

Scotland Office Minister inspired by island innovation ahead of Levelling Up Islands Forum

Levelling up was top of the agenda as UK Government Minister for Scotland Iain Stewart visited innovative island businesses and community projects on a five-day visit to Skye, Lewis and Harris, ahead of the inaugural Islands Forum later this year.

Starting his visit in Skye, Minister Stewart met with the Staffin Community Trust and local fishermen to discuss plans to redevelop Staffin Harbour and consider ways the UK Government could support the project. He then headed to Skye's largest town, Portree, to host a roundtable discussion with representatives from local community groups, where he invited views on how levelling up could enhance the area.

The Minister then made his way to Harris where he paid a visit to the Harris Distillery. He enjoyed hearing about how the island-based enterprise has grown through training and employing young people from the local area, meaning they don't have to leave the island for work.

In Lewis, Minister Stewart's busy itinerary included meeting Comhairle nan Eilean Siar – Western Isles Council – to talk about how levelling up could benefit the local community. He visited the headquarters of Gaelic Media Service MG Alba to learn about how they are creating premium Gaelic language content, and also paid a visit to Charles Macleod butchers, makers of the world-renowned Stornoway Black Pudding, to discuss their success in exporting from the island.

He also met with Lewis-based Horshader Community Trust, a charity taking forward green initiatives including decarbonising transport and nurturing trees to create woodland. The trust has received more than £70,000 from the Community Renewal Fund to help local residents gain new skills, support the development of two green projects, and work with business partners to strengthen the island's renewable energy sector.

Minister Iain Stewart said:

It was a pleasure to visit Skye, Lewis and Harris. From discussing plans to regenerate Staffin Harbour, to seeing how the Horshader Community Trust is making Lewis more sustainable, to hearing how the Harris Distillery is supporting jobs for young people, it's clear these islands have talent, innovation and resourcefulness in droves.

It's also clear that the Islands Growth Deal and investment through the UK Government's Levelling Up Funds are making a real difference in these places, for the benefit of people who live here.

However, while our island communities have unique strengths, they also face unique challenges. Infrastructure, transport and depopulation are issues that islands often have to contend with, and must be addressed for our rural areas to truly thrive.

The Islands Forum was set up to discuss these problems. It will give a platform for those who understand remote communities and their needs best, putting islands at the heart of our Levelling Up agenda which has so far resulted in more than £2 billion being invested directly in Scottish projects.

The UK Government's first [Islands Forum](#) will take place in Orkney later this year. The forum will put islands at the heart of the Levelling Up agenda, with island communities across the UK invited to discuss common challenges including connectivity, infrastructure and demographic trends.