



# Island Futures: Final Project Report

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# Introduction

The sustainability of island communities is of central concern both within island communities themselves, and to wider interests. The Scottish National Islands Plan, for example, aims to address issues of island sustainability and draws attention to a number of interrelated areas such as population and economic sustainability, environmental sustainability and sustainable service provision (such as healthcare and education) (Scottish Government, 2019).

In addressing these issues, community empowerment and community led services are often identified as offering solutions, and the development of coproduced initiatives across these areas is evident. Academic research potentially has a significant role to play in assisting communities to identify and address sustainability issues, however academic research is rarely 'community led', and is more often led by universities and researchers from urban centres (Alexander and Henderson, 2024).

This project brought together a new, interdisciplinary and collaborative partnership between researchers and island community organisations to coproduce a Scottish island research agenda, identifying how research practices in and for island communities can be strengthened.

## Background

Addressing island sustainability concerns involves being able to adequately understand and analyse the nature of the challenges that islands face, as well as being able to identify the potential assets and possibilities islands have for addressing these challenges. Research can play a key role in developing such an evidence base. At the same time researchers are increasingly under pressure to identify community impact from their research, and for research conducted in academic institutions in the UK, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) directly seeks to assess research impact. In many ways, then, researchers and island communities share a goal: to develop meaningful and impactful research.

However, despite these shared interests, a growing body of work has highlighted the problematics of research in small communities including small islands. Central to these problematics is the way that academic research is often conducted out of large universities in urban centres (Alexander and Henderson, 2024). As a result, research often comes from 'outside' of an island community and is governed by processes and protocols developed by universities, or large research funders, and may not always be suitable for small communities. The ways that working in small (island) communities may generate particular demands in relation to the ethics of research which are often not covered by university ethics procedures is particularly well documented (Hayfield, 2022; Matheson et al., 2020). Issues of power imbalances in island research are also well recognised (Hayfield, 2022), with evidence of extractive research practices with island communities often having the experience of being the subject of research (being researched 'on') and not always seeing the benefits of engaging in research (Ford, 2022; Macaulay, 2023).

Although these dynamics have been reflected upon by researchers themselves through their own experiences of conducting research in island communities, what remains unexplored in any depth is the perspective of island communities themselves on academic research, including research practices. This project sought to address this gap by exploring the experience of communities in engaging with academic research, and to identify community perspectives on how research practices could be improved. The project also engaged researchers who have worked in the Scottish islands to triangulate data relating to their experiences of engaging with island communities, and to identify the specific challenges, and potential improvements that could be made to research practices in and for island communities.

## Methods

The project involved two strands: one with island communities and one with researchers who had worked in or had an interest in working in island communities.

### Island community workshops

The project involved two online participatory workshops, with representatives from ten island-based community organisations in each. Participants were recruited via a partnership with Community Energy Scotland (CES), who are the key delivery partner for the Scottish Government Islands Team's Carbon Neutral Islands project and who deliver community-led projects focusing on energy and climate action. Participants were recruited from across the Scottish islands, including representatives from every major island group, and from both smaller and larger islands. The community organisations who participated in this project were offered an honorarium for participation of £100. Workshops utilised an adapted form of Nominal Group Technique to explore participants' experiences of, and expectations from, research and identify community priorities for the future (Alexander, 2018, McMillan et al, 2014). Workshops were recorded.

### Island researcher engagement

The project also involved bringing together researchers who had worked in, or were interested in working with, Scottish island communities. A website for the project was developed (<https://islandsresearch.scot/>) and a call made for researchers interested in working in the Scottish islands to join a new Islands research network, with 52 researchers expressing an interest. This network includes researchers from across Scotland, and further afield, and includes researchers working for universities, research institutes and independently. The network held two meetings during the life of the project, and will continue to meet on a regular basis. The network has developed a blog to communicate previous, upcoming or current research in the Scottish islands as a way of building communication between researchers and communities. At the first network meeting, a mapping exercise was conducted to identify the range of research interests of attendees, and ideas for the network were also collected.

Alongside the network, a dedicated workshop was also convened with researchers who have worked in, or have an interest in working in island communities, to gather their perspectives on island research practices and what would support them to work more effectively in the islands. The design of the workshop paralleled that of the community workshop and was also recorded.

## Analysis

Data from the workshops included lists of ideas for how island research practices could be improved. These lists were analysed thematically and summarised. In alignment with participatory research processes, the draft findings of the analysis were presented back to the researchers (via email, and in discussion at the researcher network meeting) and the community organisations (via email and two additional short workshops) to sense-check the analysis and gain further insights. This helped to refine the analysis. This final report from the project has also been circulated to participants prior to publication to again check and refine the content. The aspiration throughout the project has been to work together as a research team, and with wider community and researcher networks to collaboratively construct the outputs of the project and ongoing activities.

## The ‘CARE’ framework for island research

Through analysis of the data from the community workshops, we have developed four key principles for island research, that create the acronym ‘CARE’:

- **Connected** – research should be grounded in the specific communities in which it takes place. Researchers should take time to understand the islands in which they are conducting their research and should take care not to approach an island with preconceptions, but to seek to fully understand the context at the earliest stages of research design.
- **Aligned** - research should be aligned, where possible, to the needs and interests of the community, and should avoid duplication of previous research. Engagement with communities should happen early so that the research design can be informed by island needs and interests and to ensure that research methods, timelines and outputs are appropriate.
- **Resourced** - research should be funded in a way which allows time and resource for researchers to work with communities throughout a project from design to delivery, and with resources to ensure a legacy beyond individual project timelines. The resource contributions of communities should be recognised, including the time of participants. Community capacity should be accounted for in the design of research projects, and remuneration for community involvement should be considered, especially where community organisations are providing input of time and knowledge. The knowledge(s) shared by communities should be acknowledged and referenced in written outputs.
- **Effective** - research practices and methods should be appropriate for the contexts in which they take place. Where research seeks to represent island-wide perspectives,



researchers should ensure that research is representative of the communities in which it is conducted, and seek input from island communities about effective ways of engaging diverse voices and perspectives. Outputs should be clear and accessible beyond academic paywalls.

Appendix 1 includes a full list of the ideas shared by the island community representatives for how to improve research practices in the islands, and how they have been grouped into these four themes.

What is clear from the data is how island communities can potentially contribute across the scoping, designing and delivery of research projects, and therefore how the kinds of knowledges and skills that are important in designing effective research are not just within the remit of researchers: island communities for example can provide important input to issues such as research design, and can be an important source of information about pre-existing research within their contexts, they are also home to researchers and the site of research activities in their own right. Working with island communities should not, therefore, be limited simply to 'engagement' in a project (after it has been designed) and 'impact' of a project (as a recipient of outputs), but should be much more embedded throughout the research process.

## Developing CARE-ing research practices

The responsibility for improving research practices in islands lies, to a large extent, with researchers themselves. However, there is also a need to address the wider landscapes within which researchers work, including the demands of their supervisors, employers, and the funders of research. Recognising these wider responsibilities, a workshop was conducted with researchers who work, have worked or wish to work in the Scottish Islands, to explore and understand their perspectives on what would improve their ability to conduct effective research in the islands.

The findings of the researcher workshop demonstrated close alignment with the interests of the island communities themselves, with three key areas identified where researchers felt that they could be supported to improve research practices in the islands. These areas broadly aligned to the CARE principles:

- **Co-producing a research agenda:** recognising that research agendas are sometimes set by large research funders, and/or researchers themselves, there was a desire for more input from islanders to help to define a research focus (aligned to the themes 'connected' and 'aligned').
- **Inclusive research practices:** recognising that researchers can find it difficult to access island populations and/or can risk engagement only with limited groups of islanders, there was a desire for better understanding and use of island-based channels to engage with diverse island populations (aligned to the theme 'effective' and 'resourced')

- **Impactful outputs:** recognising that it is important for research to have an impact, there was a desire for support to make this happen, including time and resources, and input from the communities (aligned to the theme 'effective').

In order to achieve these things, channels for communication between researchers and island communities need to be supported. Extending the island research network so that it includes not just researchers but also community representatives is one way of building these channels. The research network blog should also build communication. This blog can provide a way for researchers of any kind (including masters students and PhD students) to communicate about their work. Through 'tags' it is possible to tag each blog with the name of the islands the research focuses on which will provide an additional resource for researchers and communities searching for other projects conducted in the islands, or for other projects on specific topics of interests. But there are other possibilities too, such as a database of research interests / needs or a research matching service (whereby community interests can be 'matched' to researchers and vice versa). These are areas that the island research network has agreed to take forward.

As well as building connections between researchers and communities, changes to the ways that research funders and universities operate were also identified as valuable. Currently the ability to build relationships with communities prior to research funding applications is limited because of challenges with the process of making research applications (including the pressures of time, and the lack of financial support to put these together). The ability to visit and build knowledge of island communities is limited because of challenges with research structures and funding, in particular there is a lack of adequate funding to allow for time to engage with communities at depth (including the ability to visit and stay in islands). There are also limits on the ability to share budgets with island communities, including paying for community members' time, the ability to engage islands-based researchers, and the ability to pay for incidentals (such as food, rooms, and so on) in small islands with limited infrastructure.

Finally, there are impacts on the ability to strengthen island research practices which relate to wider contextual factors that shape the practicalities (and costs) of research, including transport infrastructure. Where transport is costly, takes significant time, or is unreliable, these things can mitigate against researchers being able to spend the time they need in connecting with island communities.

## Good practice in island research

The project demonstrates how island communities and researchers have relatively strong alignment in their desires to improve research practice in island communities, using CARE principles. Building on these principles, we have produced a series of guidelines for researchers in engaging with island communities. These guidelines have been developed as something of a good-practice checklist, which can be used directly by researchers when planning a project. Researchers may also find it useful to refer to these guidelines when developing project proposals to articulate and justify their funding (or other) resource requirements to universities and funders.

Recognising that not all researchers who work in islands have experience or knowledge of island research, the guidelines may also be used by island communities themselves when they are approached by researchers seeking to work with them. Communities may request that researchers address the points in these guidelines before seeking to engage with them.

The intention behind the guidelines is not that they are a definitive checklist for researchers, but that they can be used as a thinking tool to support reflective practice. The aim of producing a set of guidelines is to raise awareness among researchers, island communities, and research funders and institutions about what good practice in island research can look like. The guidelines are shown on the following page.

# Guidelines for researchers working in island communities

## **Before making a research proposal, have you:**

- Engaged in self-reflection about your own personal interests and motivations behind the project you wish to propose and considered how it connects with the interests of island communities themselves?
- Visited the island(s) you intend to research at least once?
- Identified previous relevant research conducted in the islands by asking relevant community partners (as well as conducting searches of academic databases)?
- Reflected on and /or checked any assumptions you are making about the islands, including your interpretation of national data sets?

## **Constructing your research proposal, have you:**

- Supplied a basic project plan to, and sought feedback from, relevant community stakeholders?
- Identified appropriate methodology including sampling techniques to ensure that you are reaching diverse island populations?
- Identified potential community resources that can be used to support the project, and arranged or planned for any remuneration if necessary?

## **Planning your project, have you:**

- Confirmed timelines and resourcing plans with the community?
- Considered the ethical dimensions of your project, including the specific considerations for working in a small island?
- Piloted your data collection methods (or at a minimum, talked it through with) representatives from the community?

## **Conducting your project, have you:**

- Ensured that all parties are up to date with the research process and understand how it is progressing?
- Taken care of confidentiality including in how data is being shared formally and informally?

## **Finalising your project, have you:**

- Discussed with island community stakeholders what outputs would be of most benefit?
- Circulated research outputs to island communities?
- Debriefed with island stakeholders about the implications and next steps for the research topic and / or for generating impact and / or further research?
- Considered authorship and acknowledgements for your report and other outputs?



## Conclusions and recommendations

The research project has generated an evidence base around existing research practice in island communities and how it can be strengthened. The CARE principles and guidelines for researchers have been constructed as tools to help support everyone involved in island research (research funders, researchers and island communities especially), develop a shared understanding about what positive research practice might look like in island communities, and how it can be achieved. The responsibilities for improving island research practices lie with researchers and communities, but also lie with research funders, universities, and the structures which shape research activities.

Following the completion of this research project, it is clear that there is a strong desire among island communities and researchers to improve research practices in the islands. Therefore the next step for the project is to evolve the Scottish Islands Research Network into an ongoing network, inclusive of both researchers and Scottish islands or islanders who are interested in research. This will build links between researchers and island communities, providing a forum for developing research projects, as well as discussing shared interests. The CARE principles and the island research guidelines will be reviewed on a regular basis through this network in order to ensure that they remain working documents fit for purpose. The network will also engage policy-makers, university staff and funders to raise awareness of the specific needs and demands of research in island communities.

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# Appendix 1: CARE framework coding

Comments from participants about what is necessary to improve research practices in the Scottish islands are shown below, coded according to the four categories.

## **Connected:**

- Engage community knowledge / gatekeepers
- Ensure enough background research has been done (on the community)
- Identify previous relevant projects
- Not all islands are the same – specific context matters
- Data should be island specific and not aggregate / amalgamate with mainland areas
- Look at islands as individual islands. don't bundle in with everyone else, islands are different
- Case studies of different places to compare and contrast

## Sub theme - visit the islands

- Stay long enough
- What can be offered to researchers to encourage them to be based in islands
- Visit the island rather than just virtual
- Ensure that research is based in the islands and not conducted remotely
- Engage island based researchers
- Better transport and internet infrastructure to facilitate research

## **Aligned**

- Islands manifesto for identifying priorities
- Online catalogue of current / proposed projects
- Build dialogue so that community's needs are reflected in research design
- Early engagement with island communities
- Engage with islands to identify appropriate topics
- Improving range of topics of research / engaging community in designing research agenda
- Collaborate on when best time to research
- Bring in communities earlier in the research process
- List of organisations interested in being part of research and what topics are of interest
- Pick the right timing (for the island)

## **Resourced**

- Give enough notice
- Ensure capacity of community
- Remuneration for time
- Being cognizant of time of respondents
- Consider remuneration for respondents
- How resources can be shared with the community
- Cite information when it is given

- Researchers should listen and be open to having their assumptions challenged
- Need to respect local informants. Don't patronise or assume the researcher is the only expert
- Build relationships based on respect, recognition, reciprocity
- Better understanding of nature of research project and use of data

### **Effective**

- Engage beyond the main island
- Make sure research is representative
- Planning research with communities to maximise engagement
- Collaboration in defining potential sample for research
- How to include as many folk as possible
- Expand engagement, recognising the role that the 3<sup>rd</sup> sector plays in island communities
- Don't just speak to council and main stakeholders as they might not represent the community
- Engage with a range of individuals / groups within each community
- Offer diversity of ways of engaging to reach all islanders
- Ensure appropriate methodology (sampling)
- Keep surveys / questionnaires short and simple
- System for ensuring community-led research is robust and methodologically sound
- Ensure research is open and unbiased
- Access to professional researchers to meet research needs
- Stop aggregating national statistics – bottom up research
- Share the outputs
- Legacy relevance impact
- Knowledge of and free access to research outputs
- Research and consultations should be listened to and make a difference
- Even when researchers offer to benefit communities, uncertain what might be possibilities
- Some feedback from researchers