

Sustainable Islands: Delivering change

Speech by William Roe to Sustainable Islands Conference Friday, September 25, 2009.

Good afternoon Ladies and gentleman. I am delighted to be able to speak to you this afternoon about a topic which is not only close to my own heart, but is central to the vision that drives the organisation I represent.

For those of you I haven't met before my name is Willy Roe ... and I am chair of Highlands and Islands Enterprise. HIE – the agency which has been tasked, by the Scottish Government, with delivering sustainable economic growth for this region.

Sustainable development - was defined by the United Nations' Bruntland commission more than two decades ago. You may be familiar with the definition. But it's worth repeating. Sustainable development, the UN said, is 'meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.

But economic development is so much about seizing opportunities. NOW. Beating your competitors, increasing market share, improving productivity.

So to meet that UN definition we have to balance those immediate pressures and demands with a vision that takes account of future generations.

That's quite a challenge.

At HIE we know that if we are to succeed in meeting it, and realise our vision there are three things we must do for our islands...

We must encourage people to stay, and make sure they have the jobs and facilities – like housing and transport – they need to make staying possible.

We have to support them in making their island economically sustainable.

And we have to do both of those things in a way that reduces their carbon footprint and provides them with a source of renewable energy for their own and future generations.

It's a three-piece jigsaw which will lead to success.

But its not simple.

And we know the cost of failure.

We know that an island, inhabited since prehistoric times, rich in natural resources and with its own distinct community, language and culture, can fail.

We know that an entire island population can feel compelled to abandon their homes because contemporary developments have made their lifestyle unsustainable. Their needs can no longer be met.

We know because we remember St Kilda.

It's 79 years since the last permanent inhabitants were evacuated from that Hebridean outpost. Now the date of their departure is to be marked each year - a permanent reminder of the danger of failing to sustain our island communities.

And in case we were in danger of becoming complacent we had a stark reminder earlier this month of how vulnerable our island communities can be if they are not in control of their own resources, in charge of their own economies.

The decision not to close the MoD rocket range on Benbecula is welcome... but if the closure had gone ahead the consequences for that island would have been catastrophic.

And yet again St Kilda would have been at the centre of the collapse... The National Trust for Scotland, which owns the remote archipelago, had warned that withdrawal of test range staff there would seriously harm its ability to manage the World Heritage site.

But if St Kilda is evidence of past failure... of island life that could not be sustained... we do not have to look far for an example of success... for an island where sustainable development in the 21st Century is a reality.

Less than a decade ago, Gigha, which as many of you know is an island off the coast of Argyll, looked stuck on a downward spiral.

Its population had once been more than 600. Ten years ago it had dwindled to fewer than 100. There were only six pupils in the island's only school and the majority of the houses were below acceptable standards.

But in 2001, the latest in a succession of private landlords put the island up for sale.

The price tag was four million pounds. And this time the islanders decided they would buy it.

They had help from HIE's community land unit and from the National Lottery. They raised the remainder themselves.

In 2002 the community purchase of the land was completed.

Since then the people of Gigha have achieved a dramatic transformation. New houses are being built. New businesses established. The population has increased by 50 per cent and there are 20 children in the school.

One resident I spoke to told me that the island now has couples with children returning to be near the grandparents. Three generations can live on Gigha at once - something that shortages of housing and facilities made near impossible just ten years ago.

The island trust now runs a hotel and Gigha has the first community-owned wind farm in Britain to be connected as a supplier of energy to the national grid.

That shows remarkable vision and entrepreneurship. The island's three wind turbines produce not only enough power for Gigha, but a surplus which is sold on.

And the profit - about one hundred thousand pounds a year - is re-invested in community projects by the trust.

What a turnaround.

All three pieces of the jigsaw are in place: the facilities are there for the population, the island has a thriving economy and it is all powered by renewable energy.

Those of you here today who are islanders yourselves will be aware of the sublime irony in the fact that central to that success is the wind farm operated by Gigha Renewable Energy Ltd.

As with Orkney and the European Marine Energy Centre, the potential in the Pentland Firth, and the recently announced marine project in the Sound of Jura, the very things which in the past presented some of the greatest challenges to island life now offer some of the biggest opportunities.

High winds, strong tides, huge waves - all of them common around Scotland's islands, and each of them a vital source of renewable energy.

At HIE we've grasped that opportunity with the creation of a dedicated team which deals with wind, marine, biomass, solar and geothermal energy.

And we have seen Community Energy Scotland evolve from a project established by HIE to empower communities to create and manage their own sustainable energy initiatives, into a body doing just that for all of Scotland.

One of its early successes was in helping to deliver the all-island electrification scheme on Eigg - a project which has enabled the residents of that island to have round the clock power for the first time. Ever.

At HIE we recently passed on to Community Energy Scotland a report we commissioned on the possibility of creating a Carbon Neutral Scottish Island.

It points to the use of new technologies to reduce direct emissions from sources such as electricity, space heating and transport.

But it also talks about the need to offset the things that islanders can have little control over. Things like ferries and flights.

And how does it suggest this can be done? By exporting renewable electricity to the national grid.

So we know that our islands are beginning to make headway.

And they are looking to the future.

Gigha I've spoken about. But others, like Tiree, Islay, Westray, Harris, South Uist, are all looking at how they can benefit both in the short and the long term.

They have an example they can follow if they wish - Shetland. The islands there took the short term financial profit of the late 20th century oil boom and invested it to ensure long term benefits.

Now our other islands have the chance to do the same. But this time from renewable resources. To take that energy which is being produced on and close to their islands, use it to meet their own needs, sell the surplus back for national consumption, and invest the profits for future generations.

By putting that one – and arguably most significant - piece of the jigsaw in place they will have the means to establish the others.

And that is where our support at Highlands and Islands Enterprise is crucial.

Over the past few years that drive for sustainability has underpinned all of our work.

Everything from social and community projects to the major inward investments which will transform our economy.

We are, of course, best known as an economic development agency. We want to bring better paid, high quality jobs to the Highlands and Islands. We want to attract more wealth creators to the region, but we don't want to do it at the expense of our environment and not only in some of our areas.

We believe that there are huge benefits to be gained for our communities by investing in our natural assets... that we should focus on finding the innovative, creative and quality projects which will transform our region.

Projects like the Pure Energy Centre in Unst, our most northerly inhabited island.

This amazing project – a world-first – generates hydrogen from tap water and renewable resources which are used to supply an industrial estate with electricity and heat the rest of Unst.

This creates an energy source which can be stored in tanks for later use. It can be used to power cars and buses. Its potential is huge.

Again it is using a renewable form of energy to build a sustainable future.

But those are not the only projects which are vital for our islands.

We have to work on the other two pieces of the jigsaw as well – the population need homes, jobs and facilities. And their local economy must be strong.

And there too we are supporting projects.

We've heard earlier today about Orkney and the wonderful work going on at the European Marine Energy Centre. But there is also the renewable fabrication yard developed by HIE at Arnish point on Lewis. Our tenant, Bi-Fab has created around 80 skilled jobs there this year. There's the Shetland Centre for Creative Excellence – Mareel – in Lerwick. And on Skye there's the Gaelic college Sabhal Mor Ostaig.

We have around 200 contact centre jobs in the Outer Hebrides.

We have invested in our Connected Communities programme to ensure that our remote island communities of the Outer Hebrides have access to the benefits of broadband.

And we know that the roll out of Digital Britain and access to the next generation of high speed broadband will be vital for individuals, companies and community projects throughout the Highland and Islands.

To retain our population we have to continue to attract high quality employment.

But we also need more academic opportunities for our young people – a University of the Highlands and Islands is a project we actively and passionately pursue with UHI Millennium Institute.

If we can do all of those things – and more - we can put together the same jigsaw for other islands that is working for Gigha.

So long, of course, as we have the policies and funding in place that will allow those community buy-outs to happen.

At the beginning I mentioned the vision that drives HIE.

Recently a colleague of mine was asked for his ideal for the Highlands and Islands in the next decade. It was quite a picture he conjured up.

He imagined a region where the renewable energy industry is buoyant.

There are wind farms in the Moray Firth and on the West coast. The first tidal farm is about to go into production in the Pentland Firth. There is a wave farm off Lewis.

All of the first graduates from the University of the Highlands and Islands in Renewable Energy Engineering have been recruited ...into local firms.

Many small remote islands like Muck, Rum, Canna, Westray Foula, Knoydart, have become self-sufficient in energy following the pioneering work of Eigg.

Hydrogen is used to fuel all buses and public vehicles in the Outer Hebrides. Individuals are beginning to convert their cars too.

Our life sciences, tourism, financial and business services, food and drink and creative industries are also flourishing and bringing benefits to all our islands.

It's not a bad picture is it? It certainly something worth aiming for and something that would help us ensure we have many more Gigha's, and never another St Kilda.

ends