

## **Opening Statement:** Joint Committee on Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands

From Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann

The Board of Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann thanks the Chair, rapporteur deputies, senators, and officials of the Joint Committee. This opportunity to highlight some of the challenges facing the offshore islands is very much appreciated.

Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann was founded in 1984 and represents the offshore inhabited islands. The organisation's aim is the social, economic and cultural development of island communities through representation at local, national, and EU levels. Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann's overarching aim is to maintain and develop the Islands. Islands have much in common, however, it is important to remember that there are many nuances that need bespoke approaches.

My name is Aisling Moran and I am here representing Islanders as the Chair of Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann. I am the project worker with Sherkin Island Development Society and act as an island advocate. The past decade has been spent working with the islands seeking comprehensive means to live sustainably on our islands. Here with me are my colleagues Simon Murray from Inishbofin, Co Galway and John Walsh from Bere Island, Co Cork. Simon has spent his entire life working with and for Island communities, ensuring that key concerns are continuously addressed. John is Project Manager for Bere Island Project Group, Chair of the European Small Islands Federation (ESIN) and island advocate.

Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann find it necessary to reiterate the shocking population statistics presented to the Joint Committee during our last meeting. In 1841 Islands population was 34,219; by 2016 that number had reduced to 2,627. No other community has experienced such a dramatic decline, as pointed out in *Our Rural Future*. These figures have not improved, and some islands have moved closer to the edge. Serious and continued government support is needed to ensure the long-term viability of our offshore islands.

Today Comhdháil Oileán na hÉireann will be highlighting four areas of concern, and if time allows, we would like to also discuss other island matters.

### **HOUSING:**

The social context in how we live has disproportionately impacted the housing situation on the islands. Updated laws on planning policy limit islanders from building on their own islands. Ireland has seen an increase in second home ownership: this demand has driven the price of island housing outside the reach of islanders. Islands are finite spaces. Islanders therefore need to be able to build



**Toraigh Árainn Mhór Gabhla Inis Fraoich Inis Caorach Inis Mhic an Doirn Inis Oirthir Inis Bó Finne Oileán Ruaidh Inis Bigil Clare Island Clynish Inishlyre Inisturk Inishbofin Inis Mór Inis Meáin Inis Oírr Dursey Bere Whiddy Long Heir Sherkin Oileán Cléire**

or buy homes on their islands. Alternative mainland housing options are not solutions to the island housing crises.

The housing situation on the offshore islands is urgent. It is an area where there has been very little research carried out to date. University College Cork are currently engaged to conduct a comprehensive housing survey on all offshore inhabited islands. The outcomes of this survey will result in a report with housing recommendations for the offshore islands. The main theme of the Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann in September 2022 will be based on housing and the outcomes of this report. Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann is hopeful that the report will input into *Our Rural Future* 10- Year Plan and the Islands Policy document.

### **Connectivity**

One of the main results of the COVID-19 pandemic is that people want, and sometimes must, work from home. There is a new age of remote working already building in Ireland and Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann considers this a major opportunity for islanders and to attract both emigrant islanders and new residents to the islands. To do this, not only do we need sufficient housing but also a reliable, high-speed broadband system in place. As was stated in our previous presentation to the Committee, in exploring the opportunities for GTeic and enterprise hubs in our communities, it is vital that National Broadband Ireland provide the islands with fibre optic cable connections from the mainland.

*Rural Future* notes that: “Access to computers (58%) and broadband/ internet (55%) on the islands is considerably less than on the mainland where 73% of the population have access to a household computer and 72% have access to broadband/internet.” And while the National Broadband Plan is meant to deliver high-speed broadband to all areas of Ireland, this is only slowly being developed. While several islands do have BCP (Broadband Connections Points) and have developed internet hubs that have proven very successful, there is a lot more to be done – and it must be done at a faster pace. People cannot put their businesses and lives on hold waiting for the infrastructure to catch up.

### **Infrastructure, Life Line Services and Capital funding**

The Island Capital Budget Programme, funds infrastructure projects, life line services and capital works. Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann believe that there is definite scope for increasing this budget to reflect the real needs of the offshore islands. From “*Our Rural Future*”: “The Government will invest in vital infrastructure on the islands over the lifetime of this policy, to ensure safe access for islanders, service providers, and visitors alike.” Infrastructure is not only about safe access; it is about the everyday lives of islanders and the future sustainability of their islands. Comhdháil would like to see a consistent budget that could meet the needs of the offshore islands, working in conjunction with the interdepartmental committee, Island interagency and local authorities.

The Island Capital Budget Programme is crucial to the sustainability of the offshore islands. The success of Island policy documents depends on real financial support. The budget has, in the past, proven to cover a wide and vital range of areas of island life, integral to the future of offshore islands.

## Energy

Sustainable Energy is a key consideration for the whole country. Islands are keen to be at the forefront of these new developments. The offshore islands are already working at European Level through the EU Clean Islands Secretariat. Through the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications there is potential for the offshore islands to work at a local and national level. The recent SEAI National home retrofit scheme was welcomed, however this initiative will not translate due to islands due to higher costs of works and also the requirements on contractors. Island proofing would aid in the understanding of these nuances. It would be hopeful that through the interdepartmental committee and Ministers engagement we can get a resolution to this. Islands are ideal test beds for energy pilot projects.

The areas highlighted today is by no means a comprehensive list of areas of concern for the offshore Islands. Comhdháil would welcome expansion of the discussion to include policies surrounding health, education, agriculture, the marine, access, childcare, enterprise and employment, fire and emergency services, waste management, tourism, youth, and older persons.

We recognise that there are great opportunities to be achieved by working together. Comhdháil Oileáin na hÉireann understand that the work on the islands policy document is central to *Our Rural Future*. Comhdháil are requesting that a draft version of this document be presented to the Island Communities for review prior to publication. Comhdháil would also like to recognise the importance of the Interdepartmental Committee in the process of writing the Islands Policy document and delivering on *Our Rural Future*. Comhdháil are grateful for the opportunity to speak before the Joint Oireachtas Committee today and see these opportunities as key to the delivery of government policies that will secure the offshore islands of Ireland for future generations.