

A Catalyst for Economic, Social and Cultural
Development:

Islands Entrepreneurial Network



Chris Moule
Head of Entrepreneurship & Innovation
Robert Gordon University
NORA Conference
July 2025

A Story



Sarah Kay – Resin Artist & Jeweller, Scalloway

draws deep inspiration from Shetland's coastal landscapes
its beaches, seaweed, shells, the “Mirrie Dancers” (Northern Lights), & local flora

crafting distinctive seascape artworks, resin jewellery, sea-glass “washing-line” pieces,
shell buttons, and pendants—handmade with foraged island materials



Key Challenges

- **Limited access to finance and startup support** across the islands compared to the mainland
- **Fragile sectors** across the island with a declining job base or excessive reliance on seasonal employment
- **Lack of affordable housing and housing stock**
- **Lack of Childcare** creating barriers to starting new ventures
- **Declining population and net migration create a loss of skills and young people** moving to the mainland for education, employment, and housing
- **Digital infrastructure problems**

Key Drivers

- **Islands Mindset** – resourceful and resilient
- **Cultural Assets** across the island groups, like Harris Tweed, Callanish Stones
- **Strong communities and identity** – locally loyal and embedded networks
- **Energy of Youth** - using their own voice to bring new solutions to old problems
- **Island tourism 2.0** – sustainable and experience-led
- **New industries** including space and renewables supply chain and Blue economy
- **Growth in Freelancing and new ways of working**

OUR ISLANDS OUR DEAL

Our Islands Deal Vision

To harness the unique assets of Orkney, the Outer Hebrides and Shetland to create world class, innovative and globally focused industries that will help address the Islands' severe demographic challenges and strengthen the distinct and important contribution our Islands make to the economic vitality and international reputation of Scotland and the United Kingdom.



Funded by
UK Government

Our themes



Theme 1: Leading the way to a Low Carbon Future

Ambition: Our Islands are the first parts of the UK to reach the Governments' net zero carbon emission goal. We are recognised global leaders in the development and adoption of the technologies and processes associated with this transition and we have a thriving low carbon business and research cluster selling products, services, and expertise around the world.



Theme 2: Supporting Growth and Future Industries

Ambition: Our Islands provide a collaborative environment that supports creativity, innovation, growth and productivity improvement within key Island industry sectors and we are fully exploiting our unique assets to create new, high growth sustainable industries of the future.



Theme 3: Thriving Sustainable Communities

Ambition: Our Islands are recognised for the high quality of life available to all in our communities, as attractive and affordable places for young people and families to live and realise their ambitions, and where you can live healthily and happily into old age. As a result, we have decisively shifted the dial on our long-term demographic trends.

Collaboration for net zero:

Fast-track decarbonisation across Scotland's island communities.

Tackling demographic challenges:

By creating new education pathways, employment opportunities, and enterprise support, TalEntEd helps retain and attract people to Orkney, Shetland, and the Outer Hebrides.

Driving sustainable innovation:

Each partner focuses on a unique area to ensure holistic impact, build resilient island economies and foster a just transition to net zero.



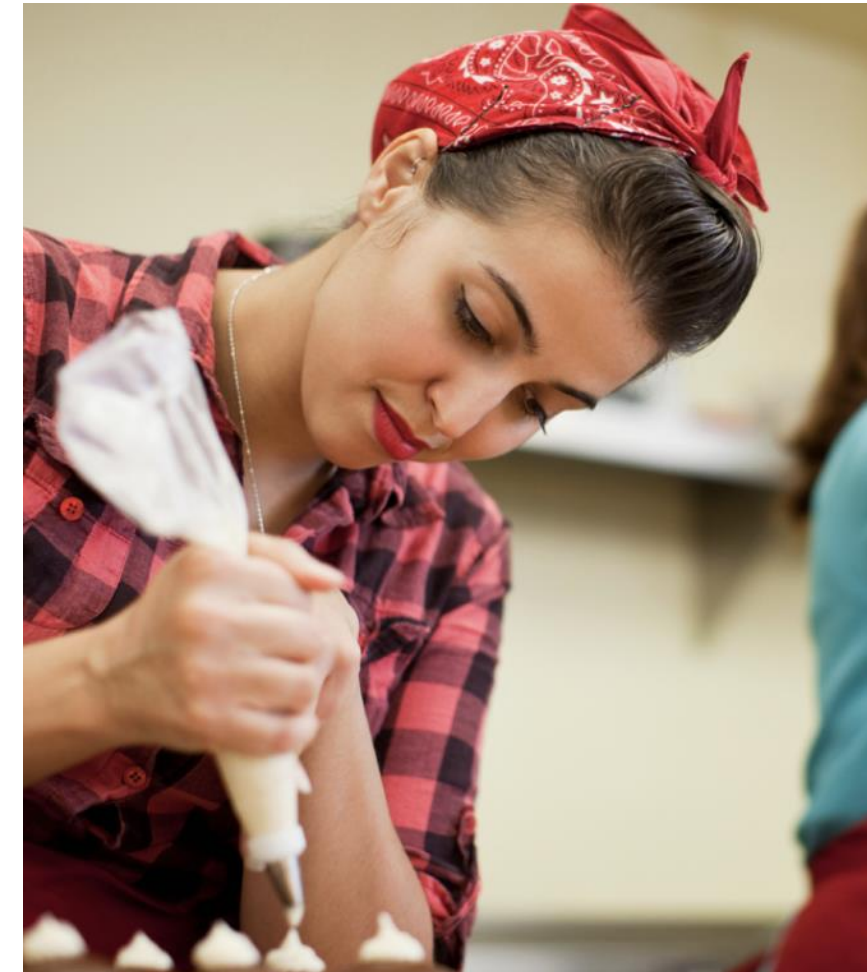
The Islands Entrepreneurship Network (IEN), led by Robert Gordon University, represents a programme of activities and events to **stimulate and foster an entrepreneurial eco-system and create new ventures and new jobs across the three island groups**, as part of the Islands Region Deal (IRD).

Key to the success will be the **partnership working** on each of the Islands with community groups, local authorities, local community trusts and local businesses.

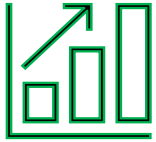
The programme of activities will be developed and delivered in co-operation with key stakeholders, and Island communities.

The objective is to **develop an entrepreneurship ecosystem** on the islands which will:

- Inspire entrepreneurship
- Build communities of innovation
- Expand innovation knowledge
- Create new ventures



The Team



CREATING NEW VENTURES

Stimulate economic development through new venture creation and job creation



EXPANDING ENTREPRENEURIAL KNOWLEDGE

Train, develop and support a diverse island population



INSPIRING ENTREPRENEURSHIP

To seek out opportunities and have the confidence to create a new venture



BUILDING COMMUNITIES OF INNOVATION

As a foundation of an entrepreneurial eco-system with an innovative mindset



Islands Entrepreneurial Network



Start Up Accelerator Programme & Showcase

Aimed at early -stage entrepreneurs from
any sector



Creative Entrepreneurship Programme

Aimed at creative practitioners who want to
know about self-employment, finance &
marketing

8 Weeks



Women in Business

Aimed at mothers who face barriers to
employment and want to know about self-
employment, finance & marketing

6 Weeks

Islands Entrepreneurial Network



Freelance Academy

Aimed at people, particularly young people, wanting to enter the gig economy and have part-time portfolio / seasonal jobs



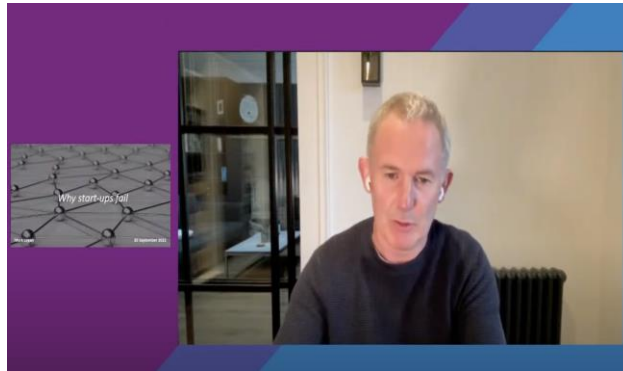
Seniors Programme (60+ yrs)

Aimed at retired and semi-retired entrepreneurs or those looking to supplement their income



Innovation Challenge Weekend

Intense weekend hack workshop, partnering with industry focused on a specific challenge



Masterclasses

Aimed to inspire a new generation of entrepreneurs and stimulate new innovative thinking

Delivered Online, in-person and hybrid

Monthly



Islands Entrepreneurship Schools Forum

Aimed at building an entrepreneurial mindset across pupils and teachers – embedded in the curriculum

Quarterly

Gaelic Language, Culture & Arts

Working alongside organisations such as Ceòlas, MG ALBA, An Lantair and Lews Castle College/UHI, the IEN will align to the aims and ambitions set out in Scottish Government's / HIE's Gaelic language plan 2022-27.

This will enhance Gaelic identity and culture to drive economic growth, whilst simultaneously capitalising on the language as a vehicle for inclusion besides stimulating new ventures, social enterprises and community organisations.



University of the
Highlands and Islands
Lews Castle College

Oilthigh na Gàidhealtachd
agus nan Eilean
Colaisde a' Chaisteil



COMHAIRLE NAN EILEAN SIAR



ceòlas

Partnerships – other Deals

Islands
Centre
for Net Zero



- pathways to funding, sectoral experts, mentors, insight into industry challenges
- new thinking, entrepreneurs and technology innovation
- access to space and key partner for entrepreneurial conference

CREATIVE ISLANDS
& WELLBEING

- promotion and pathways of creative island practitioners onto the start-up accelerator programme, the Creative Entrepreneurship and Freelance Academy
- access to networks, competitions and exhibitions

Key Stakeholders



COMHARAILLE NA H-EILEAN SIAR



Oilthigh na Gàidhealtachd
agus nan Eilean
Colaisde a' Chaisteil

