy.

Government Departments
Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine
Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
Department of Defence
Department of Education
Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment
Department of Environment, Climate and Communications
Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
Department of Health
Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage
Department of Rural and Community Development
Department of Social Protection
Department of the Taoiseach
Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media
Department of Transport
Local Authorities
Donegal County Council
Sligo County Council
Mayo County Council
Galway County Council
Cork County Council
Climate Action Regional Offices

State Bodies
Údarás na Gaeltachta
Western Development Commission
Fáilte Ireland
Uisce Éireann
SEAI
Bord Bia
Road Safety Authority
An Post
ESB Networks
Other Stakeholders
Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann
National Federation of Group Water Schemes
Irish Planning Institute
Scottish Government Islands Team
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (Western Isles Council, Scotland)

Appendix 4:

Island Primary and Post-Primary School Enrolment Numbers

Island Primary School Data from 2011 - 2021

School	Address	Enrolment Figures from Department of Education Website										
		2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Scoil Naomh Cholmcille	Toraigh	6	9	11	10	9	7	11	12	15	19	21
Árainn Mhór 1	Árainn Mhór	43	41	36	31	25	18	18	12	15	10	8
Árainn Mhór 2	Árainn Mhór	12	10	12	12	15	16	18	18	19	22	19
St Patrick's NS	Clare Island	20	18	19	22	20	22	24	19	16	17	13
St Columba's NS	Inishturk	3	3	3	2	3	3	2	3	3	6	3
Inisbofin NS	Inishbofin, Galway	15	17	17	12	11	12	12	12	13	14	14
Scoil Rónáin	Árainn (Inis Mór)	42	41	36	34	37	42	46	43	39	37	38
Scoil Eoin Pól II	Árainn (Inis Mór)	16	23	21	20	21	17	18	20	24	25	23
SN Inis Meadhoin	Inis Meáin	6	8	5	3	8	8	10	12	14	14	10
SN Chaomháin	Inis Oírr	17	17	16	18	25	24	32	29	32	34	35
Scoil Mhichil Naofa	Bere Island	23	22	20	19	18	20	18	16	17	17	16
Scoil Náisiúnta Cléire	Cléire	8	14	12	15	13	14	11	7	7	5	5
Sherkin Island NS	Sherkin Island	12	6	12	4	2	Closed	Closed	Closed	Closed	Closed	Closed
TOTAL		223	229	220	202	207	203	220	203	214	220	205

The figures for Primary School Enrolment in island schools between 2011 and 2021 show a decrease in total enrolment. One island primary school closed during that period, which was Sherkin Island National School in Cork.

Island Post-Primary School Data from 2011 - 2021

School	Address	Enrolment Figures from Department of Education Website										
		2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Coláiste Phobail Cholmcille	Toraigh	4	6	5	4	4	4	6	5	6	8	7
Gairmscoil Mhic Diarmada	Árainn Mhór	58	63	65	78	93	105	104	96	82	70	72
Gairmscoil Éinne Oileáin Árainn	Árainn (Inis Mór)	80	64	66	72	62	57	56	56	55	39	49
Coláiste Naomh Eoin	Inis Meáin	*	*	*	*	*	*	*	40	40	30	42
Coláiste Ghobnait	Inis Oírr	26	30	28	30	23	28	27	23	24	31	27
TOTAL		168	163	164	184	182	194	193	220	207	178	197

*Under the auspices of Coláiste Cholmcille (Indreabhán) and the GRETB

Above are the figures for Post-Primary School Enrolment in island schools between 2011 and 2021. An Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar awarded Coláiste Naomh Eoin, Inis Meáin, with an Independent status in September 2018. It had previously been under the auspices of Coláiste Cholmcille (Indreabhán) and the Galway Roscommon Education and Training Board.

Appendix 5:

Island Population changes 2011 -2016 (Census)

The main inhabited offshore islands included in the 2016 census (Compared to 2011)

Islands with average population greater than 2 based on Census 2011 and 2016.

County	Island	Population 2011	Population 2016	
Co. Donegal	Toraigh*	144	119	
	Inis Bó Finne*	11	2	
	Gabhla*	15	5	
	Árainn Mhór*	514	469	
	Inis Mhic an Doirn	1	5	
Co. Sligo	Coney	2	3	
Co. Mayo	Inis Bigil*	25	18	
	Collanmore	4	7	
	Clynish	4	4	
	Inishlyre	4	4	
	Clare Island	168	159	
	Inisturk	53	51	
	Co. Galway	Inishbofin	160	175
		Árainn (Inis Mór)*	845	762
		Inis Meáin*	157	183
Co. Cork	Inis Oírr*	249	281	
	Whiddy	20	18	
	Bere	216	167	
	Dursey	3	4	
	Long	10	20	
	Heir	29	28	
	Sherkin	114	111	
	Cléire*	124	147	
Total		2,879	2,734	

*Gaeltacht Islands

