



An Comhchoiste um Choimirce Shóisialach, Forbairt Pobail agus Tuaithe agus na hOileáin

Tuarascáil maidir le hOibriú agus le hÉifeacht an
Bheartais Náisiúnta agus Áitiúil i ndáil leis na Pobail
ar na hOileáin mar a pléadh ar Árainn Mhór.

Aibreán 2024

Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development, and the Islands

Report on the Operation and Effect of National and
Local Policy on Island Communities as discussed on
Oileán Árainn Mhór

April 2024

33/JCSPCRI/025

Contents

Related information	5
Publications	5
Committee videos.....	5
Contact details.....	5
Terms of reference	5
Committee Membership.....	6
Cathaoirleach.....	6
Leas-Cathaoirleach.....	6
Members	6
Foreword.....	7
Introduction and Witnesses	9
Meeting Context.....	9
List of witnesses	11
All recommendations	13
Academic Research.....	16
Module 1 – Climate Neutrality and Biodiversity on the Islands	17
Water and Energy Connections on the Islands.....	20
Module 2 – Housing and Sustaining Communities.....	22
Module 3 – eHealth and Living Longer on Islands	26
Home Health Project	26
Future Proofing Healthcare Technology	26
General Practitioner Care in Rural Ireland and Islands.....	29
Accessibility Issues	30
Further National Policy Issues affecting Islanders	31
Roll-out and Delivery of Broadband on Offshore Islands (Rural Areas)	31
Engagement with Islanders following Official Proceedings	33
Conclusion.....	36

Appendix 1 Opening Statements and Submissions 37

Opening Statements37

List of written submissions.....38

Related information

Publications

All publications for this committee are available on the [Oireachtas website](#).

Committee videos

Footage of Committee proceedings can be found on the [Committee videos page](#).

Contact details

The contact details for the Committee can be found on the [Committee page](#).

Terms of reference

Read the [terms of reference](#) for the Committee.

Committee Membership

Cathaoirleach

[Denis Naughten TD](#), Independent

Leas-Cathaoirleach

[Marc Ó Cathasaigh TD](#), Green Party

Members

[Jackie Cahill TD](#), Fianna Fáil

[Joe Carey TD](#), Fine Gael

[Joan Collins TD](#), Independents 4 Change

[Paul Donnelly TD](#), Sinn Féin

[John Paul Phelan TD](#), Fine Gael

[Éamon Ó Cuív TD](#), Fianna Fáil

[Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire TD](#), Sinn Féin

[Senator Paddy Burke](#), Fine Gael

[Senator Róisín Garvey](#), Green Party

[Senator Paul Gavan](#), Sinn Féin

[Senator Eugene Murphy](#), Fianna Fáil

[Senator Mark Wall](#), Labour Party

Foreword

In September 2023, following the agreement of motions by both Houses of the Oireachtas, the Parliament precincts included Oiléan Árinn Mhór, County Donegal. This is permitted by Article 15.1.3° of Bunreacht na hÉireann “The Houses of the Oireachtas shall sit in or near the City of Dublin or in such other place as they may from time to time determine.” This was the first time that the parliamentary precincts have included an offshore island.

This meeting was the first official Oireachtas business to be held on an offshore island and it signified the importance of involving all people of Ireland in the democratic process. It showcased the huge potential that broadband, and technology have in bringing democracy and the operations of Leinster House to the people right across this country. This meeting was not only innovative in terms of the location but also from the perspective of integrating applied academic research into parliamentary proceedings.

The success of this initiative offers valuable lessons for other parliaments worldwide, and the technical and procedural protocol developed would be useful for other parliaments wishing to progress such an initiative. It demonstrates the feasibility and benefits of conducting official parliamentary business in diverse locations, leveraging technology to enhance accessibility and inclusiveness. The initiative aligns with the strategic outcomes outlined in the Oireachtas Service’s Strategic Plan 2022-2024, particularly advancing the goal of public engagement and demonstrating the potential of broadband technology in facilitating remote participation in parliamentary democracy.

The issues raised in this meeting are fundamental to the work programme of the Committee and to the lives of those living and working on Ireland’s offshore Islands.

I would like to thank the islanders who have facilitated the broadcast of this live meeting, in particular Gairmscoil Mhic Diarmada, Arranmore Community Council, Comharchumann Forbartha agus Fostaíochta Árinn Mhór, Arranmore Island Development Co-operative and all those who gave their time and invaluable insights to Members outside of the official meeting. I would also like to thank the witnesses both those who travelled to Arranmore and who gave their time remotely. Thanks also to the Oireachtas Corporate Services including the Broadcasting and ICT teams who made the broadcast happen, the Ushers and An Gardaí Síochana for their services, the sign language interpreters, debates staff and the

Committees Secretariat and House Services for facilitating the logistics and procedural necessities.

I hope this meeting can act as a beacon of best practice for other parliamentary committees, in Ireland and elsewhere. We as members of this committee have a responsibility to represent the interests, concerns and aspirations of island communities throughout our country. However, to effectively do this, we must actively engage with Islanders. That is why the members of this committee were determined to ensure that Ireland's first ever live parliamentary broadcast outside the city of Dublin would take place on an offshore island.

Denis Naughten TD

Cathaoirleach to the Committee

March 2024

Introduction and Witnesses

The Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands held the first official Oireachtas meeting on an offshore island on 22 September 2023. This signifies the importance of involving all people of Ireland in the democratic process. The Committee feel that they have a responsibility to represent the interests, concerns and aspirations of island communities throughout the country. The Committee has focused on some of the most isolated parts of Ireland, working at the frontier where isolation meets innovation.

Through the participation of all involved in the historic meeting, the Committee demonstrated how broadband technology can bring parliamentary democracy closer to the people. It was agreed by Members that the Islands have the potential to be lighthouse communities across the three modules discussed and inform national policy on rural issues.

The Committee held two further meetings arising from the issues raised on the Islands. The first with officials from the Department of Rural and Community Development, the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC), and the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities, ESB Networks and Uisce Éireann regarding utility connections in rural areas and on our islands.

Meeting Context

In line with the remit of the Committee, Members requested in April 2023 that an official Committee Meeting be held on an offshore island the coming September. This was to bring the parliament to those it represents in one of the most remote areas of the State, Oileán Árann Mhór and understand how national policies are affecting islanders and showcase how technological improvements on the islands would permit an official parliamentary sitting to be broadcast live from an island.

The islands are a standalone aspect of the Committee's work programme and it was important to the Committee to consider the issues affecting islanders in their day to day lives in a meaningful way. In a wider sense, the Committee has focused on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and has explored the idea of offshore Islands being an ideal pilot programme for the implementation of the SDGs.

The holding of official parliamentary business outside the precincts of Leinster House is a concept permitted by the Constitution but rarely exercised. The last time an official committee meeting took place outside the precincts was in 2007, notably as part of a series of debates before Ireland voted on acceptance of the Lisbon Treaty.¹ Advances in telecommunications infrastructure and rural communications enabled the official proceedings to be conducted and streamed live from an offshore island for the first time from Árainn Mhór.

This kind of parliamentary engagement is thought to be the first of its kind globally to take place on an offshore Island, allowing Members to engage and platform the issues faced by islanders in a unique, innovative and meaningful way. In selecting the modules for discussion, Members agreed to frame the meeting in the context of the most pressing national issues and how they are applied in the context of the Islands and how they affect Islanders.

The Committee's meeting covered three strands:

- Module 1: Climate neutrality and biodiversity on the islands. A discussion with Avril Ní Shearcaigh of Comharchumann Fuinnimh Oileáin Árann Teoranta.
- Module 2: Housing and sustaining communities on offshore Islands. A discussion with Dr. Conor Cashman, UCC, Comhar na nÓiléain on a new national report that is an expansion of Housing and Sustaining Communities on the West Cork Islands.
- Module 3: eHealth and living longer on islands. A discussion with Dr. Ian McCabe, Dr. Jennifer Doran and Dr. Noreen Lineen Curtis on their Digital Health Project.

¹ Official Meeting transcript of the European Union Affairs Committee Meeting, 10 April 2008, available on Oireachtas.ie

List of witnesses

Meeting date	Witnesses
22 September 2023	<p>Module 1 – Climate Neutrality and Biodiversity on the Islands</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Avril Ní Shearcaigh – Aran Islands Renewable Energy Cooperative (with Comharchumann Fuinnimh Oileáin Árann Teoranta (CFOAT)) <p>Module 2 – Housing and Sustaining Communities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dr Conor Cashman – University College Cork School of Applied Social Science, Comhar na nOileáin• Máire Uí Mhaoláin, CEO of Comhar na nOileán CTR.• Nóirín Uí Mhaoldomhnaigh, Bainisteoir, Comharchumann Oileán Árann Mhór and member of Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann Teo <p>Module 3 – eHealth and Living Longer on Islands</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dr Jennifer Doran – Research Physician at the HIVE laboratory, University of Galway.• Dr Noreen Lineen-Curtis – General Practitioner serving Clare Island and Inishbiggle Co. Mayo.• Dr Ian McCabe – Project Manager in the Health Innovation Via Engineering (HIVE) Laboratory, University of Galway.
15 November 2023	<p>Department of Rural and Community Development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fintan O’Brien, Assistant Secretary General, Rural Development & Regional Affairs• Brendan Whelan, Principal Officer, Regional Development & Innovation Unit <p>Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fergal Mulligan, Director, Digital Connectivity Office• Gavin Brown, Deployment Lead• Jacqueline Barron, NBP Operations

- Kevin O'Donoghue, Principal Officer, National Broadband Plan

National Broadband Ireland

- Peter Hendrick, NBI Infrastructure Chief Executive Officer
 - Tara Collins, Chief Marketing Officer
 - TJ Malone, NBI Deployment Chief Executive Officer
-

6 December
2023

Department of Rural and Community Development

- Aodán Mac an Mhíle, Principal Officer – Islands Unit
- Robert Nicholson, Principal Officer – Rural Strategy & Social Enterprise Unit

Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications

- John Finnegan, Principal Officer
- Brían Diskin, Assistant Principal Officer

Commission for Regulation of Utilities

- Aoife MacEvilly, Commissioner
- Conor McEvoy, Electricity Networks Manager
- Jim Gannon, Chairperson

ESB Networks

- Alan Rossiter, Manager – Customer Projects Delivery South
- Nicholas Tarrant, Managing Director

Uisce Éireann

- Anthony Skeffington, Regional Operations Manager
 - Des Joyce, Water Supply Lead
 - Ted O'Reilly, Asset Planning Manager
-

All recommendations

1. The Committee recommends that Oireachtas Committees should invite witnesses with direct experience to practically apply academic research. This helps address real-world challenges, promotes evidence-based policymaking, while fostering collaboration with the academic community.
2. The Committee recommends the implementation of resource-efficient, less polluting means of improved transport for access to and from the Islands and requests that the Minister report annually to the Committee on the progress of same.
3. The Committee recommends the installation of electric vehicle infrastructure at key places on the offshore Islands and to encourage the use of resource-efficient transport for internal transport.
4. The Committee recommends that the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications report on the outcome from “lighthouse” projects outlining how these can be mainstreamed on both our islands and mainland communities.
5. The Committee recommends the development and collection of specific island metrics to determine the specific needs in each individual island region.
6. The Committee recommends that Údarás na Gaeltachta should be central to the creation of a community-led housing association or an approved housing body on Gaeltacht islands.
7. The Committee recommends that Comhar na nOileán / Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann seek to provide input to the planning guideline updates to assist in developing an islands-specific approach that address concerns as to population and environmental sustainability on the islands.
8. The Committee recommends that Comhar na nOileáin/Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann work with Vacant Home Officers in Local Authorities to ensure the realisation of unused housing stock, including vacant and derelict properties.

9. The Committee recommends the introduction of an automatic 35% top-up on all schemes to manage the additional costs of transporting materials to the Islands in line with the Croí Cónaithe scheme.
10. The Committee recommends an extension of the Croí Cónaithe grant to allow community groups who may have purchased land to avail of the scheme in order to develop housing.
11. The Committee recommends the introduction of a specific island-based action plan and metrics for Housing that may sit under the action plan or policy from Government.
12. The Committee recommends that ongoing monitoring, research, and consultation is conducted to ensure action plans and targets are meeting island needs.
13. The Committee recommends that the Minister for Health and the Minister for Rural and Community Development report annually on the delivery of this commitment for telemedicine services for the offshore islands..
14. The Committee recommends that every island community have a resident Public Health Nurse (PHN's) with accommodation provided for the duration of their island appointment. Furthermore, locum cover could be provided through the establishment of a national panel of PHN's willing to gain additional experience, on a similar basis to the current deployment of paramedics on the Aeromedical service based at Custume Barracks, Athlone
15. The Committee recommends the delivery of a Community Health Worker post for the Islands.
16. The Committee recommends that following the annual islanders update from the HSE each November, that a submission is made to the Committee outlining the update and next steps.
17. The Committee recommends the regular audit of health care premises and the provision of an associated vehicle for use in emergencies to ensure that it is up to patient care standards.

18. The Committee recommends that provision is made as required for medicines which should be kept in a 'cold chain' to be distributed to Islanders.
19. The Committee recommends that the Minister for Health prioritises locum supports for GPs operating in rural areas and serving the Islands.
20. The Committee endorses the recommendations in the Limerick Declaration on Rural Healthcare and recommends the Minister for Health and Minister for Rural and Community Development notes it in their future planning for the provision of rural GP services.
21. The Committee recommends that accessible embarkation/disembarkation from ferries onto the piers both on the mainland and the island be implemented as soon as possible.
22. The Committee recommends the provision of services to children with additional needs living on the Islands.
23. The Committee recommends that the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications facilitate the upgrading of the electricity supply for the islands, both inwards and outwards.
24. The Committee recommends that the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications survey the Islands with the intention to provide a programme of fundamental infrastructure upgrades to islands over and above what commercial companies would prioritise.
25. The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education provide Irish as an Additional Language hours to Irish medium schools who have an enrolment of students from outside the state.
26. The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education review the Irish and Bilingual Grant payment with a view to ensuring all post-primary schools are included.
27. The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education review the Gaeltacht and Island Allowances for teachers.

28. The Committee recommends the Minister for Social Protection undertake a re-examination of access to social welfare schemes for fishers and farmers.

Academic Research

The Committee’s discussions on Arranmore centered around critical issues such as climate neutrality, biodiversity, community sustainability, and eHealth. These topics drew significant insights from current academic research, involving researchers from University College Cork and the University of Galway. However, the focus was not solely on academic research itself; rather, it delved into the practical application of that research and its deployment to address real-world challenges in communities—especially island and rural communities.

This approach primarily relied on direct evidence from the islanders themselves, who collaborate with researchers. They outlined the impact of academic work on island communities, complemented by evidence from academics. By doing so, the discussions shifted from theoretical discourse to actionable insights, crucial for tackling pressing challenges in community development and environmental sustainability. Moreover, it acknowledges the “usability gap”² between academic research and its practical implementation in real-world decision-making.

Furthermore, this approach facilitates the direct application of research findings to policymaking, particularly in addressing the specific needs of island and rural communities. These critical topics not only matter to island communities but also underscore the importance of greater engagement between the scientific community and the Oireachtas.

Recommendation

1. The Committee recommends that Oireachtas Committees should invite witnesses with direct experience to practically apply academic research. This helps address real-world challenges, promotes evidence-based policymaking, while fostering collaboration with the academic community.

² Pearman, O. and Cravens, A.E (2022). Institutional barriers to actionable science: Perspectives from decision support tool creators. *Environmental Science & Policy*. Volume 128,2022. Pages 317-325, Institutional barriers to actionable science: Perspectives from decision support tool creators - ScienceDirect

Module 1 – Climate Neutrality and Biodiversity on the Islands

It had been more than 25 years since a national framework for the development of the islands was last published before ‘Our Living Islands National Islands Policy 2023’³ was published in June 2023. 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. Alongside that is the ambition that visitors to the island can continue to experience and appreciate the unique culture, heritage and environmental richness that the islands have to offer.

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 and ecosystems and livelihoods can quickly become apparent on the islands.

The offshore islands support an extraordinary range of flora, fauna and wildlife and offer a unique opportunity to employ the infrastructure that could see Ireland come to the fore of renewable energy resources.

Protecting the rich island 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 tourists who visit the islands 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.

³ Our Living Islands – National Islands Policy 2023-2033. Page 65. Available [here](#).

Two other Oireachtas Committees have carried out reports on this topic:

- Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action – Report on Biodiversity⁴.
- Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment – Report on Offshore Renewable Energy⁵

Although these Committees have reported on climate and biodiversity, there was no specific focus on the offshore islands and the role they play in this context.

Through their Energy Transition, the Aran Islands Renewable Energy Cooperative are endeavouring to make the Aran Islands fossil fuel free. Their aim is to create sustainable communities, clean up the planet and stem climate change using the energy resources available on the island; wind, water and light.

The vision of the Cooperative includes the aim to make our offshore islands ‘lighthouse’ communities that will show the way in the energy transition. In the process, the offshore islands will become centres of excellence in the whole area of renewable energy and sustainable living. This will result in giving the islands a positive role within the national community and will create a broader range of employment on the islands, thus maintaining our islands’ valuable heritage.

In the evidence presented to the Committee, the transport to and from the Aran Islands accounts for 60% of their carbon emissions⁶, this is likely to be the case across the offshore islands and as such, the Committee recommends the redoubling of efforts to address sustainable transport both to and from the Islands and the provision of electric vehicle infrastructure in key areas on the Islands. In doing so, the Committee supports the proposal in ‘Our Living Islands’ to ensure when state funding is awarded for transport on the islands, there are green procurement principles and criteria to incentivise and reward innovative operators that invest in more resource-efficient, less polluting means of transport.⁷

⁴ Joint Committee on Environment and Climate Action Report on Biodiversity. Page 8. Available [here](#)

⁵ Joint Committee on Enterprise, Trade and Employment Report on Offshore Renewable Energy. Page 7. Available [here](#).

⁶ Opening Statement to the JCSPCRDI, 22 September 2023, Page 3, available [here](#)

⁷ Our Living Islands – National Islands Policy 2023 – 2033, Page 22, available [here](#)

Recommendations

2. The Committee recommends the implementation of resource-efficient, less polluting means of transport for access to and from the Islands and requests that the Minister report annually to the Committee on the progress of same.

3. The Committee recommends the installation of electric vehicle infrastructure at key places on the offshore Islands and encourages the use of resource-efficient transport for internal transport.

In this module⁸, Members were presented with the challenges faced by Comharchumann Fuinnimh Oileáin Árann (The Aran Islands Energy Co-op) (CFOAT). CFOAT are a community owned energy cooperative on the Aran Islands who are “working towards becoming self-sufficient in locally generated renewable energy and free of dependence on oil, coal and gas as soon as possible.”⁹ CFOAT have five goals;

1. To stabilise and sustainably increase the population on the 3 islands.
2. Maintain the language, the culture, and the heritage of the 3 islands.
3. Be sensitive to the beauty and richness of the natural environment in which we live.
4. Increase the comfort, energy efficiency, and sustainability of our homes and transport.
5. Promote the 3 Aran Islands as lighthouse communities, offering inspiration, support, and examples of best practice, to other communities in Ireland and throughout the world.

The evidence presented to the Committee asserted that there are difficulties with the expansion of the utilities and energy connections from the mainland to the Islands in Aran. In particular, in order for Aran to be a net provider of energy to the mainland, there needs to be a review of the electricity lines to ensure that they are viable into the future.

⁸ Official meeting transcript, 22 September 2023, pages 3-15, available [here](#).

⁹ CFOAT website, available [here](#)

Recommendation

4. The Committee recommends that the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications report on the outcome from “lighthouse” projects outlining how these can be mainstreamed on both our islands and mainland communities.
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Water and Energy Connections on the Islands

Following the Joint Committee Meeting on Oileán Árainn Mhór, the Committee met with officials from the Department of Rural and Community Development, the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC), and the Commission for the Regulation of Utilities, ESB Networks and Uisce Éireann regarding utility connections in rural areas and on our islands. It was demonstrated in the Joint Committee meeting on Árainn Mhór, very clearly to Committee the impact of water and electricity connections in rural areas and the difficulties often for those in remote areas and on our offshore islands. There are brilliant strides being made on connectivity and with the utility connections in place it will be possible for the islands to become climate neutral and a net provider of energy to the mainland. However, in order to realise these aims, it is essential utilities are available and regularly serviced to ensure the island population is able to live, work and thrive on our offshore islands into the future.

Under the Climate Action Plan 2023¹⁰, the Government has set an ambitious target of having an 80% share of electricity generation capacity coming from renewable sources by 2030. In this context, a key priority is enabling citizen and community participation in the energy transition across the country, including in our rural communities including our offshore islands. This will be achieved through a combination of Government support schemes and policies to encourage and subsidise the generation of renewable electricity as well as corporate power purchase agreements and private wires.

Uisce Éireann informed the Committee of the initiatives they are undertaking to support the supply and maintenance of water services to islands that have public water and wastewater

¹⁰ Climate Action Plan 2023, Page 134, Available [here](#)

infrastructure. In line with the Our Living Islands national policy¹¹, Uisce Éireann are undertaking feasibility analyses in a number of areas which will inform the direction of future investment. The Committee heard that the provision of water services on the islands presents a challenge due to limited water availability, environmental constraints and the logistical challenges of serving infrastructure not on the mainland.

The Committee questioned Uisce Éireann regarding its plans to generate a resilient water supply to all islands. Uisce Éireann informed Members that as of the date of the meeting, December 6, 11 islands have their own water supply. A 25-year study of natural water resources was carried out and it informed the Uisce Éireann about the challenges for providing water on those islands. The Committee heard that a feasibility study is being advanced in the three Aran Islands, Inishbofin, and Whiddy Island in Cork to determine the best solution.

The Committee raised concerns in respect to CLÁR funding. CLÁR funding for some sewage schemes was provided on a 50:50 basis. Small villages in the CLÁR areas and the islands lose out on funding on the basis of size. The Committee questioned the Department on whether a 50:50 fund could be established for CLÁR areas under which it would provide 50% of the funding for the provision of small sewage schemes in CLÁR areas specifically.

The Department of Rural and Community Development told the Committee that with regard to the CLÁR scheme, it might be used to get more money from the responsible Departments. Members were told that the same approach could possibly be used from the capital money which is currently available to the islands. There was a reduction in the capital budget approximately 10-15 years ago when other works were taking place.

¹¹ Our Living Islands National Islands Policy 2023 – 2033, Page 21 – 31, Available [here](#)

Module 2 – Housing and Sustaining Communities

In this module, Members were presented with the barriers to housing and sustaining communities on the islands. The lack of affordable, good quality housing – both to buy and rent year-round – is impacting on the ability of islands to attract newcomers and retain existing inhabitants and the next generation of islanders.

In his opening statement¹² Dr Conor Cashman from the school of applied social sciences in UCC as part of their research focusing on housing needs on Ireland’s offshore islands, carried out a survey of which 611 people participated, with 60% of survey respondents being full-time residents on the Irish offshore islands. Second homeowners accounted for 21% of total responses received, while 13% of respondents had previously lived on the islands, many of whom expressed a wish to return to the islands. 6% of respondents were from people who needed to or wished to move to the Islands full time.

The Committee heard¹³ a number of key issues regarding housing and sustaining Communities on the islands, an important issue being the lack of affordable and available housing. There is also an issue around the lack of long-term, available rental accommodation, with renters facing a particularly precarious experience and living situation on Ireland’s offshore islands. The Committee heard that there has been significant concern expressed by renters about the security of tenure and having to vacate their home due to its sale, due to the landlord requesting them to move out, or due to having to move out during the holiday season.

Members of the Committee acknowledged the issue of cost rental and affordable rental. It was noted that if the cost of renting is put on the individual, then it becomes unaffordable. In this context, members also mentioned the need for public housing on the islands, which holds a lot of importance. Public housing is necessary so that the people who cannot and will never be able to afford to get a mortgage, even on an affordable scheme, are given an opportunity to live on the islands as well. Members feel that there is a situation where people want to live and work within their own Gaeltacht community and find it extremely difficult to access housing because of the cost, and they are simply priced out of the market.

¹² Opening Statement to the JCSPCRDI, 22 September 2023, Page 2, available [here](#).

¹³ Official meeting transcript, 22 September 2023, pages 15-25, available [here](#).

On the very rare occasion that a house comes up for sale, the property tends to be unaffordable to people who are working within the community.

Dr Cashman stated the support found through their research for the creation of a community-led housing association or an approved housing body. This could be managed by communities on the islands. It could also be provided with the remit to offer affordable, gateway or sheltered housing options for full-time residents, new residents and essential workers. The Committee agreed with the need for an approved housing body, stating that there would be a need for it to be a different type of housing body to that with which we are familiar.

This approved housing body would not be exclusively for affordable social housing, rather it would need to include ordinary purchase housing for those who have better jobs and who want to avail of the schemes. As stated in *'Our Living Islands'*¹⁴ 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) to examine the potential for an island-focused AHB or other community-led housing structures.

All of the islands, including all of the Donegal islands and the three Aran Islands, which population-wise are the vast majority of the islands, but with the exception of Inishbofin in Galway, the Mayo islands and the Cork islands other than Oileán Chléire, come under the remit of Údarás na Gaeltachta. The Committee appreciate the economic ability of that organisation and feel that it should be part of setting up this approved housing body and should be central to it. The Committee feel that rather than reinventing the wheel, we are better off using the strong agents that we already have.

The Committee discussed the Croí Cónaithe scheme and the extra top-up for the islands. Members feel that this should become automatic for all schemes such as housing aid for older people, mobility grants, adaption grants, the help-to-buy scheme and any scheme that is introduced in the future that gives assistance to people on the mainland.

Another issue that was raised in relation to Croí Cónaithe was the fact that where there are derelict houses on some of the land, you do not qualify for Croí Cónaithe if the name of the property is not in the name of an individual. This is an issue where there are derelict, vacant

¹⁴ Our Living Islands: National Islands Policy 2023-2033, Page 27, available [here](#).

houses on the island, but to establish ownership of the title individuals would have to go back a few generations. Community groups who have bought lands and properties over the years cannot avail of the Croí Cónaithe grant in these scenarios.

The Committee noted that the issue of housing needs on the islands is mostly due to planning and four different local authorities approach it in four different ways. These are the local authorities in Donegal, Mayo, Galway and Cork. There is a need for clear national guidelines. The Committee also noted that anybody who lives full-time on an offshore island, where it is the place of residence for that person, should be deemed to have a social and economic connection with the island. Witnesses agreed with members regarding the planning issue on the islands and feel that the big issue with planning is the willingness of local authorities to engage.

The Committee feel that the research presented on this module is useful from the point of view of trying to develop policy, not just for island communities but across rural and remote areas in Ireland.

Recommendations

5. The Committee recommends the development and collection of specific island metrics to determine the specific needs in each individual island region.

6. The Committee recommends that Údarás na Gaeltachta should be central to the creation of a community-led housing association or an approved housing body on Gaeltacht islands.

7. The Committee recommends that Comhar na nOileán / Comhdháil Oileán na hÉireann seek to provide input to the planning guideline updates to assist in developing an islands-specific approach that address concerns as to population and environmental sustainability on the islands

8. The Committee recommends that Comhar na nOileán/Comhdháil Oileán na hÉireann work with Vacant Home Officers in Local Authorities to ensure the realisation of unused housing stock, including vacant and derelict properties.

9. The Committee recommends the introduction of an automatic 35% top-up on all schemes to manage the additional costs of transporting materials to the Islands in line with the Croí Cónaithe scheme.

10. The Committee recommends an extension of the Croí Cónaithe grant to allow community groups who may have purchased land to avail of the scheme in order to develop housing.

11. The Committee recommends the introduction of a specific island-based action plan and metrics for Housing that may sit under an action plan or policy from Government.

12. The Committee recommends that ongoing monitoring, research, and consultation is conducted to ensure action plans and targets are meeting island needs.

Module 3 – eHealth and Living Longer on Islands

Home Health Project

The third module that the Committee considered was eHealth and Living Longer on the Islands. In their consideration of this topic, the Committee heard from witnesses involved with the Clare Island Home Health Project. The project aimed to improve the management of patient care for the 165 residents on Clare Island and make the island a beacon for the delivery of digital health solutions.¹⁵ The project is funded through a public-private partnership led by Cúram, the Science Foundation of Ireland Research Centre for Medical Devices at the University of Galway and global technology company Cisco, in partnership with the HSE. In partnership with Researchers at the Health Innovation Via Engineering (HIVE) Laboratory in the University of Galway, the pilot project sought to offer a suite of healthcare solutions and options to Islanders who may have found it difficult to attend their healthcare provider due to “distance, disability, lack of transport, responsibility for loved ones, land and livestock, or inclement weather”¹⁶ This pilot showed incredible results for the Islanders involved, from “remote patient monitoring, online consultations, rapid diagnostics, community health screening, and personalised nutritional and exercise goals for islanders”.¹⁷ The project is expanding and hopes to keep the rural population of the Islands living longer and better and reducing the need for admission to our hospitals and care homes.

Future Proofing Healthcare Technology

Flowing from the 2017 Island Services Primary Care Review, an interdepartmental steering group was convened with representation from the HSE, Department of Health, Comhdháil na hÉireann, Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, health care professionals living on the islands and other key personnel.

The review contained 16 work streams/themes with an average of 8 sub-objectives in each stream/theme. In West Cork, the HSE convened the CHO4 project forum in September 2021, known as the West Cork Islands Health Forum (WCIHF). In a submission to the Committee,¹⁸ the HSE has worked with the island representatives to identify the top

¹⁵ University of Galway, Press Release 16 September 2022, available [here](#)

¹⁶ Official Meeting Transcript of the JCSPCRDI, page 26, available [here](#).

¹⁷ Opening Statement to the JCSPCRDI, Dr. Ian McCabe, Page 2, available [here](#).

¹⁸ Submission to the Committee from the HSE, September 2023, available [here](#)

priorities from the 16 work streams/themes, selecting 6 streams to concentrate on, which are as follows:

1. Workforce Planning
2. Community Resilience
3. HSE property evaluation
4. Digital Health and E-Health
5. Health and Wellbeing
6. Mental Health

'*Our Living Islands*' policy document from the Minister for Rural and Community Development reaffirmed the commitment made in the 2017 HSE Primary Care on the Islands Review. This report stated that;

“The HSE will work to develop telemedicine services for islands with a view to facilitating the delivery of video link consultations; providing services that promote mobile assessment and enhanced service delivery on islands in line with best practice; improving multi-disciplinary working; and providing online training and education.”¹⁹

The Committee supports this proposal and would request that both the Minister for Health and the Minister for Rural and Community Development deliver on this commitment. Additionally, as outlined in the HSE submission, the Committee would like to see the delivery of a Community Health Worker post for the Islands. The Committee discussed the infrastructure for health on the islands, the updating of many of the health centres is required, alongside the often-adjointing temporary living quarters for health care professionals stationed temporarily on the Island. In particular, witnesses at the meeting spoke to the need for a vehicle to transport individuals from their residence or the site of an incident to the helipad while they await transfer to a hospital. This vehicle could be used by the GP on the island visiting patients on regular calls and also, in emergencies to give first aid and care.

¹⁹ HSE Primary Care on the Islands Review, 2017, available [here](#)

As Islanders require more complex health care needs and medication, there may be a need for the transport and distribution of a range of medicines in a ‘cold chain’ where they must be stored between 2° and 8° at all times. This service should be provided for by sea or air.

Recommendations

13. The Committee recommends that the Minister for Health and the Minister for Rural and Community Development report annually on the delivery of this commitment for telemedicine services for the offshore islands.

14. The Committee recommends that every island community have a resident Public Health Nurse (PHN's) with accommodation provided for the duration of their island appointment. Furthermore, locum cover could be provided through the establishment of a national panel of PHN's willing to gain additional experience, on a similar basis to the current deployment of paramedics on the Aeromedical service based at Custume Barracks, Athlone.

15. The Committee recommends the delivery of a Community Health Worker post for the Islands

16. The Committee recommends that following the annual islanders update from the HSE each November, that a submission is made to the Committee outlining the update and next steps.

17. The Committee recommends the regular audit of health care premises and the provision of an associated vehicle for use in emergencies to ensure that it is up to patient care standards.

18. The Committee recommends that provision is made as required for medicines which should be kept in a ‘cold chain’ to be distributed to Islanders.

General Practitioner Care in Rural Ireland and Islands

Witnesses noted that as outlined in the 2022 paper Irish College of General Practitioners, ICGP publication, ‘Shaping the Future of General Practice’²⁰, Ireland has one of the highest rural populations in Europe at 31%. However, only 15% of Irish GPs cater for this highly dispersed and often elderly population with many complex health needs. Therein lies a significant inequity of access to healthcare for our rural and island populations. Over 29 million consultations take place in general practice each year and each patient, on average, visits his or her GP 4.3 times per year. Almost a quarter of these GPs are aged over 60.²¹

Another recommendation in the HSE’s island services report is that GPs are provided with adequate locum supports to enable them to take leave and to attend ongoing training on a consistent basis. In an effort to ensure sustained GP services and to disincentivise young GPs leaving rural practice, the Committee recommend that locum supports are made an urgent priority by the government.

The 19th World Rural Health Conference in 2022 initiated the Limerick Declaration on Rural Healthcare²² which asserts the right of rural and island communities to equitable access to healthcare and is a blueprint to transform healthcare for rural and Island communities on this island. This declaration is also in support of World Health Assembly resolution 72.2 on primary healthcare which calls on all stakeholders to provide support to member states in mobilising human, technological, financial and information resources to help build strong and sustainable primary healthcare, as envisaged in the Declaration of Astana.

The proposals outlined in ‘*Our Living Islands*’, the HSE Primary Care on the Islands Review, and the Limerick Declaration on Rural Healthcare all feed into the Sláintecare Reform Programme. It is vital to 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. As stated by the witnesses, “All the technology in the world will amount to little if there are no GPs to run the services.”²³

²⁰ Irish College of General Practitioners, ‘Shaping the Future of General Practise’, 2022, available [here](#)

²¹ Official Meeting Transcript of the JCSPCRDI, page 29, available [here](#)

²² Limerick Declaration on Rural Healthcare, 2022, available [here](#)

²³ Official Meeting Transcript of the JCSPCRDI, page 29, available [here](#)

Recommendations

19. The Committee recommends that the Minister for Health prioritises locum supports for GPs operating in rural areas and serving Island Communities.
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20. The Committee endorses the recommendations in the Limerick Declaration on Rural Healthcare and recommends the Minister for Health and Minister for Rural and Community Development notes it in their future planning for the provision of rural and island GP services.
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Accessibility Issues

In the course of the meeting, the issues facing those with both physical and intellectual disabilities living on the offshore islands was discussed. On Islands where there is no roll on/roll off services, there is a requirement to address disability access on piers for residents and visitors to the islands. There is a commitment in *'Our Living Islands'* to improve facilities for wheelchair embarkation/disembarkation from ferries.²⁴ The Committee requests that this issue is addressed as the feeling from witnesses was that it was not possible at the moment for a wheelchair user to be a resident of the offshore islands.

The access of services and therapies such as speech and language, occupational therapy and physiotherapy for children with additional needs in the Islands should be considered by government. The Committee recommends that this could form part of the remote, interactive services currently being rolled out as part of the Home Health Project.

Recommendations

21. The Committee recommends that accessible embarkation/disembarkation from ferries onto the piers both on the mainland and the island be implemented as soon as possible
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22. The Committee recommends the provision of services to children with additional needs living on the Islands.
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²⁴ Our Living Islands: National Islands Policy 2023-2033, Page 23, available [here](#).

Further National Policy Issues affecting Islanders

Roll-out and Delivery of Broadband on Offshore Islands (Rural Areas)

It was demonstrated at the Joint Committee Meeting on Oileán Árann Mhór how broadband technology can bring parliamentary democracy closer to the people. The delivery of high-speed broadband has yet to be achieved on our offshore islands, but it has the potential to transform so many of the key issues the Committee encountered on that day. During the hearings of the Committee, Members were presented with a set of unique challenges that are faced by island communities. Members also heard about solutions which can not only address the challenges on the islands but can help support isolated communities across Ireland and across the world. These solutions are in large part driven by the adoption of broadband on the islands and in rural areas.

In this context, on Wednesday 15 November 2023²⁵ the Joint Committee met with the Department of Rural and Community Development, the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC), and National Broadband Ireland (NBI).

Officials from DECC updated the Committee members on the Government contract with NBI which requires that every premises on every island in the intervention area will be provided with access to gigabit connectivity as part of the overall NBI deployment. To date, NBI has completed fibre deployment activity on 10 islands off counties Donegal, Mayo, Galway and Cork, namely, Eighter, Eadarinis and Inishcoo, Rutland, Inishfree, Carrowholly, Inishlyre, Turbot, Inishturk South, Heir and Long islands. Premises on these islands can now order broadband services with a minimum speed of 500 Mbps. NBI is progressing a further five islands through the design phase. Those islands are Owey, Dursey, Horse, Inishbiggle and Achillbeg islands. Sherkin, Cape Clear and Bere islands will be surveyed by the end of 2023. An additional six islands will commence fibre survey and design activity in 2024. These are Tory, Arranmore, Inis Mór, Inis Óírr, Inis Meáin and Inisbofin islands.

Members of the Committee raised concerns regarding which islands will not get a fibre connection from the mainland. As members understand it, NBI was not contracted to provide fibre between the islands and the mainland in certain cases but that distribution is by fibre once the service lands on the island.

²⁵ [Official Meeting Transcript](#) of the JCPCRD, PAGE 8 – 40.

National Broadband Ireland informed the committee that they are deploying fibre on the islands, so that every home will be connected with fibre. They deliver the required capacity and resilience to all the islands. On some of the islands, they are delivering capacity of 40 Gbps from the mainland fibre to the island fibre. Some of it can be short-hop and some can be slightly longer.

Members noted that an upgrade of the electricity supply for the islands would be just one of the many solutions that can be put forward to ensure the islands have better connectivity, in line with that on the mainland. This is vital for scenarios where the islands want to export electricity from renewable energy sources, or to import more electricity. This will also give resilience if a cable goes down, as all of the islands, with the exception of Inishturk and Tory Island, are all connected to the mainland with a physical cable.

DECC updated the Committee in their opening statement at a further meeting on 6 December 2023²⁶ regarding concerns of the Committee in ensuring the grid will be updated as necessary to allow electricity to be exported from the islands to the mainland. The Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications informed the committee that the intention of the enduring connection programme is that the grid will be upgraded as and when it is needed to facilitate renewable generation on the islands, or anywhere where there is potential for renewable power.

The Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications pointed out to members the differences between NBI's point-to-point wireless, and subsea cables. There is a regime through MARA where one has to go to An Bord Pleanála for cables under water and carry out many appropriate and environmental assessments. The Department pointed out that this would be a significant risk to getting broadband to those islands in a timely manner. It was recently agreed that seven of the 27 islands originally due for completion in 2027, will be brought forward to 2025 and 2026. A 12-to-14-month acceleration to the islands was agreed towards the end of 2023, which would only be possible with the point-to-point link from the mainland.

Mr Brown updated the Committee on the islands brought forward. Inis Meáin, Inis Mór and Inis Oírr were originally forecast to be ready for service in June and August 2027, respectively. All three islands will now be ready in June 2026, an improvement of between

²⁶ John Finnegan [Opening Statement](#) 6 December

12 and 14 months. Of the other islands that were looked at, Sherkin and Cape Clear were forecast for April 2026 and are now planned for March 2025, an acceleration of circa 13 months. Valentia Island was in the current plan for 2027 and has now been brought forward by 14 months to the end of 2025. It is not a huge improvement, but Achill Island has been improved by two to three months: it was September 2025 and is now June 2025.

The Department informed the committee that the time and the cost are very significant considerations if subsea cables were decided on.

Recommendations

23. The Committee recommends that the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications facilitate the upgrading of the electricity supply for the islands, enhancing not only its import but most importantly its export when in surplus.

24. The Committee recommends that Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications survey the Islands with the intention to provide a programme of fundamental infrastructure upgrades to islands over and above what commercial companies would prioritise.

Engagement with Islanders following Official Proceedings

The Committee Members met with Islanders following the official proceedings on 22 September and heard their views on issues affecting the schools, co-operatives and fishing industry on Oiléan Árains Mhór. The Committee believes that the following issues should be addressed by the government.

Education

The future viability and sustainability of all Island schools is a major priority for the Committee. In a submission received from the Principal of Gairmscoil Mhic Diarmada, the venue for the Committee Meeting on 22 September, concerns around the ongoing services provided for the education of Islanders were raised. All Island communities need to be assured that the current level of services being provided by their schools are maintained

into the future, regardless of any declining enrolment which may affect schools going forward.

Currently, English medium schools are receiving additional English as an Additional Language (EAL) hours to help them support Ukrainian students. However, Irish as additional language (IAL) hours are not available to Irish Medium schools who have a Ukrainian Enrolment. These young people enrolled in Gaeltacht schools are not getting the required Irish language supports to which they are entitled.

Additionally, the submission from Gairmscoil Mhic Diarmada highlighted a disparity in the grant scheme for pupils receiving Irish medium education in schools who are not Voluntary Secondary Schools in the Free Education Scheme. In 2021 the Irish and Bilingual Grant increased to €110.50 per student for all subjects taught through Irish. The rate remained at €22 per student per subject up to a maximum of 4 subjects taught through Irish. Under Revision of Capitation Grant Rates in July 2020²⁷, the Vocational schools and community colleges owned by the local Education and Training Board (ETB) are omitted from this scheme. The Committee would like to see this disparity reviewed and addressed.

It is imperative for the current levels of staffing on Island schools to be maintained and expanded where required, in order for schools to deliver a broad-based curriculum to students. The submission asserts that as the Gaeltacht and Island Allowances for teachers were cut in 2012, a review should take place to determine given the increase cost of living and/or working on an island whether this allowance should be reinstated.

Recommendations

25. The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education provide Irish as an Additional Language hours to Irish medium schools who have an enrolment of students from outside the state.

26. The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education review the Irish and Bilingual Grant payment with a view to ensuring all post-primary schools are included.

²⁷ Revision of Capitation Grant Rates for Voluntary Secondary Schools in the Free Education Scheme, Circular letter 0052/2020, available [here](#)

27. The Committee recommends that the Minister for Education review the Gaeltacht and Island Allowances for teachers.
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Fisheries Industry

The fishing industry is a vital part of many offshore Islands livelihood. In 2014, the Oireachtas Joint Sub-Committee on Fisheries produced the “Report on Promoting Sustainable Rural Coastal and Island Communities” which made the following recommendation;

Recommendation 28 (p.181): In light of the fact that under the existing social welfare laws, share fishermen are considered self-employed, and due to the low take-up of the voluntary Class P PRSI contributions, the sub-Committee recommends that a re-examination of access to job seekers benefit, illness benefit and other social welfare benefits for such fishermen should be undertaken.”²⁸

In a submission received from the Irish Islands Marine Resource Organisation (IIMRO), it has been requested that this recommendation is taken under consideration and provision is made in this year’s budget. This will have a significant positive impact for fishers right across island and coastal communities.

Recommendations

28. The Committee recommends the Minister for Social Protection undertake a re-examination of access to social welfare schemes for fishers and farmers.
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²⁸ Joint Sub-Committee on Fisheries, [“Report on Promoting Sustainable Rural Coastal and Island Communities”](#), 2014.

Conclusion

The Committee feels that Ireland's offshore Islands, if given the investment, have the potential to be a guiding light for the future of rural life across a broad range of policy areas. These lighthouse communities have presented evidence to the Committee which exemplifies the innovation that is happening in these remote places. It is hoped that the recommendations of this report will assist Islanders to live and live well on the offshore islands long into the future. The Committee is very grateful to all who made this historic meeting possible and hopes that this meeting will show the possibilities of opening parliamentary proceedings into communities and the democratic process in action.

Appendix 1 Opening Statements and Submissions

Opening Statements

Date	Witness	Opening statements
22 September 2023	Dr. Ian McCabe, Project Manager, HIVE Lab and The Healthy Islands Project	Opening statement
22 September 2023	Avril Ní Shearcaigh, Manager, Aran Islands Energy Co-op	Opening statement
22 September 2023	Dr. Conor Cashman, Representative, UCC School of Applied Social Science	Opening statement
15 November 2023	Fintan O'Brien, Assistant Secretary General, Department of Rural and Community Development	Opening statement
15 November 2023	Peter Hendrick, Chief Executive Officer, National Broadband Ireland	Opening statement
15 November 2023	Fergal Mulligan, Programme Director, Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications	Opening statement
6 December 2023	Jim Gannon, Chairperson, Commission for Regulation of Utilities	Opening statement
6 December 2023	Aodán Mac an Mhíle, Principal Officer, Department of Rural and Community Development	Opening statement
6 December 2023	Nicholas Tarrant, Managing Director, ESB Networks	Opening statement
6 December 2023	John Finnegan, Principal Officer, Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications	Opening statement
6 December 2023	Anthony Skeffington, Regional Operations Manager, Uisce Éireann	Opening statement

List of written submissions

Stakeholder	Submission
HSE: All-Ireland Islands HSE Primary Healthcare Programme	Submission
UCC School of Applied Social Science	Submission
Irish Islands Marine Resource Organisation	Submission
Principal of Gairmscoil Mhic Diarmada	Submission