

Rathlin Island Action Plan 2016–2020



Department for
Infrastructure
An Roinn
Bonneagair

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Minister's Foreword



Chris Hazzard,
Minister of the Department for
Infrastructure

I am delighted to publish the Revised Rathlin Island Action Plan. Rathlin is a very unique and beautiful place. As the only off-shore inhabited island in the North of Ireland, Rathlin needs special consideration to ensure that it continues to grow and prosper.

I believe this Executive supported Action Plan has a key role to play in securing Rathlin's continued sustainable growth. The Revised Action Plan not only ensures that the island community will continue to have access to necessary services and infrastructure but also provides an opportunity for service providers to consider how they might adapt existing policies or deliver services differently to address the challenges of island life.

The Action Plan's outcomes based approach reflects the new approach we in the Executive are adopting in our Programme for Government. While the Action Plan sets the direction for the years ahead it also provides us with an opportunity to take stock and reflect on the success of the

Executive's Rathlin Island Policy. Much has been achieved but it is important that we acknowledge that this has been as a result of collaborative working between stakeholders and the active involvement of the community in decision making processes.

My Department will continue its oversight and co-ordinating role in respect of the Rathlin Island Policy and Revised Action Plan. We will continue to support the three-way working partnership adopted in previous Rathlin Action Plans. This will ensure that the policy aims and objectives are taken forward and that the Rathlin Community & Development Association are key stakeholders in implementing the plan.

A Message from the Chairman



Michael Cecil,
Chairman of the Rathlin
Development & Community
Association (RDCA)

I welcome the publication of the Revised Rathlin Island Action Plan which is the result of extensive stakeholder engagement and included three very lively consultation days with the island community.

The Rathlin Island Policy and Action Plan adds value to the island and enables the community to be involved in the development of policies and projects which influence everyday life on Rathlin. Much has been achieved since the publication of the last Action Plan and this is due in no small part to the positive working relationships which have been developed between the community and its stakeholders.

We look forward to being partners in the implementation of the Revised Action Plan. It is a valuable tool to help us continue to thrive from within, making the best of the opportunities that our unique and very special place has to offer.

Policy Background

Following a visit to Rathlin in 2006, Northern Ireland's then Regional Development Minister highlighted to his Ministerial colleagues in the Northern Ireland Executive the difficulties faced by the islanders in having their issues addressed across government in a co-ordinated manner. In recognition of these difficulties and Rathlin's position as Northern Ireland's only offshore inhabited island, the Executive agreed that a specific Rathlin Island Policy should be developed to support the community, to ensure the sustainability of island life and to promote a vibrant island community. The policy is now implemented and managed by the Department for Infrastructure with support from other Central Government Departments, Non-Government Organisations, the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council and the Rathlin Development & Community Association (RDCA).

Purpose

The purpose of the Rathlin Island Policy is to develop a vibrant healthy Rathlin community and increase the involvement of islanders in the development of policies and projects which improve conditions for all the people of the island while protecting its environment.

Policies developed for this purpose may differ from policies applying elsewhere, in recognition of the unique circumstances of Rathlin Island and the challenges of island life.

Strategic Aims

- ✓ To enhance community involvement;
- ✓ To improve the provision of public services for islanders;
- ✓ To advance policies for a sustainable island community; and
- ✓ To conserve the island's exceptional environmental heritage.

Revised Action Plan

This document represents the second formal review of the Rathlin Island Action Plan and is the result of three stakeholder consultation events, facilitated by Rural Community Network on the island during March and April 2016.

The thematic approach adopted in previous Action Plans has been continued in this Revised Plan with some amendments made to the broad themes and associated policy priorities to better reflect those views outlined during the consultation events. The themes outlined in the Action Plan (*Island Connections, Access to Services, Island Community, Island Economy and Environment*) continue to be interdependent and should be read in the round rather than considered in isolation.

The Executive previously adopted a three way working partnership in respect of the Action Plan, whereby Executive Departments, the islanders and any other interested parties work together to ensure the policy aims and objectives are taken forward. The success of the previous Action Plans is a direct result of the lead role taken by islanders in this implementation partnership. The Revised Action Plan will continue this collaborative approach.

The time period for implementation of the Revised Action Plan has been extended to 2020. This links the Plan to the community's own 2020 vision. A revised approach will be taken to monitoring and implementation of the Action Plan to ensure its continued relevance. The Revised Action Plan outlines a series of high level actions, anticipated outcomes and long term impacts. This outcomes based approach reflects that adopted in the draft Programme for Government Framework 2016-2021. Actions are underpinned by a working implementation document which outlines the specific activities that will be required to ensure the high level actions are achieved. Stakeholders will be asked to report on this implementation plan annually when actions will be added or amended as necessary to reflect progress or a change in circumstance.

The annual Ministerial Forum chaired, on the island, by the Minister for Infrastructure, will also continue as a means of ensuring progress in respect of policy and plan implementation. Rathlin Development & Community Association (RDCA) continue to be key stakeholders in the implementation of the Policy and Action Plan and are represented on the Ministerial Forum. Those actions identified in the Action Plan are listed subject to agreement with all stakeholders.

1

Island Connections

Overview

The key theme of Island Linkages has been updated in the Revised Action Plan and will now be referred to as Island Connections. This change reflects the need to make this development area about more than infrastructure provision and to promote the development of both “hard” and “soft” links not only internally on Rathlin itself but also externally to Ballycastle, across the North of Ireland and with other island communities and similar interest groups.

Achievements under previous Action Plan

During the period of the previous Action Plan much progress has been made by the islanders in respect of developing island connections. A joint Rathlin - Departmental study visit to the Scottish Islands during 2014 provided an opportunity to build relationships and learn from the experiences of other islands across a range of themes. The visit also built confidence and helped representatives recognise that many of the issues faced on Rathlin are similar to those faced by other island communities.



RDCA have also worked with the Commissioners of Irish Lights and the RSPB as part of the West Light visitor project. Further development of these relationships will bring new opportunities in respect of the Great Lighthouses of Ireland trail.

An investment of £2.8 million by DfI to build a new ferry to replace the existing *MV Canna* will bring significant benefit to the island. The new vessel will provide increased capacity and improve passenger comfort and safety by offering passenger and vehicle separation.

While some progress has been made in respect of broadband and road infrastructure on the island, these will remain challenges to be addressed during this Action Plan period.

Policy Priority

- ✓ To enhance connections on-island, between the island and the rest of Northern Ireland; with other communities, island communities and similar interest groups.



2014 Joint Rathlin – Departmental visit to the Scottish Islands

Key Issues

- Infrastructure provision on the island will remain a key issue for the Revised Action Plan.
- The life line service provided by the ferry, the necessity of an affordable and reliable link to Ballycastle and the need for the ferry to remain “resident” on Rathlin were recurring themes across the three consultation days. As a minimum, the existing service delivery model should be maintained to ensure the continued growth and development of the island.
- The sporadic nature of broadband provision on the island was also highlighted. Achieving a reliable island communications infrastructure offers major potential as a means of islanders obtaining better access to services and developing on-island businesses.
- Road maintenance and repair on Rathlin present different challenges to elsewhere in Northern Ireland.

Output - Policy Actions

Output Area	Policy Action	Outcome	Long Term Impact
Communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide island wide access to reliable, affordable high speed broadband and phone connections • Work with service providers to make best use of new technologies to enhance island connections 	<p>High speed broadband & phone connections will be available to islanders regardless of location on island</p> <p>Services which might not otherwise be available on-island can be accessed electronically</p>	The island will be better connected and have improved access to services
Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop links with and support sharing of best practice with other communities 	Islanders will be able to learn from experiences of other communities and share their own experience for reciprocal benefit	Rathlin will benefit from appropriate implementation of best practice and be recognised as a community development exemplar
Ferry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safeguard the provision of affordable and reliable transport and infrastructure links with Ballycastle 	A modern, reliable ferry link will be provided between Rathlin and Ballycastle	Isolation and remoteness of island life will be minimised
Infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain and improve road infrastructure on the island 	A safe and attractive on-island road network will exist for both islanders and visitors alike	The on-island road network will be improved and the need for ongoing maintenance reduced

Infrastructure provision on the island will remain a key issue for the Revised Action Plan



2 Access to Services

Overview

Rathlin's position as an island can often make the delivery of services that are taken for granted elsewhere, more challenging. Examples include healthcare, veterinary care, policing and activities such as emergency planning, wastewater and refuse treatment.

Providers need to seek innovative ways of delivering services to meet the needs of the island community. A one size fits all approach is not appropriate. Advances in technology present a unique opportunity to reconsider how services can be delivered innovatively, particularly in respect of health and veterinary care.



Finding appropriate ways to deliver essential services

Achievements under previous Action Plan

Rathlin has benefitted from a number of improvements to services during the period of the previous Action Plan.

The installation of a new island wastewater treatment system has had significant benefits in terms of providing increased capacity, producing cleaner wastewater and thereby minimising environmental impact.

An increase in services provided by the local health visiting and SureStart teams in respect of parenting; play skills and other related areas has offered island families local access to necessary support systems. Agreed contract changes in respect of domiciliary care provision have offered increased security of employment for locals and reliability of service for those requiring care.

Policy Priority

- ✓ To achieve fair and equitable access to key public services for all islanders.

Key Issues

- There was agreement across the three consultation days that new technologies should be used to assist service delivery on the island. Examples cited included the possibility of using video conferencing facilities to assist with on-island medical provision or to enable islanders to access learning and development opportunities off-island, for example, evening classes, Comhaltas groups, DAERA meetings/ seminars.
- Veterinary care is a challenge on Rathlin, particularly out of hours, with additional costs incurred for travel outside the regular scheduled ferry service.
- There remains a strong desire for islanders to be trained in service provision, particularly by utilities providers to enable a reduced response time in the event of service disruption and to minimise the need for expensive emergency call-outs.
- Notwithstanding the suggested alternative approach to electronic delivery of certain healthcare services, an integrated approach to healthcare on the island is likely to remain a major challenge, particularly in the context of an ageing population combined with an expanding younger population.

Output - Policy Actions

Output Area	Policy Action	Outcome	Long Term Impact
Key Services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with service providers to achieve local solutions to local problems 	Tailored services will be provided which meet the needs of the island community	Islanders will have access to services which are equivalent to those available elsewhere
Learning and Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the key knowledge and skills of the island community 	Islanders will be sufficiently skilled to avail of opportunities for career, business and personal development	Rathlin will be a lifelong learning community with the key skills, knowledge and attributes to ensure its sustainable growth and development
Water & Waste	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess and deliver necessary infrastructure to meet present and future demand 	Water and waste infrastructure will be in place which meets the needs of the current and future population	Rathlin will have a fit for purpose water and waste infrastructure





3 Island Community

Overview

Rathlin has a relatively small but vibrant population with a strong sense of community spirit. Although the community has grown in recent times with an increased number of births and new residents moving to the island, there remains an ageing population.

Rathlin has a deeply rooted culture and heritage which needs to be supported to enable it to thrive and grow. The support received from local government and the NI Executive has helped the community to become more proactive and confident. This support and the community's ability to access decision-makers will be an essential means of ensuring continued community growth and development.

Achievements under previous Action Plan

The Gort Beag housing scheme was a notable success during the period of the last Action Plan. The development provided new homes for existing Rathlin residents, offering greater security to young families wishing to remain on the island and also allowed Rathlin to welcome some new residents.

The ongoing “Floating Support” model delivered via the Northern Ireland Housing Executive Supporting People Programme in conjunction with the Northern Health Trust continues to be a successful scheme which has improved the quality of life of the older members of the Rathlin community, enabling them to retain independence and bringing associated benefit to their families.



A number of successful community planning days were held during the period of the last Action Plan. The support for these events and the output from these days is indicative of a community with a clear future vision and direction. This vision is also reflected in the growing confidence of the Rathlin Development & Community Association and its willingness to embrace opportunities emerging via social enterprise. The Association's growth has been further underpinned by a number of successful grant applications from a range of funding bodies.

The community-organised Rathlin Sound Maritime Festival has also grown and developed since publication of the previous Action Plan and is recognised as a signature event for Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council. The festival attracts a large number of visitors and its successful design and delivery is a direct result of the community's initiative and their growing involvement in and support for the festival. The festival not only provides a best practice model but also demonstrates the RDCA's ability to organise and promote an extended programme of events in partnership with other local stakeholders.



Rathlin Sound Maritime Festival
Visual Minutes

Policy Priority

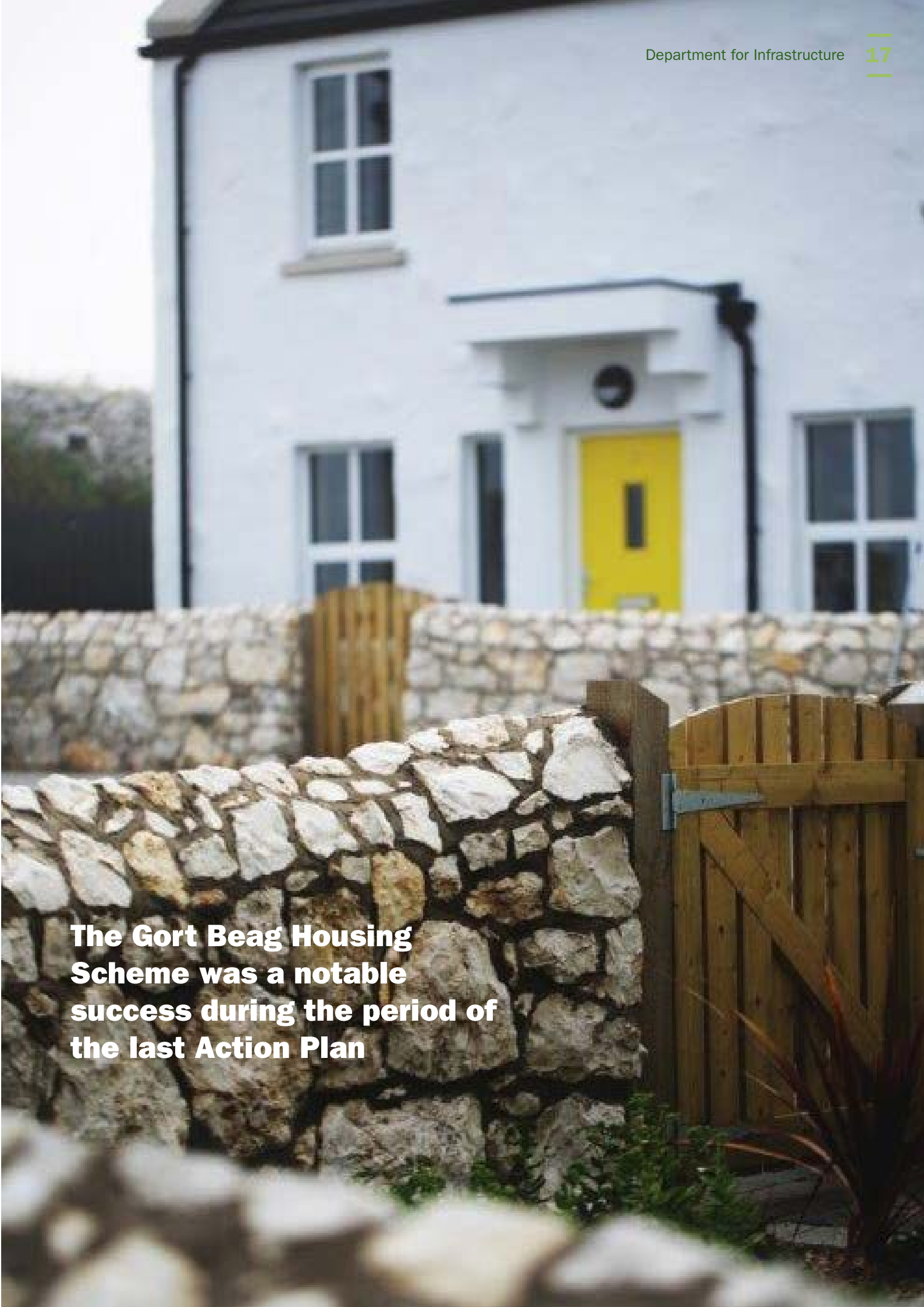
- ✓ To support positive health and well being for islanders.
- ✓ To minimise, where it exists, disadvantage, poverty, social exclusion and inequality amongst those living on the island, particularly amongst the most vulnerable groups.
- ✓ To preserve the cultural and social uniqueness of island life.
- ✓ To develop community capacity to engage in rural governance structures.

Key Issues

- Despite achieving almost full employment, the island has a low wage economy. Employment can often be seasonal, part-time or intermittent with many islanders taking on more than one job. For those islanders wishing to take up employment opportunities off-island, reliable transport links between Rathlin, Ballycastle and beyond will be essential.
- The island has an ageing population which presents difficulties in terms of “caring” services, particularly if this section of the population are to remain on Rathlin and be cared for in their own environment.
- There is a need to preserve and record the cultural traditions, the oral history and the long term memory of the island, many of which are currently retained by the older island residents.
- At the other end of the spectrum, the island has experienced a recent population growth with a number of new families moving to Rathlin and a recent increase in number of births. While this population growth is welcomed, an insufficient supply and availability of suitable housing will limit further growth in this area.
- The continuation of funding for a development officer post beyond the already committed period (to March 2018) will be key in ensuring that the community continue to progress, will increase the long term security of the Community Association and ensure the local implementation of the Rathlin Island Policy and Revised Action Plan.

Output - Policy Actions

Output Area	Policy Action	Outcome	Long Term Impact
Cultural Identity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustain, develop and promote the island’s culture, traditions and heritage 	Rathlin’s culture and heritage will be developed and sustained for future generations	The cultural and social uniqueness of island life will be preserved
Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and sustain the capacity of the RDCA • Maintain strong links with local and central government and NGOs 	The community will be more confident and better able to engage more widely in governance structures	The views and needs of Rathlin will be represented across local and central government
Health & Wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve the health and wellbeing of the island population 	The community will be more resilient and less reliant on government support and funding	Rathlin will be self-sufficient and self-sustaining

A photograph of a modern, two-story white house with a bright yellow door and a stone wall in the foreground. The house has a white facade, a yellow door, and several windows. A stone wall and a wooden gate are in the foreground, partially obscuring the view of the house. The text is overlaid on the bottom left of the image.

The Gort Beag Housing Scheme was a notable success during the period of the last Action Plan

4 Island Economy

Overview

Development of the island economy will only take place when sufficient recognition is given to the unique challenges of operating on an island. Establishing and sustaining businesses on Rathlin can often be difficult due to seasonality and the additional costs associated with transportation. Islanders should be encouraged to avail of the range of support available to promote business start-up and maximise employment opportunities.

The development and promotion of Rathlin tourism and environmental products has been and will continue to be the key to the growth of the island economy. The island's creative industries and its natural capital are prime tourist draws. Increased involvement in and development of social enterprise will also impact positively on the island economy.



The Manor House Guesthouse
& Restaurant

Achievements under previous Action Plan

An award of £734,642 to the RDCA from the Coastal Communities Fund, combined with £250,000 from Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), to support the Manor House project was a significant achievement during the period of the last Action Plan and demonstrates RDCA's commitment to social enterprise. The refurbished Manor House guesthouse and restaurant will be a key asset for the island; will have spin-off effects for other island businesses and will provide opportunities to extend the tourist season thereby supporting the further growth of the island economy.

The refurbished West Light visitor centre provides an additional tourist attraction on the island. The relationships developed with the RSPB, Commissioners of Irish Lights and the associated links with the Great Lighthouses of Ireland trail are positive developments which will assist tourism and economic growth, provide direct links to other similar attractions and offer access to a wider programme of marketing and promotion.

Rathlin's Co-op shop has also developed since publication of the previous Action Plan. Collaborative working between the Rathlin Co-op, RDCA, the National Trust and ASDA has resulted in the development of a social enterprise model and a facility which attracts a customer base from both on and off the island.

Policy Priority

- ✓ To provide island businesses with appropriate support to ensure the development of the island economy.
- ✓ To maximise employment opportunities for islanders.
- ✓ To develop and promote Rathlin tourism and environmental products.
- ✓ To broaden and deepen the scope of the Rathlin island economy.



West Light visitor centre, one of the Great Lighthouses of Ireland

Key Issues

- While Rathlin's relative isolation presents economic challenges, it can also be an economic driver and something which is used to promote economic growth from a tourism and environmental perspective. Enhanced broadband connectivity will be key to supporting growth in this context.
- While progress has been made in respect of tourism development on the island the need to extend the length of Rathlin's tourist season remains. Opportunities around experiential and corporate tourism need to be explored and the island promoted on that basis. Similarly, the island's potential as a location for environmental and educational visits should be further developed.
- Social enterprise and cottage industries are acknowledged as potential areas of growth. Experience gained via the Manor House project and the associated Community Interest Company provide a basis for future development in these areas.

- The Rathlin wind turbine project is recognised as a key economic generator for the island. Despite the receipt of planning permission for the project, significant challenges remain in respect of implementing this permission and recognising the full socio-economic benefits of the project.
- The facilities available in the marina for visiting vessels also need to be considered. By enhancing berthing facilities and associated services, the island economy is likely to benefit from an increase in visitors.

Outputs – Policy Actions

Output Area	Policy Action	Outcome	Long term Impact
Economic Growth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustain and grow island employment and associated incomes • Encourage on-island development of social enterprise and entrepreneurship • Maximise the economic return from Rathlin's environmental designations • Increase the economic opportunities arising from island agriculture and aquaculture 	Rathlin will experience economic growth and increased availability of employment opportunities	Rathlin will be self sufficient and have a thriving economy
Tourism Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop and promote the Rathlin tourism product 	Rathlin will provide an increased tourism offer and will have increased benefit from tourism The community will be more involved in island tourism	Rathlin will be an attractive year round destination for visitors

The development and promotion of the Rathlin tourism and environmental products has been and will continue to be the key to the growth of the island economy.



5 Environment

Overview

This key theme has been revised to encompass Rathlin's range of environmental assets including its natural and built heritage.

Rathlin is unique in terms of its wildlife and landscape; its natural, built and marine environments all need conservation and stewardship. The environment is of immense value to the people who live and work there and also to those who visit the island for recreation. Opportunities exist to develop Rathlin's environmental attributes in a sustainable manner and as an economic driver for the community.

Rathlin's range of environmental designations and its relative remoteness are also unique selling points. Environmental preservation must be balanced against the needs of a living, working community. Ongoing support and collaboration will be essential elements in building on the islanders' commitment to their role as environmental custodians.



A young Rathlin Grey Seal
with its mother

Achievements under previous Action Plan

Publication of a Local Biodiversity Action Plan (LBAP) is a significant achievement for the RDCA. Support received via the NI Environment Link Challenge Fund has enabled the island to positively focus on environmental issues in conjunction with other interested stakeholders. The preparation of seal signage; townland, species and habitat identification; the promotion of walking routes and enhanced awareness of Rathlin's biodiversity amongst visitors and locals are all direct outcomes of the LBAP process.

RDCA's ability to achieve planning permission for their wind turbine project is a noteworthy achievement. Close and proactive working relationships between Government Departments, the local Council and islanders was key to achieving a successful planning outcome and is a reflection of how the collective influence of the Rathlin Island Policy and Action Plan can impact on decision making processes, bringing long term benefit to the community.

The implementation of the Rathlin Island European Marine Site Management Scheme is also a positive development assisting collaboration to ensure that the marine nature conservation interest, an intrinsic part of the island's heritage, is sustained for future generations and managed in harmony with the socio-economic interests of the area.

Policy Priority

- ✓ To safeguard the island's exceptional environmental beauty and heritage and increase opportunities for all to enjoy the benefits of the island.
- ✓ To support the island's agricultural and aquaculture sectors to develop and maintain sustainable practices.
- ✓ To work collaboratively to enhance Rathlin's unique environment by maintaining its environmental designations.



An example of Rathlin's built heritage

Key Issues

- Rathlin is covered by a wide range of environmental designations, reflecting its unique heritage and natural beauty. These designations are often viewed as a hindrance rather than as a benefit. Opportunities exist to promote the advantages associated with these key designations and to use the island as a showcase or best practice exemplar.
- Opportunities also exist around developing Ecosystem Services as a means of accessing alternative funding sources, promoting Rathlin as a "green" destination and offering market development across the education and research communities.

- Opportunities exist to develop Rathlin as a carbon neutral island with the island's potential in respect of renewable energy development remaining largely untapped. Progress in this regard will require careful management to ensure that development does not occur at the expense of the island's environmental attributes. The implementation of the wind turbine project will be an important first step in recognising this potential and creating an economic generator for the community.



Rathlin has Northern Ireland's largest seabird colony

Outputs – Policy Actions

Output Area	Policy Action	Outcome	Long Term Impact
Agriculture & Aquaculture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support the island's agriculture and fisheries industry 	Rathlin's agriculture and aquaculture industries will have the opportunity to apply for financial support to ensure their continued sustainability and economic viability.	Rathlin's agriculture and aquaculture industries will be sustainable and viable
Aesthetics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve the aesthetic appeal of the island and increase its amenity and economic value to the community and visitors 	The local environment will be improved and islanders and tourists will have increased pride in their surroundings	Rathlin will be an attractive place for islanders and tourists
Energy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the island's energy efficiency by supporting renewable energy development 	Rathlin will be more energy efficient and less reliant on fossil fuels	Rathlin will be a carbon neutral island generating energy from renewable sources
Natural	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote Rathlin as an exemplar destination for environmental research and best practice 	The benefits provided by Rathlin's natural environment will be recognised and sustained	Rathlin's natural resources will be conserved and used sustainably to achieve long term prosperity

The environment is of immense value to the people who live and work (on Rathlin) and also to those who visit the island for recreation



Assessments

The Rathlin Island Policy was screened in respect of its potential equality and environmental impacts with no significant likely impacts identified. There has been no change to the original Policy as a result of the Revised Action Plan and as such no further screening has been undertaken as part of this Action Plan review. The equality and environmental impact of individual policies or projects arising out of the Revised Action Plan will continue to be subject to screening and, where appropriate and in line with the statutory duty, full impact assessments will be carried out by the relevant implementation body.

The Revised Rathlin Island Action Plan reflects and supports the Rural Vision outlined in the Rural White Paper Action Plan. The Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016, once commenced will place a duty on public authorities, including government departments, to have due regard to rural needs when developing, adopting, implementing or revising policies, strategies and plans and designing and delivering public services. The Act will add value to the Revised Rathlin Action Plan and the range of actions outlined therein.





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