

Letter from Author of 'Outer Hebrides Migration Study'

Thank you for forwarding the information from your FOI request to Argyll and Bute Council. I understand that they referred to our 2007 Outer Hebrides Migration Study as a basis for the following conclusion:

*'Studies of the sustainability of rural communities do not generally see the existence of a school as being of comparable importance to local employment, availability of housing, private sector led economic diversity of clean energy.'*

Firstly, I would like to point out that the section of the report that they refer to sets out the outcomes of a scenario planning workshop involving public sector officials and elected members. It was only one element of a very comprehensive and wide-ranging research project. Secondly, the inference that they draw about schools is not one that the vast majority of those reading the report (or even that section) would draw. The session, as I recollect, did not ask participants to compare importance of local services and it is therefore highly misleading of Argyll and Bute Council to use this as a basis for drawing this conclusion.

Both 'learning and skills' and 'community infrastructure' were identified as being key issues for the islands over the next 15 years (page 86). And as part of the desirable situation in 15 years it identified:

*'Continuing high quality schools that provide the best modern facilities and teaching standards.'*

The report as a whole highlighted that the declining school age population and subsequent loss of local primary schools was an undesirable consequence of depopulation. The issues alluded to above were identified as a means of helping to ensure that the working age population in rural communities could be sustained and local services (including primary schools) could be protected. Chapter 6 of the report entitled 'A sustainable population for the Outer Hebrides' clearly states that: *'The focus for interventions should therefore be on:*

- Retaining more young people in the local population;*
- Increasing the number of younger women and couples in the population;*
- Stabilising the number of primary school age children in the local population.'*

A more balanced analysis of the importance of schools in this report might have also noted:

*'Benbecula has the highest rate of economic activity of any Island in the Outer Hebrides and has been more successful in retaining its female population. This is also likely to be linked to the investment in public services such as schools, the hospital and the data centre.'*

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In the section on views from people who have moved away from the islands:

*'Participants were not happy about school closures. A participant originally from Back felt that closing the secondary school there could be detrimental to young people with the first two years of secondary schooling recognised as being important. A participant originally from South Uist criticised the closures there and felt that once they were closed, they were never going to be re-opened.'*

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The chart on page 82 indicates that 'Quality of Schools' is the fifth most important factor for leavers in considering moving back to the islands.

The importance of primary schools to sustaining remote communities is widely acknowledged and was also highlighted in our more recent Orkney Population Study, which highlighted that:

*'people often perceive that having a GP and a primary school are key services and that when these go the islands are under threat.'*

(Highland and Islands Enterprise, 2009, page 58)

Overall I feel that using this report as a basis for concluding that schools are less important in sustaining rural communities is wholly unjustified. The report clearly states that business, jobs and housing are the factors that will help to sustain local communities and that retaining primary school rolls is an explicit desirable outcome of doing so.

Yours sincerely

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