

UK Government Minister makes Islands Deal visit

UK Government Minister for Scotland David Duguid this week (Wed 18 Aug) visited the Outer Hebrides to look at tourism proposals for historical St Kilda as part of the Islands Growth Deal.

He met with Iain Buchanan, Chairman and Director of Ionad Hiort, the St Kilda Centre. Through the Outer Hebrides Destination Development programme, the organisation is involved in Slighe Hiort – the St Kilda trail.

Comprising three state-of-the-art visitor centres – one at Uig on Lewis, one on the South of Harris, and another on North Uist – the proposed trail would increase tourism and bring associated revenue and employment prospects to the area.

Minister Duguid said:

After hearing about the St Kilda project last year, visiting the area today has given me a real sense of its potential. Its ambitions encapsulate so much of what the Islands Deal will achieve – to boost the local economy, create employment opportunities and, in the case of this project, put an area of such outstanding Scottish beauty and heritage firmly on the domestic and international tourist map.

Across Scotland we have committed more than £1.5 billion to Growth Deals. The Islands Deal is truly transformational and will bring investment, innovation and jobs to communities across the islands. The UK Government's £50 million investment will help unlock a more prosperous and sustainable future as we build back better and greener from the pandemic.

The St Kilda project, which like all proposals under consideration is subject to full business case approval, aims to put the islands at the forefront of the transition to Net Zero and support thriving, sustainable communities.

Minister Duguid visits the Callanish Standing Stones as part of his visit to the Outer Hebrides

The Heads of Terms agreement for the Islands Deal was signed in March confirming that both the UK and Scottish Governments will each invest £50 million in the future economic prosperity of Orkney, Shetland and the Outer Hebrides. This is anticipated to unlock a further £235 million of investment from project partners, delivering a combined £335 million boost for the

islands.

The 10-year programme of investment has the ambitious target of creating up to 1,300 jobs and tackling the depopulation concerns facing many parts of the islands.

The cluster of volcanic islands is one of only two dozen sites around the world that is a double UNESCO World Heritage site, putting it in the same category as sites such as Machu Picchu in Peru and Mount Athos in Greece.

Uninhabited since 1930, there's evidence of human inhabitants dating back more than 2000 years on St Kilda. It's home to nearly a million seabirds, including the UK's largest colony of Atlantic puffins.

Ionad Hiort Director Iain Buchanan said:

Ionad Hiort the St Kilda Centre will help sustain one of the UK's most peripheral areas with economic benefits spread throughout the Western Isles and Scotland as a whole. We are grateful for Minister Duguid's interest.

Like many UNESCO World Heritage sites, St Kilda represents a precious environment and history of human resilience. This project will allow far more people to access its story through state of the art technology in a setting that shares many of the same characteristics.

Ionad Hiort is deeply appreciative of all the invaluable help and financial support we've received from Highlands & Islands Enterprise, Bòrd na Gàidhlig and Comhairle Nan Eilean Siar over the lifespan of this project to date.

Leader of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Western Isles Council, Roddie Mackay, said

St Kilda's position as the UK's only dual world heritage site makes it a globally important tourism asset for the Outer Hebrides. I'm delighted that this is recognised as it's considered for the allocation of Islands Growth Deal funding for the Slighe Hiort proposals, and was very pleased to welcome the Minister to our islands.

The three community-led projects that make up the Slighe Hiort trail will bring to life different aspects of the rich and unique cultural and natural heritage of St Kilda, and enable us to tell the islands' story to a wider audience. This investment will grow our tourism economy, provide rich and varied experiences for our visitors, and distribute economic benefits from tourism across our island communities.

Partners are working towards the development of full business cases for approval by both governments, with the anticipation of funding being approved and released from 2022/23 onwards.

Background

The St Kilda Project is one of 18 proposals being considered for joint funding by the UK and Scottish Governments as part of the Islands Deal programme. Some of the other plans which could receive UK Government investment include:

- The Shell-volution – a new and innovative means of enabling expansion in the low carbon and sustainable mussel farming sector in Shetland, and more widely in Scotland.
- The Orkney Community Vertical Farm – focused on agricultural innovation and creating an islands’ vertical farm.
- Islands Centre for Net Zero – supporting the energy transition for all three island groups and creating sustainable “green” jobs within the islands for 300 people.
- The Outer Hebrides Energy Hub – establishing the initial infrastructure necessary to support the production of Green Hydrogen from renewable energy (Onshore and Offshore Wind).

The full Heads of Terms agreement signed in March further details on the proposed projects and aims of the deal.