

## Climate Action in Scottish Rural and Island Communities

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At the [Scottish Rural and Island Parliament 2023 Climate Session](#), around 80 participants watched a short [film](#) about the myriad of social enterprises across the Highlands and Islands working on climate initiatives. They were invited to take part in a [Climate Café®](#) to their ideas and action in their own communities to tackle the climate crisis. Several cross-cutting themes emerged from the conversations and are captured in this policy spotlight.

### Key Takeaways

- Community climate initiatives range from local energy or food production to active travel; and they support wealth building and wellbeing.
- Most of the discussions centered around elements which would support community climate initiatives. Themes discussed around this topic included: flexible funding, creating and enhancing community spaces, top-down support for bottom-up initiatives, knowledge exchange, skills enhancement, and scaling up local climate action to ensure transformational change.
- Rural and Island communities have high levels of self-sufficiency, which is one form of 'resilience' within these communities.
- At the local level, women are often at the forefront of innovation and climate action. It is important to consider 'what keeps projects going?'



Snapshot from the film presented at the Climate Café Session at the Scottish Rural and Islands Parliament 2023 © SRUC

## Examples of Community Climate Initiatives

Following the film, participants engaged in Climate Café® Chats about observed themes and their relevance to local climate initiatives. They identified opportunities for community renewable energy production, citing examples from the film and their own areas. Some suggested repurposing community centers into energy hubs for electric vehicle charging, inspired by the AMAZE project on the Isle of Mull. Participants acknowledged the role of local grid networks and energy pricing in incentivizing local generation but highlighted challenges such as regulatory issues and limited access to land hindering community-owned energy projects. They emphasized the need for radical land reform and island-specific skills to support such initiatives.

Others drew inspiration from the film's local food production examples, proposing community growing initiatives linked with social enterprises. These initiatives aimed to promote learning, skills enhancement, healthy eating habits, and overall well-being. Participants envisioned collaborations between willing learners and older individuals in need of garden maintenance as a training opportunity. Additionally, they explored the idea of local chefs designing menus featuring seasonal, locally sourced produce. Ideas for enhancing active travel were also discussed including creating a cycling group for kids and parents.

## Elements which would support climate initiatives

Participants noted that money matters and it is important for volunteers to have the resources they need to do their work. More flexible funding periods are needed to ensure project sustainability. These funds should go towards hiring more staff and providing basic training. Power imbalances occur when projects rely on funding rather than stemming from genuine community needs. Participants noted that it would be better if the funding could support community led projects rather than forcing projects to meet certain criteria.

The importance of non-digital community gathering spaces was discussed. It is difficult to measure what is happening in a community if there are no spaces to congregate. Naturally, the topic of housing arose: "We need more housing but also community spaces...not just rows of houses without community gathering spaces and infrastructure like hospitals."...."It is not just where do they live, but how do they live."

The need for knowledge exchange was also discussed as the film reminded folks that there are plenty of great climate initiatives happening, but we do not always hear about the success stories. They noted that we need to share more knowledge about innovations and scaling up. While academics have a role to play in exploring

the problems present, there needs to be more emphasis on sharing solutions to encourage action. The idea of skills enhancement through skills sharing workshops was also discussed.

Some groups discussed the need for top-down support for bottom-up initiatives from local councils and Scottish Government. There are currently small groups of people supporting entire communities, often through unpaid and unofficial means. Lack of support from local councils for climate initiatives can discourage action and incentives from Scottish Government are needed - Denmark was cited as a good example of this. Even if some initiatives seem economically infeasible (such as recycling) they are still important. Rural and Island communities know what is needed and simply need support: "We know what the problems are; we know what the solutions are. Either listen or go away."

Finally, it was noted that it is important to scale up local climate action to ensure transformational change. Lots of small actions make an impact, but systems change is essential. Better collaboration, for example, between community led initiatives, local government and other funders is critical to enable communities replicate effective approaches. At strategic level it is also necessary to progress land reform, the governance review and the transition to a wellbeing economy.



Jess Pepper and Joan Lawrie kick-off the Climate Session at the Scottish Rural and Islands Parliament 2023 © SRUC

## Other themes

The theme of framing in climate communications also arose in discussions. Some participants noted that people are becoming desensitized by constant exposure to negativity. It is important to make language accessible and shift the phrasing of climate issues to a more optimistic format.

One participant noted in reference to the film: "There were no sad polar bears. I really liked that." The discussions highlighted the crucial role of 'concept framing' in climate communications. Recognizing that constant exposure to negative narratives can lead to desensitization, participants emphasized the importance of crafting messages in an accessible and optimistic manner.

The film underscored the leadership of women in climate action, showcasing social enterprises led by rural and island women. When the authors discussed this theme, Alexa noted that: "It makes sense that women are the ones to end up taking the brunt of the responsibility for climate action because this is something which is so engrained in the caring roles women have historically taken. When something needs to get done and no one is getting up to do it, it is typically the women in the room who get to work on it and that is what we're seeing here".

The discussions highlighted the crucial role of 'concept framing' in climate communications, recognizing not only the importance of crafting messages in an accessible and optimistic manner, but also in a way that is relevant to where people live, and to the diverse challenges and opportunities they live with. The success of the women-led social enterprises showcased in the film is down to how they frame and deliver their projects – tailored to local contexts, rooted

*One participant noted in reference to the film: "There were no sad polar bears. I really liked that. People are becoming desensitized to this topic."*



*'Inverness kidical mass ride' Film Stills from the Climate Session at the Scottish Rural and Islands Parliament 2023 © SRUC*

in community action and motivating people to change and adapt their behaviour.

The film underscored the leadership of women in climate action, showcasing social enterprises led by rural and island women. As we navigate the challenges of the climate crisis, it is evident that a shift in perspective is essential.

Moreover, the engagement and leadership of children and young adults who grasp the significance of environmental and community preservation amid the crisis adds a hopeful dimension to the narrative, promising a future generation committed to fostering positive change.



*'Thurso socially growing' Film Stills from the Climate Session at the Scottish Rural and Islands Parliament 2023 © SRUC*



*'Northmavine's PoliCrub in construction' Film Stills from the Climate Session at the Scottish Rural and Islands Parliament 2023 © SRUC*

## Recommendations for the Climate Change Plan:

- Communities need more common spaces to chat and act on climate that could support, profile and measure the impacts of locally led initiatives. Town halls on wheels could be an alternative option for those communities that cannot create space.
- When framing climate change and the need for climate action, it is important to ensure the language is accessible and the messages are framed in a proactive, optimistic and place-based way.
- When creating policies and initiatives to fund local climate actions, it is crucial to engage and support with communities on what matters most to people and how to make climate friendly choices natural and easier to adopt everyday.
- Instead of focusing policies on addressing individual shifts in behaviour (e.g., encouraging electric cars use), they should be informed by and focus on addressing and supporting community needs first (e.g., improved public transport access and infrastructure)
- Policies should support the reduction of overconsumption in every segment of life considering that island communities already have difficulties dealing with waste and due to their location often have lower turnover of technology or appliances.



Film Stills from the Climate Session at the Scottish Rural and Islands Parliament 2023 © SRUC (left to right):

- 1) 'Raasay Community Hydropower'
- 2) 'Collecting Food for Kirkwall's Community Fridge'
- 3) 'Northmavine Policrubb chat'
- 4) 'Golspie coastal defence'
- 5) 'Letters to the Earth at Rogart Mart'



'Girls on Boards Formation' Film Stills from the Climate Session at the Scottish Rural and Islands Parliament 2023 © SRUC