



Scottish Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [The demography of Scotland and the implications for devolution](#), HC 82

Monday 4 July 2016

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Members present: Pete Wishart (Chair); Margaret Ferrier; Chris Law

Questions 200 - 273

Witness: **Professor Jim Hunter**, former Director for the University of the Highlands and Islands Centre for History, gave evidence.

Q200 Chair: First of all, could I welcome you all to the Scottish Affairs Committee's inquiry into population and demography in Scotland? There are a couple of bits of housekeeping before we get under way. I think this is probably the first time that a Westminster Select Committee has been to the Isle of Skye. It is certainly the first time we have been to Sleat in southern Skye, so we are absolutely delighted to be here.

It is my obligation and responsibility to tell you that these are formal proceedings of the House of Commons so unfortunately there will be no contributions from sedentary positions, as we say in the House of Commons. It is a very formal exercise in acquiring evidence. We are down to a bare minimum of the Committee. I think you all probably understand that Westminster is in quite an excitable state just now. Our Government colleagues on the Committee unfortunately cannot be with us because it is the first round of voting in the Conservative leadership contest, and our colleagues in the Labour Party are a little bit detained themselves. We have a quorum of the Committee here today and we are absolutely delighted that we are able to continue with this session. We are delighted that Sabhal Mòr Ostaig is generously hosting this Committee here and we are looking forward to hearing the evidence today.

That brings us to our first witness, who is Professor Jim Hunter. For the record, Professor Jim Hunter, could you tell us who you are, who you represent, and if you have anything in the way of an opening statement?

Professor Hunter: I don't really represent any organisation. I am speaking in a purely personal capacity. I am Emeritus Professor of History at the University of the Highlands and Islands—Emeritus Professor is just a fancy way of saying I have retired—but I have

also had a long involvement in the Highlands and Islands, not least here in Skye, in regard to community development, land reform and many other matters.

Q201 Chair: Professor Hunter, we are very grateful for your written evidence, which is very extensive and substantial. In your written evidence you talk about the centuries of emigration from the Highlands and Islands and how this was addressed in the 1960s. Could you tell us a little bit about some of the cultural and historic background to the story of emigration from the Highlands and Islands and how that fits into the general picture of Scotland in the context?

Professor Hunter: Not just here in Skye—although Skye was very much at the centre of it—but across the Highlands and Islands as a whole this was an area characterised for a very long time by runaway population loss. The Highlands and Islands had a much higher proportion of the overall Scottish population if you go back to the 18th century and presumably beyond that, although details are scanty once you go further back. That began to change in the 19th century, particularly with the Highland Clearances and related events, and, as a result of the famine of the 1840s, population outflow became so extensive that it began to run away altogether. For well over 100 years, taking the region as a whole, this was an area where the population was constantly falling.

It is perhaps worth emphasising—and I have tried to indicate that in the paper I sent you—that Skye is a place that was particularly badly scarred by many of these developments. This was probably the area of the whole Highlands and Islands that was worst affected by the famine. That was in the 1840s. In one respect it seems a long time ago. It is only two human lifetimes ago and yet there were scenes here then of the sort that nowadays we would see, and still see occasionally, sadly, on our television screens happening in the most disadvantaged and fragile parts of Africa. That was common here in the 1840s, starvation and all the rest, and the mass emigrations that followed came out of that.

Q202 Chair: The Committee found it fascinating in your written evidence where you went through a series of episodes, starting in 1760 with the landlord clearances and the famine of the 1840s, but beyond that there seemed to be other episodes where there was mass emigrations from the Highlands and Islands area; post-war there were issues. Could you give us your view about why it seems to have been a centuries-long series of emigrations from the Highlands? Is there anything beyond that, other than the initial clearances and the famine? What happened after that?

Professor Hunter: I think once a locality gets into that cycle it becomes very difficult to break. I grew up not in this part of the area but in the north part of Argyll. I was born in 1948 and so I grew up as a wee boy in the 1950s and went to secondary school in the 1960s. That was a time when people were still leaving. It was not something we even thought about very much. It was just the way things were, like the weather. It might have been nicer if it was different but that was just the way it was. There was a universal notion that if you were going to get on in the world you had to get out, that there was nothing here for anybody very much. Worse than that, there was a very strong notion that any younger person who was still around the place when they were into their 20s was almost by definition a failure, that success was something that only happened somewhere else. That was a very difficult thing to break.

It is one of my contentions in this paper that, in terms of Government policy, the key to breaking it was the increasing recognition that goes back to the 1880s in the first instance,

in the first Crofters Act of 1886, that there should be security of tenure and no more mass evictions and so on. That was the beginning of a recognition that the Highlands and Islands was a particularly difficult area, a unique area in mainland British terms, and that some particular institutional initiatives had to be taken here to break out of that cycle. Even with the beginnings of that, even with security of tenure, the end of clearance and evictions and all the rest, and with the beginnings of housing improvement and much else, you were still seeing people leaving. This area here in Sleat was the most depopulated, depressed and deprived part of an island that was in much the same state but here it was particularly acute.

In the 1950s people studying this locality, and Skye more generally, were of the opinion that this was just going to continue indefinitely. If it had continued at the rate that it was going up until the 1950s here in Skye, if you extrapolate the downward trend—because there were 24,000 people in Skye in the 1840s and by the beginning of the 1960s there were not many more than 6,000 or 7,000—there would be nobody left at all now. You get a sense of how difficult it was to break. Also, I think it is important to emphasise the huge effort that Government put in to try to turn it around.

Q203 Chair: We want to ask you specifically about this but staying on some of the historical stuff just now, as a Committee, we want to try to understand what is different about Scotland's population, why we lag behind the rest of the United Kingdom and the European Union averages in securing a higher population. We have what is called a dependency ratio where we have a shrinking working age population vis-à-vis an ageing population. I am trying to get to the culture of why Scotland's issues are different from the United Kingdom's. Do you think that the experience of the Highlands, through emigration and through these seismic episodes of famine and clearances, have had an impact upon how we view immigration and emigration that maybe makes us different to the rest of the United Kingdom?

Professor Hunter: In a Highland context, it became something that was constantly ongoing. I am old enough to remember that; several of my cousins left for places like Canada and Australia when I was a kid and that just seemed to be the way things were. I feel very strongly that it is the successful turning around of this that accounts for the success story that is the Highlands more recently, or much of the Highlands. What began to take hold here was what I have called in my paper—and it is a term borrowed from anti-colonial theorists like Edward Said—a process of inferiorisation. That is when people begin to buy into the notion that their area has no future. Worse than that, they begin to buy into that notion because people here were told by folk in authority, over several generations, that everything about them, starting with their language, their culture and things as basic as that, were inferior, second rate and of no account. Once you begin to buy into that, once you begin to think, “There is no future here. All of this has to be put to one side if we are going to get on, and we are only going to get on if we leave”, then there is no self-confidence and no self-esteem, and these are the key to enterprise and initiative of any kind.

It wasn't that there was some sort of genetic weakness about people from a Highland background; rather the opposite. They were often very successful commercially and in other ways once they had gone to Canada or the United States or wherever, but there was a very pervasive conviction within the locality itself—encouraged by the way that it was viewed from outside—that there was no future for people here. That has been very hard to break. I would not argue that it is completely broken even yet, but I would argue that there

has been a huge sea change and this development here is perhaps the most emblematic and most obvious result of that. There has been a huge sea change in the last 30, 40 years but it has not been an easy process.

The experience here is different to that of lowland Scotland or of the central belt, because for much of the 19th century in some respects that area was very prosperous and certainly its population was growing. Many of the people who left this area, who did not go overseas, settled in places like Glasgow and west central Scotland and worked in industry there. In the inter-war years that all began to fall apart and people began to leave in large numbers. As others have observed—and it is not my area of expertise—there is something very peculiar about Scotland in this regard. On the face of it, in the 19th century and into the early 20th century, Scotland was one of the most successful economies in the world in terms of industrial development but, even throughout that period, it was still characterised by out migration. That is very unusual. Most localities in the world that are at the forefront of development at any particular phase are the other way round. They are places that people are flocking into. Of course there was a degree of that in lowland Scotland, particularly people moving in from Ireland, but even throughout that period a lot of our own folk were still leaving. That sense of Scotland being a place that people left became very deeply rooted, as it also did in Ireland of course.

Q204 Chair: Maybe now we can address some of the things that have been done to try to tackle these issues. In your paper you highlight a number of interventions that happened when this was recognised as a problem. First of all, could you talk about when this historic emigration emerged as a problem? I know you mentioned the Crofters Act as one of the first pieces of intervention where the Government tried to address this. There are others that you mention in your paper and we get up to the 1960s where the Highlands and Islands Development Board is one that you identify. Could you talk about why there was a sense of a need to address this issue of emigration and Government policy interventions and how successful they have been in trying to address that?

Professor Hunter: The problems of the Highlands were thrust upon the attention of Government and the wider British world by people within the area itself often taking direct action, not least here in Skye that in the 1880s was a centre of riot, revolution and rebellion of various kinds. That is what thrust the problem of the Highlands to the forefront, which resulted in the Crofters Act and the beginnings of a whole series of inquiries and initiatives to try to do something about it. It became obvious as the 20th century went on that, despite all these initiatives, the problem had not been solved because population was still falling. That was particularly severe and very marked in the 1950s. This was the time when Harold Macmillan—the then Tory Prime Minister—was telling people in Britain that they had never had it so good. Yet here in the Highlands, as people were constantly remarking, this was one of the most depressed localities in the British Isles. It was still characterised by heavy population loss and out migration to a quite remarkable extent. In the space of 20 years the population in some parts of the Highlands fell by a quarter or more. That was the most visible evidence of this.

It is important to stress that, although all these efforts were made, you can argue, “Well, the population was still falling so they didn’t work”. On the other hand, if these things had not been done the situation would have been even worse if there had been no security of tenure. In particular, I highlight the achievements of the Hydro Board there. Today in

Scotland, and not least here in the Islands, it seems virtually impossible to get super fast broadband into localities like this—

Q205 Chair: I noticed your comment about it was possible to get everybody connected to the National Grid but not to broadband yet.

Professor Hunter: Yes. The Hydro Board was a state agency. State agencies nowadays are regarded with some suspicion, but here was a state agency that managed to connect virtually every home—not every home but 99.9% or more of homes—in the Highlands and Islands to the National Grid with very heavily subsidised connection rates. If that had not happened, if there was no provision of electricity, then I think the demographic situation would have got completely out of hand. But even with that people were still leaving, and then you got the effort that is recognised by the Highlands and Islands Development Board. I quote a bit of his speech in the paper I have written but it is remarkable now to read Willie Ross, who was Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, speaking to the House of Commons in 1965—just after Harold Wilson’s Labour Government had been established—about what the Government were proposing to do for the Highlands. By present standards, it was utterly remarkable, visionary and farsighted and it was going to tackle all these issues. Ross was careful to emphasise that the problem would not be solved overnight, but the aim was to really turn the place around. That is remarkable. We don’t seem to have the capacity to take these radical steps anymore, which I think is a shame.

Q206 Chair: What particularly did the Highlands and Islands Development Board offer the Highlands and what did it do to address it? Of all the interventions that you note in your paper, this was the most dramatic one and the one that seems to have had that cultural shift and change. What was there about it that led to this success?

Professor Hunter: These are complex matters and there is no one silver bullet, but one key to it was the extraordinarily wide powers that the Highland Board was given and that were transferred largely to Highlands and Islands Enterprise by the Tories in about 1990. Most development agencies—and Scottish Enterprise is a good example of this—have a very narrow economic development focus. They are solely concerned with business development and job creation. That was the fashion for a long time. They build factories, offices and so on. They opt to help business in a very direct grant-funded way. All of that is significant. I am not for a moment arguing that that should not be done but when you have the sort of situation that I tried to describe—and described in more detail in my submission—in the Highlands and Islands, where you have the society so far gone, where you have this demoralisation and what I have called “inferiorisation”, where there is a lack of enterprise and initiative, then, in my view, you have to start further back. That is why it was so critical that the Highland Board was given powers to intervene in all sorts of ways.

Just before this session started, you had an informal presentation about the work here of Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. The point was made forcefully there, and I think very correctly, that what the Highland Board did—and HIE has also been doing but it was the Highland Board that pioneered this—was to begin to invest, not just in business in a direct sense but in cultural and other initiatives, which began to give people much more of a sense of pride in their own locality, a sense that there was something here to be proud of, a sense that there was something worthwhile about the place that previous generations had been encouraged to feel was not the case.

Q207 Chair: On that point—because it was one of the most fascinating details in your paper when I was reading it—you say that the cultural investment was probably just as important as the infrastructure investment, and we had the Gaelic fund that was established in the 1990s in developing Sabhal Mòr Ostaig. Could you tell us a little bit about what that is and what that means and represents? Can you build and repopulate areas on the back of cultural activity?

Professor Hunter: It is not just that cultural activity is important in its own right, in the sense that if you have various cultural activities they themselves generate economic spinoffs in a very direct way. It is much more deep-seated than that. It is to make people feel good about the place and about themselves. Once that begins to happen it has all sorts of indirect spinoffs, so somebody who feels good about their locality, their background and their heritage. I don't mean this in some kind of ethnic sort of way, whereby it could only apply to folk who can prove that their family have been here for the last 20 generations. It is just as important for people moving into the locality to feel that they are coming to a place that is a bit distinctive, that has particular things to offer, not just perhaps in the strictly cultural sense but environmentally and so on as well.

Again, I am talking personally here. One of the things that is quite strikingly different about the Highlands and Islands now—and for young people here as compared to when I was growing up—is the huge sort of enthusiasm that there is, for instance, for traditional music and the like. You, Chairman, of course, have had something to do with that but I won't get into that. That might seem at one level to be, “Well, that is all very nice and cosy and we all like a good tune and it is nice to go a ceilidh and what not”, but it goes way beyond that. I think that is what is important about what has been happening here and what sometimes is difficult to explain to developmental economists and others elsewhere.

I remember when I became chairman of Highlands and Islands Enterprise, at the first meeting I went to in Scottish Enterprise's headquarters in Glasgow there was a presentational map on the wall of the room. It was to do with inward investment into Scotland and business development and where factories had been set up and so on. Scotland was projected on to this map in a way that showed this, so there were glitzy buildings in Dundee, Edinburgh and elsewhere, and the Highlands was represented by a thatched cottage and a Highland cow. That was in Scotland's mainstream development agency and I thought, “What we are trying to do in the Highlands is just outwith the ken of these folk”. That is still difficult to get across, but to me it is fundamental. If you look around you here at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, this is perhaps the most striking instance of that sort of thinking.

Q208 Margaret Ferrier: I am coming on to education. Do you feel that the availability of higher education has made the Highlands and Islands a more attractive place to live? How do you feel that will affect the Highlands and Islands' population in the future? Will it be favourable or otherwise?

Professor Hunter: It will certainly be favourable. It is favourable already. It is a key development. I think the establishment of the University of the Highlands and Islands is one of the most important things that have happened here in the last 20 to 30 years. In fact, I would argue it is the most important. Again, it is not simple. There is a kind of notion sometimes put about that this will stop all the young folk going away. I don't think for a moment it will stop all the young folk going away. If I was an 18 year-old growing up in the Highlands today I might still want to go away. I think that is in the nature of very many

young people. They want to experience different localities, different cultures and different things. Nevertheless, it opens up all sorts of opportunities to people within the area who previously were denied those sorts of opportunities, particularly because getting a higher education today is a much more expensive and difficult process for the individual than it was when I was lucky enough to get a university grant and go off to university in 1967.

I think what UHI is about, and we see it here, is not just creating opportunities for young folk who are already here but also for young folk from elsewhere. It will help a proportion of our own young folk to make a life here. It will create opportunities for young people who leave to come back again. Most obviously, there were no academic jobs in the Highlands and Islands until UHI appeared—no high-level academic jobs anyway—and all the research and other effort that is going on is all terribly important. As UHI becomes more established and gets a better and better reputation, as I think it will do, we will see, as we are seeing already, more people coming from elsewhere. Just as it might be attractive for a young person from Skye, or Lewis or wherever, to go off to Edinburgh, or London or Cambridge or some place, to get a higher education, the opposite also applies. There are plenty of young people in Britain and beyond, who have perhaps grown up in cities, who would fancy spending three or four years in a place like this.

It is terribly important and the fact that we did not have a university was one of the absolute downsides. I quote in this paper something I said once upon a time that, to people of my generation, getting three good highers in secondary school and a university grant was the equivalent of getting a place on an immigrant ship for an earlier generation.

Q209 Margaret Ferrier: The next question I want to ask is about the EU referendum result. How is that going to impact on the future of the population of the Highlands and Islands regarding retaining of migrants? Obviously it is now completely up in the air because of the outcome. Will that affect you and the college here?

Professor Hunter: Well, potentially. Of course, it depends on what happens and whether we can retain, by one means or another, our membership of the European Union. That is clearly going to be very difficult if we remain part of the UK, but perhaps we had better not get into that. If the Highlands and Scotland generally ceased to be part of the European Union—as is obviously very possible now—then, in my view, that will be an unremittingly bad thing. This is as good an example as any: what you see around you here would not exist, certainly not in its present form, if it had not been for European Union investment. That sort of situation is replicated right across the region. Even more fundamentally, and I know you are going to hear later this morning from the Brains, the family who have been in the news who want to make their home in the Highlands and who, under present UK immigration regulations might not be permitted to do so. We are going to conceivably see that on a much larger scale.

Coming here this morning, I listened to Philip Hammond, the Foreign Secretary, being interviewed on the “Today” programme on the radio. He was asked repeatedly if he would offer a guarantee or if he thought a guarantee should be offered to residents of the European Union currently living and working in the UK that they would be permitted, irrespective of what happens next, to remain here, and he refused to issue such a guarantee. I think that is deplorable, though I have stressed in this paper that we have seen—and Skye, of course, has seen this in very large terms—repopulation here over the last 30 to 40 years to a quite remarkable extent. This is still one of the relatively few parts of Europe,

outside northern Scandinavia, where there are still many fewer people today than there were 200 years ago.

If there is a case for arguing that Britain is overcrowded and cannot accept any more migrants, then wherever that case applies it most certainly and indubitably does not apply to the Highlands and Islands. We need all the people we can get. I personally feel very strongly about this. Easily the best thing that has happened to the Highlands and Islands in my lifetime is that, for the first time in a very long time, far more people have been moving into the Highlands and Islands in the last 30 to 40 years than have been moving out. I think that is extraordinarily beneficial to the area. If you live in a community where the population is falling, where the young folk in particular are disappearing like snow off a dyke, then it is extraordinarily difficult to envisage any good future for that community. We have seen in the Highlands the beginnings of that being turned around and an important component of that is people coming into the area from elsewhere.

Q210 Chris Law: I want to ask a question about how policymakers are informed today, very often on a short term—lucky if it is five years—of planning ahead, but history is great for teaching us perhaps where we could be looking further into the long future. I want to ask what lessons can be learned for policymakers from the history of both the population decline and growth in the Highlands and Islands.

Professor Hunter: On the latter point, in this paper I have called the Highlands and Islands “a Scottish success story”. I believe that is the case. It is important to note—and I stress this in the paper—of course, that success is not universal in the Highlands and Islands. There are exceptions to it. Even here within Skye, what we see around us here in Sleat is not replicated at the north end of Skye, in the Staffin area, for instance. There continue to be difficulties in the area that need to be addressed.

I feel myself—and ultimately this is my opinion but I think it can be backed up by evidence—that an absolute key to our success or such success as we have had is creating as much autonomy as possible within the locality. I have stressed the importance of HIDB/HIE in this regard. It was given remarkably wide powers. It was also given powers to do what it liked, within limits. Initially, the limits were pretty slack. We talked a moment ago about the University of the Highlands and Islands. The University of the Highlands and Islands was conceived as a project particularly by two people, Bob Cowan, who was then the chairman of the HIDB—this is towards the end of the 1980s—and Val MacIver, who was a councillor, who was then the chair or the convenor of Highland Regional Council’s education committee. With the backing obviously of the HIDB and the council and others, they set out to create a university in the Highlands. They did not ask anyone’s permission. They did not say to anyone at Edinburgh or London, “Do you think it would be okay if we do this?” They just did it. In my view, HIE and Highland Council could not possibly do that today.

When I got to this point in my paper I mentioned that I make these points not because of party political feeling, because I am a member of the SNP, but because I think that one of the downsides of what we have seen in Scotland in the last 10 years has been a throwing into reverse of that extension of greater autonomy to areas like the Highlands and Islands. There has been a recentralisation both in respect of the Highlands to Edinburgh, and within the Highlands and Islands themselves there has been a recentralisation in Inverness. When I lived in Skye in the 1980s and 1990s, Skye had its own district council, Skye and Lochalsh District Council. It had its own local enterprise company, Skye and Lochalsh

Enterprise. These were very small organisations, or at least organisations serving very small populations, but they had a degree of autonomy. They were recognised very widely as being highly effective. They undoubtedly contributed substantially to the turnaround that we began to see at that time in Skye.

Today there is no such local authority. There is only Highland Council in Inverness and there are no local enterprise companies, because they were abolished by the SNP Government. All power now resides again with HIE in Inverness and HIE itself, rather than being the autonomous organisation with capacity, as Willie Ross said, to do what it thought necessary at its own hand, is regarded by the Scottish Government as a delivery agency—that is the phrase that is used—whose job is to deliver policy that is conceived centrally in Edinburgh. In relation to the sort of better news story that we have to tell now about the Highlands, I think that is all bad news. I don't mean that it is going to put the kibosh on it all. It is not, but I think, if there is a lesson from what went before, it is that we do better to not believe that devolution of power should stop in Edinburgh but that it should extend into localities like this. We have seen a reversal of that process in the last 10 years and I think that is a pity.

Chair: We are going to extend this session for another five minutes or so because we are very grateful for your evidence, Professor Hunter, and I think the Committee is thoroughly enjoying this. I do not know if Chris Law has further questions, if that is all right with my colleagues.

Q211 Chris Law: Moving back on to EU and EU funding, how big an impact has EU funding had on the growth of the population in the Highlands and Islands? What concerns do you have given the result of Brexit with regards to that?

Professor Hunter: As I said earlier, I think it has been fundamental. The European Union has been very good for the Highlands and Islands in all sorts of ways in a funding sense. It goes beyond that, though. It has put the Highlands and Islands in touch. Again, I keep drawing on the example of Sabhal Mòr Ostaig just because that is where we happen to be. Quite a lot—well, I don't know how big a proportion of the success of Sabhal Mòr Ostaig but it has certainly been a constant theme in Sabhal Mòr Ostaig's development, is to develop links with other comparable parts of Europe; particularly, and for obvious reasons, in the case of Sabhal Mòr Ostaig and Gaelic culture and language, to develop links with Ireland. All of that has been facilitated by the fact that here and both parts of Ireland, the Republic and the North, are in the European Union.

There have been particular European programmes that have assisted exchanges of young people and the development of universities and contact between them. All of that has been jeopardised. It is not just the potential loss of the hard cash that has gone into facilities like this, or even into roads and harbours, and all the other things that the European Union has funded or helped very substantially to fund, but it is the potential cutting off of these contacts and, as I stressed earlier, the possibility that we cease or that it becomes more difficult to attract people from other parts of Europe to make their lives here, which I think would be a very great shame.

Q212 Chris Law: My last question is: what do you think is required to continue ensuring the growth of population here? Is there an optimum level of population in the area that is hoped to be achieved?

Professor Hunter: Optimum levels of population are very difficult concepts. It used to be argued by historians—with whom I passionately disagree—that all that happened here in the past was all perhaps a bit difficult but it was inevitable because the population had exceeded the capacity of the land to sustain it. Well, the population of London exceeded the capacity of the London area to grow potatoes and turnips a heck of a long time ago, so it depends entirely what sort of economy you are looking to create here. There are agricultural opportunities here, but for obvious reasons it is not ever going to be the agricultural breadbasket of Europe, Scotland or, indeed, anywhere else, but it is a place that offers all sorts of opportunities.

I used to make parallels between here and the Pacific Northwest of the US. If you look across North America and, indeed, Europe, the Continent, it is interesting that some of the most buoyant areas in respect of information technology and so on—places like the Seattle and Vancouver areas and all of that—what attracts people to these places is partly the natural environment, the ease of access to a highly attractive natural environment, the creation of the infrastructure in terms of IT and the like that makes all sorts of other developments possible. There is absolutely no reason why that cannot happen here. This is a very attractive place.

The world was very different 50 and 100 years ago, but if you find yourself in Dublin with a few moments to spare, I would strongly advocate going to Trinity College and looking at the exhibit there on the Book of Kells. The Book of Kells is recognised to be probably the greatest surviving artistic artefact of the early Middle Ages in Europe. Where was that produced? It was produced on the island of Iona. The island of Iona was seen then, not just in Scotland and in Ireland but much further afield, as a centre not just of spirituality but of learning and high culture. There is no inherent and intrinsic reason why the Highlands, despite what we have been told or what we used to be told forever, is remote, peripheral or on the margins with no great future possibility. It was once at the centre of Europe and it can be at the centre of Europe again.

Q213 Chair: We are really grateful, Professor Hunter. That was fascinating evidence. I think you have set the tone for the day expertly. Thank you for that. As always with witnesses before this Committee, if there is anything that you feel that you could further share with us, another one of your fascinating papers, for example, that would be helpful or anything that we have missed in the course of the inquiry, we are obviously always open for further written evidence and we would welcome you to do that. Thank you very much for coming along to the session today.

Professor Hunter: Thank you for the opportunity and I hope you enjoy the rest of your visit here.

Chair: I am sure we will.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Alistair Danter**, Area Business Manager for Skye and Lochalsh, Business Gateway, **John Norman MacLeod**, Vice-Principal, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, and **Dr Donnie Munro**, Director of Development, Fundraising and the Arts, Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, gave evidence.

Q214 Chair: Gentlemen, thank you ever so much. Sorry we are a little bit late, but I think it was worthwhile hearing that extra 15 minutes or so from Professor Hunter, who has set up things expertly for us. Just for the record, can we go from left to right, who you are, who you represent and anything by way of a short statement?

John Norman MacLeod: John Norman MacLeod. I am vice-principal and director of studies at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig UHI. I have been employed here since 1983 when Sabhal Mòr Ostaig started delivering programmes through the medium of Gaelic.

Dr Munro: Donnie Munro, artist, musician, former rector of the University of Edinburgh and a former rector of the University of the Highlands and Islands, currently director of development, fundraising and the arts at Sabhal Mòr Ostaig.

Alistair Danter: Alistair Danter. I work for Business Gateway Skye and Lochalsh. My background and training is in rural land management/land economy. I have lived and worked on Skye since 1998 in the area of rural development with the council primarily, latterly with Highland Opportunity and the Business Gateway. I also have a croft and I have my own business.

Q215 Chair: I am grateful. You were all here to hear Professor Hunter's evidence. He was giving several solid reasons, a description and explanation, about why there has been this population growth in the last 20 or 30 years. I would be very interested in your perspective and take on all of this and if there is anything maybe Professor Hunter overlooked in terms of a number of reasons why this population growth has taken place. We will go one by one and respond to what you have heard and if there is anything that may have been missed.

John Norman MacLeod: It is very hard to follow Professor Hunter. He gave his evidence so eloquently. I too have read his paper; there was an awful lot there. I would very much agree with what Professor Hunter has said. I would certainly agree that having the Government intervention, with the setting up of the Highlands and Islands Development Board, has been very important. In the last 50 years we could say, yes, very much it has been a success story, the Highlands and Islands, with the increase in population; I think a 22% increase in the population of the Highlands and Islands. It has been very successful in that sense. Again, I would agree that the setting up of the University of the Highlands and Islands certainly offers great opportunities for all parts of the Highlands and Islands. In fact, it is very much a wider area even than the HIE area.

I would also agree that there are challenges. The increase in population is not universal in all areas. There are still areas of the Highlands and Islands that are suffering population decline—particularly Argyll and The Isles is one area—but there have also been huge increases in population, like the Inner Moray Firth area, Shetland and this particular sub-area as well of HIE, that is Skye, Lochaber and Wester Ross. There is a lot there.

One thing I feel certainly with the population is there has been a drift to the centres as well, so that causes problems in a lot of areas because, when you have a drift to the centre, then you also have services being provided more in the centre and there is more pressure on services then. Some areas are quite deprived, but I feel population is something that is being looked at and addressed, and I would very much agree with the final point he was making about devolved powers to communities. I think that is so important.

One final thing: I am a director or trustee of Sleat Community Trust, so I am very much aware as well that locally it is so important to have that involvement in community and democracy right down to community level.

Dr Munro: First of all, I would say that clearly the evidence that we have just heard from Professor Hunter is very important. Not least, it is correct to reflect on his own contribution directly, to be perfectly honest, as a historian and a writer to raising issues and to giving people access to real information. For generations of young Highlands' people to have had the contact with his work has been a significant stimulus to building the confidence that Jim spoke about in the evidence.

All of the discussions that we have had, and most of what Jim spoke about in his evidence, are about capacity building. Capacity building is a critical part of what has happened with this institution in this environment. It covers a whole range of areas. It cannot be tied down to just one aspect, such as education. I think it has to be something that is approached from a completely holistic way of working, looking at the community and energising the community by creating opportunity.

It is interesting that part of our discussions have already alluded to the fact that the centralising agenda, which has perhaps been the case over time, is still problematic. In actual fact, there are very clear reasons. There were moves at one time to create the opportunity of taking out specific bodies of Government, agencies of Government, into areas like this or into areas within rural Scotland. There are very clear, logical reasons why that should happen rather than why these bodies should be centralised. Doing that with the likes of National Heritage or the Forestry Commission, all of these bodies that are dealing in aspects of the rural economy, the development of rural areas and particularly economically fragile areas, that in itself would make an enormous difference to building capacity in the areas where we see economic problems.

Generally, the catchword for me would have to be the opportunity to capacity build, to make this whole sense of people having a sense of belief in themselves. As we have heard from the evidence this morning that is something that is filtered through many, many generations of people in this area, but it is changing. With regards to the use of Gaelic language and culture and the wider material culture associated with the language, whether it is the arts or other areas, what is becoming quite apparent is an attitudinal shift among young people, who now currently see Gaelic language and culture as being something that is based around opportunity rather than something that was seen and perceived as negative. There are now positive benefits to being educated bilingually, to becoming qualified bilingually and to seeing the fact that you are dealing with a language that is contributing in a very vibrant way to a modern society.

Q216 Chair: Mr Danter, I am interested in your views on this, but perhaps you could also speak a little bit about if there is anything that you have observed or detected. Has this population growth that we have seen had any impact on demand or provision of services to cater for a larger population, if you are in a position to help us with that?

Alistair Danter: There are a couple of things I could just say before that. There has been a growth in population but the structure of it is changing. I think that should give rise for concern. It is a much older population certainly than the rest of Scotland, and if we look at the demographic profile the number of high school enrolments has gone down. Projecting that forwards, that is certainly a matter for concern. Yes, there are pockets where the

population has grown and Skye is one of them. My colleague does the same work as me but in Sutherland. Sutherland has a population density of something like two people per square kilometre. That is three less than the West African state of Mali, which is two-thirds of the Sahara Desert. Economic development in this environment is certainly challenging. If you go on from that, then there are other impacts. Yes, there are people coming in, which is great. If you like, the type of finance that they come with is very different.

Q217 Chair: Just on that so we do not lose this, because this is an important point, if we are seeing a range of different population issues, growth in some areas, perhaps not so much depopulation but still under population—as you mentioned, the Sutherland example—is there any reason why that should be spread across the Highlands like this? For example, is there anything that parts of the Highlands are doing and other parts are not that could increase that population?

Alistair Danter: A lot of what happens is due to where we are in the world, on the edge of Scotland, on the edge of Europe geographically. That does set things. Obviously, the north of Sutherland, Skye, there is a difference.

Chair: It is arguable it is easier to get to Sutherland than it is to get to Skye, as Mr Law and myself found out yesterday travelling four hours up.

Alistair Danter: Certainly, that is the case. There is a mixture of historical reasons. There is a mixture of the small businesses that have developed and the specific sectors that they come from. Obviously, tourism is a massive industry for us here. It is a challenge to run a small hotel I think anywhere, shall we say, on the west coast of Scotland. I would say it is doubly difficult in Sutherland than it is on Skye. You can see that in things like the number of times that a hotel will change hands. In Skye I would say that is probably going down. They are staying in ownership for longer periods of time now than maybe 10 years ago. In Sutherland I think you will find that certain hotels will be changing hands every two or three years. That is a small side of things.

Q218 Chair: I would still like an answer to my question and I will leave it to the other guests to help out. Does this have an impact on the demand for services and is there a sense that there has to be a longer-term plan and a look at the provision of services if there is a growing population, particularly in areas like Skye and other parts of the Highlands?

Dr Munro: I think there is no doubt that many people would have very strong views about services and certainly, when you are talking about dispersed communities, communication and transport infrastructure is absolutely vital. Going back historically, it is probably fair to argue that the Highlands and Islands may well have been better served in the 1930s and 1940s, in terms of an integrated transport service or structure, than they are currently. There were more services that were integrated that serviced communities. That is an issue that remains very high on the agenda for people in these areas. In Skye in particular, the issue of the ferry services are current in the south end here but also the long-running discussion, demand and desire for an air service. It is absolutely unbelievable that there is no air service into Skye. I cannot think of any other European island of this size and population that would not be served by an air service. That would be something that would be very much a catalyst for the further regeneration of the area.

Q219 Margaret Ferrier: The Highlands and Islands have a higher proportion of older people than the rest of Scotland. As we know Scotland is an ageing population, compared to the other parts of the UK, and the Highlands and Islands have this higher proportion. What implications do you feel that has for communities like Skye?

Alistair Danter: I would say it is a mix. Certainly there is pressure on social services and I think there are potential implications there for business start-ups. Generally people are not looking to start up a business or become seriously economically active once they are older. They are looking for different types of employment if they do move here later on in life.

John Norman MacLeod: It is not only in Skye. The Western Isles are also very aware of this higher ageing population. As I was saying, I think it is certainly an issue that some of the services are more centralised. It may be in Stornoway or it may be in the more populated parts of the islands and so on. There are issues as well, particularly in this area, of 24-hour medical care. There are particular issues if you are an island off an island, thinking of Raasay for example. These issues are very pertinent in relation to provision for the elderly in that sense.

Alistair Danter: The demographics may be different but, similar to other areas, what has to happen in the Highlands and Islands area is that we have to create a situation where we have an enterprise culture, where there is opportunity for young people and for working age people to successfully relocate to live in these communities. In many ways people coming to live in this part of the world, their requirements are no different to people living anywhere. Essentially, they are opportunities for employment, good housing and education and a decent transport and communication network. The problems are the same, but the solutions are different. We need to see a development where you are bringing opportunity into these areas.

It is quite interesting that when you are talking about demand, perhaps talking about demand on services, quite often development in the Highlands and Islands has been seen through the prism of civil servants sitting in Edinburgh looking at a project or an idea and saying, "Well, where is the evidence of demand?" If these kinds of developments and if this kind of place had been dependent on an evidence of demand, it simply would never have existed. I have certainly had experience where we have presented a project on the island of Islay, as the sister campus to this place here. On the basis of the attitude in terms of trying to decide to make a decision of should you be doing this or not, if it had been purely demand-driven you would have been erecting a Portacabin somewhere rather than a centre for community and learning.

Q220 Chair: This Committee is particularly interested in what you raise as the dependency ratio, the shrinking working age population vis-à-vis an ageing population and the challenges that Scotland has, which has a bigger dependency ratio than the rest of the UK and the rest of the EU. One of the things that we are looking at is how to address this, and perhaps one of the ways to do that is the growth of businesses and SMEs and small businesses in the Highlands and Islands area. Perhaps you could help us by talking about how important these are to the local area and if there is anything that differentiates the way that SMEs and small businesses operate in the Highlands from the rest of Scotland.

Alistair Danter: Perhaps I could just kick off. We need breeding pairs. If you can tell people we need breeding pairs.

Chair: I don't think it is our job to tell them that but maybe we can have a look at some of the factors towards it.

Alistair Danter: Small businesses are absolutely vital. The challenge that they face here is that from a banking perspective they are seen as high risk. Small businesses are seen as high risk because usually there are just one or two people running them and they are taking all the decisions, doing all the work. They may not have financial acumen, so they are seen as high risk and accessing finance is quite difficult for them. Very often the amount of finance they need is relatively small. Because of the banking conglomeration essentially we have five banks in the UK. They are all pretty similar and their attitude to SMEs and the people wanting very small amounts of money—which is really all they need—is that they are high risk, they are a problem and they cost a lot to run and service. So they are dealt with in a way that is not that satisfactory. A lot of it is done over the telephone. For a business to have a face-to-face meeting with their bank manager in the Highlands and Islands is very difficult, unless they want £50,000 and upwards or maybe £100,000 and then they can get to see someone. If they just want £5,000 or £10,000 it has to be done over the telephone. That is not very satisfactory.

Very often those businesses are in a start-up phase and they need more support and more capacity building, which costs to get it to them, but that is certainly the work that I do and it is the work that I see.

Dr Munro: I think SMEs are extremely important to an area like this and, again, this goes back to issues of connectability and so on. To have that facility of being connected to the world market, being able to relocate or to locate to an area like this, in many ways, depending on your activity, it doesn't matter a great deal where you are located, providing you have access to your market. That is increasingly becoming the case through IT and through good connectivity.

Going back to the earlier point that Dr Hunter made with regards to more autonomy in the regions, it is certainly the case that the problems that you are raising there—which Alistair has raised with regard to decision-making—of looking at a small company in an area, if that had been dealt with at a local level in the former structures, for example, with the local enterprise companies there is a greater sense of understanding of the regional requirements, the background and context that these SMEs are operating in, and the likelihood is that you have far better outcomes in terms of decision-making in areas of finance and a willingness to invest.

Q221 Chris Law: I want to ask a little more about the business side and, in particular, what types of businesses are here in Skye and the surrounding areas and how they differ from the mainland. Also, in the start-ups, is it people who have been living here for a long time or is it people coming here to live to change their lifestyle or to start a business here?

Alistair Danter: To start with the sectors, the main sector is tourism, which in itself can be very broad. It can be accommodation provision or it could be an outdoor activity provider. It is a major sector. Creative industries are hugely important and growing, and again that could be musicians, jewellers, potters, textile workers. There is a huge growth in that sort of sector.

Food production is another area of growing importance: food and drink. In a survey we conducted a couple of years ago, what is interesting is that those different sectors have

different challenges. Certainly, for the food and drink sector the issue was very much to do with transport, whereas with the tourism sector it was finance that was more of an issue. So within sectors there are problems.

The most important primary production is agriculture and fisheries. With agriculture we suffer because we don't have an abattoir on the island. If that was possible I think the amount of agricultural production would increase. If you are in the north of Skye possibly to take a beast to market you have four to four and a half hours to get to Dingwall or you could go on a ferry and go over to Lochmaddy, which is another way of doing things. Those are the sorts of sectors that are certainly important. Also in IT and software, in the crofts and hills you have whiz kids hidden away doing extraordinary things.

In terms of who is doing it, I would say it is across the board. It is a mixture of folk that have been born and bred here and have stayed, people who have gone away and come back and also people that have moved in. The people that I see are a very wide range of people.

Q222 Chris Law: To follow up on that, are there challenges for these businesses to retain or attract talent here, and is it also a problem for Sabhal Mòr Ostaig as well?

John Norman MacLeod: In our presentation we showed the importance of Sabhal Mòr Ostaig as an employer. It is the third largest employer in the area. I think it is so important that young people have that opportunity to study in the area and to remain in the area. For Sabhal Mòr Ostaig we have been able to attract people as well outwith the area. We attract, particularly on the academic side, lecturers from throughout Scotland and internationally as well. It is quite interesting what you find in the college, and I think again here the creative industries are particularly important. The college is not just a centre for education and research and so on, as a partner of UHI, but is also important for various projects, for businesses and business start-ups in some ways as well because we are providing opportunities in the area, business incubation as well. This particular building we are in is the centre for our creative and cultural industries. There is a lot of activity here in relation to the media. We also mentioned MG Alba as being important as well for input to the Gaelic media. There is also the Gaelic soap, "Bannan", which is being filmed in this particular area and is centred around about the college. That brings more employment and more money into the area. There are challenges, like everything else, but the college has certainly been successful in attracting new talent and keeping people in the area.

One point that Dr James Hunter said about the University of the Highlands and Islands is that young people may still want to leave but there is a choice now. There was no choice when I was growing up in Skye. The only choice if you wanted higher education was to leave the island. Now there is a choice, and a lot of people may go away but they also return, so there is that opportunity for them now.

Alistair Danter: Could I add a couple of things that I think are important? The Highland Council has a graduate employment grant programme every year with funding for 25 graduates. It is quite often very difficult to recruit graduates for some of the positions that businesses want. Businesses do want to expand. They have identified a need and work that a graduate could do, but it is often quite difficult to recruit them. That is proving a problem.

Linked to that, even if recruitment is possible, there is a problem with accommodation in the area. Some communities have a very high percentage of secondary or holiday homes,

which is a kind of double-edged sword. I was doing some work recently with someone from Carbost and Minginish and 25% of the houses in that community are secondary holiday homes, so that is a real problem.

In my own community, which is Edinbane in the north-west, we recently carried out a housing survey talking to the business sector. All of the businesses there wanted to expand and develop. They were being pushed that way and were happy to do it. Their major challenge was accommodation for staff working for them. The biggest employer is a fish farm with something like 18 employees. Less than 50% of those lived within a five mile capacity and some had to come a lot further.

Q223 Chris Law: We did an inquiry not so long ago with Scottish Affairs into post-study work visas. We found that businesses were having difficulties recruiting international graduates because of the wage requirements for the tier two work visas. Do you have problems here in filling graduate vacancies as a result?

John Norman MacLeod: I wouldn't say that we have had problems here. There are issues certainly within Scotland within the sector, and Scottish universities are very much aware of this. UHI is also very much aware of this issue as well. Because of this issue numbers of applicants for courses in Scotland have fallen, particularly from students from India, and also there has been a drop off in enquiries for courses here at UHI as well. It is anti-competitive in a lot of ways and these students are obviously going to go elsewhere, for example—

Q224 Chair: Just on that point—and don't lose it—do you have evidence that is suggesting that, in relation to the post-study work group, there is an impact on the student numbers? Is that what you are saying?

John Norman MacLeod: Yes, certainly within UHI there are figures where I think it was students from Nepal showed a decrease. I think there were maybe 27 and then it is down to about single figures, or round about that. I think in Scotland as well, certainly with students from India, there has been a decrease. The other factor is in a lot of overseas degrees internship is important as well, to have that work experience. Students will miss out on that if they don't have that post-study visa and the opportunity to work. Again, you are missing out on the skills of these students that have been educated here but they are not able to remain here to work and to add their skills. Particularly in rural areas there are skills shortages, so I would say it is very much a disadvantage and it is something that UHI is aware of. It is also something that the Scottish universities are very much aware of and would like to see a change there.

Q225 Chair: I have one last question around high speed internet. I was speaking last night up in Portree to the hotels that are struggling to get Wi-Fi and hearing that fibre optic is finally coming here. How important is high speed internet here in this college, both in terms of attracting students and also in terms of teaching, particularly, for distance learning, for example?

John Norman MacLeod: It is vitally important, for education, to live here, to work here and for businesses and so on. UHI is a European leader in VC, video conferencing and distance delivery. It is the same with the college here. It gives you that connectivity. We

are aware of the digital Highlands and Islands HIE. It is funded through Scottish Government and the UK Government but there are particular issues here in Skye. I think that is rolled out more from the centre and then there are certain parts of Skye that will not benefit from that. Certain areas will not benefit. There is also an issue about being near the exchange. If you are between one and two kilometres from an exchange you will not have the benefit of the strong signal.

One development that is quite important is the community broadband, and that has been provided in areas like this. I did mention that I was on Sleat Community Trust. We provide Skynet, which is linked to community broadband, rural broadband, to areas here in this peninsula that may not get broadband or may not get sufficiently fast broadband, so it is about accessibility and also about the level of connectivity.

Q226 Chair: I am trying to summarise what we have heard from both Professor Hunter and from our three distinguished guests just now, and am trying to look at the issues and the challenges or things that need to be overcome to ensure that we do continue to repopulate the Highlands. On my list here is local decision-making, housing, transport infrastructure and access to broadband. Would you say that these are the key levers that you would need in order to try to continue to grow the population of the Highlands or have we missed something? Is there any ranking of these particular issues I have picked up? Maybe we will start with you, Dr Munro.

Dr Munro: I think these are all absolutely critical, and to add to that list is the relocation of specific agencies of Government to areas where it makes sense to locate them. That would make a big difference too. All of these are key to future development.

Chair: Have I missed anything, Mr Danter?

Alistair Danter: I would just add finance to that list, whether it is local banking, or a local enterprise trust. That sort of local finance is so important. As I say, the big difference between ourselves and Europe is that we have these sorts of centralised banks, whereas in Europe they have the centralised banks and they have the local banks and the local banks have a very clear remit to serve the local business population.

Q227 Chair: Lastly from me, and Margaret Ferrier has one more question, if there was one thing that you would want Government—whether that be of a Westminster or Scottish variety—to assist you in order to try to ensure that we continue to have population growth in the Highlands, what would that be? We always like the on-the-spot questions on this Committee, so we will go with each of you on that one. We will start with you, Mr MacLeod.

John Norman MacLeod: I would say it is this distinctive answer to distinctive problems. It is about devolved power, more autonomy. In the islands there is this development, “Our Islands Our Future” and I think it is about that. In looking at this, the other thing I found very encouraging is the attitude of young people. There has been a survey by HIE looking at young people in the area and outwith the area as well. It shows that young people have that confidence—and I think that is the confidence that Professor Hunter was talking about—to remain and to study here. They see it as a good area. They identify with their own communities. That is particularly strong in Shetland, Orkney and other areas as well. It is about our future and the young people are very much our future.

Dr Munro: Given the cataclysmic events of the last couple of weeks, then certainly one of the areas in relation to central government—both Westminster and the devolved Government—as Dr Hunter said earlier, is to recognise how critical the European funding programmes have been, not just to the capital infrastructure but to some of the social programmes through ESF funding and so on. It is vital that in these areas, as early in the process as possible, there is an absolute undertaking to ensure that the gap in funding that may emerge because of this change will be met by Government.

Chair: Now you bring that up, I know Margaret Ferrier was very keen to ask a question on this, so I am going to bring Margaret in to follow that up.

Q228 Margaret Ferrier: Coming back to the EU referendum result, the UK's future immigration system is now unclear. We do not know what the policies will look like in the future. Looking at some of the evidence on superfast broadband in Scotland, I was interested to see that there was £20.5 million in EU funding coming to help with the funding of superfast broadband. We are not going to be sure now about that £20.5 million, and that is just one example of funding. So how do you feel Brexit could affect the future population of the Highlands and Islands?

Dr Munro: If the inward investment that has been witnessed over the years coming from Europe is not maintained in some shape or form, I feel very strongly that it will have a really detrimental effect on future development. I have been involved with Sabhal Mòr Ostaig—very happily involved here—in development since 1997. This development we are currently in at the moment included all of the capital programmes have been substantially funded through EU funding. Wider than that, I think it is an attitudinal issue as well. The one thing that we have enjoyed is a relationship with European communities, particularly with European areas of minority language. There has been a common cause there between different regions. Part of what Sabhal Mòr Ostaig has done has been working in partnership with these communities. I think the European Union has particularly recognised the importance, for example, of looking at Ireland, of Northern Ireland and the Republic seeing language as an area of common cause, as a way of crossing barriers that historically have been erected between communities. By going through that and developing that process of looking at common culture, that has been a significant part of the history of development of the language between Ireland and Scotland.

Chair: Does anybody else want to make a contribution on that?

John Norman MacLeod: I would agree with what Donnie has said. We should be building bridges instead of putting up barriers. We have benefited from structural funds in roads and a lot of projects. They would not happen had it not been for European funding. We have benefited in other ways as well, environmentally and culturally, and made a lot of connections. I think it is very much a period of uncertainty and it would be good to have reassurances of the way forward, basically.

Q229 Margaret Ferrier: I think you brought up the point earlier about the post-study work visa route. That it is not just about giving back economically to the country or the place that you have studied in, but that there are cultural and social benefits that you get from overseas students coming here. I believe that one of the key issues as well for young people to come to this area was cited as the broadband issue. I think all of us have been slightly frustrated while

we have been here that we have not been able to go on Twitter and tweet what we are doing. That has been very frustrating. I believe there are wider consequences to Brexit that I hope will all become apparent in time.

Alistair Danter: Could I just add that I would endorse what my two colleagues have said. It is a matter for concern particularly for the tourism sector, both in terms of who is working in it and the fact that many people from Europe come to work here. You have to be visiting one of the foodiest islands I think on the west coast at the moment. If you talk to any restaurateur they would tell you how great it is being able to pull in people from different cultures and how their offer is increasing. If we lose that, that will have an impact. If people cannot come, historically, one of the problems for the tourist industry is that being in service is not seen as a great future, whereas in Europe people have a very different attitude to that. If we lose those people we will suffer. Many do come here to work and settle and start their lives and businesses.

Q230 Chair: I am very grateful to you. Unfortunately we have come to the end of time again. A fascinating session and we are very grateful. I should just say the last time I shared a stage with Dr Munro was going back about 20 years, and there was a request from my colleagues to do a duet, which I think we have managed to resist.

Dr Munro: So far.

Chair: We are very grateful to you, and again to all our guests. If there is anything we have missed, or anything you have observed in the course of this inquiry, please get in touch with us and give us any further written evidence but thank you for coming here today.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Dr Caroline Gould**, Skye and Lochalsh Access Panel, **Judy Footit**, Advocacy Highland, **Sandra Mackenzie**, Skye and Lochalsh Mental Health Association, and **Morag Hannah**, Bureau Manager, Skye and Lochalsh Citizens Advice Bureau, gave evidence.

Q231 Chair: For the record if you could say who you are, what organisation you represent and anything by way of a very short introductory statement. We will start with you, Ms Hannah.

Morag Hannah: Morag Hannah from Skye and Lochalsh Citizens Advice Bureau.

Sandra Mackenzie: Sandra Mackenzie from Skye and Lochalsh Mental Health Association. We provide a drop-in centre for people with mental health problems.

Judy Footit: I am Judy Footit from Advocacy Highland. I co-ordinate the project here on Skye and Lochalsh and we provide independent issue-based advocacy across the Highlands.

Dr Gould: I am Caroline Gould. I am secretary and an access auditor at Skye and Lochalsh Access Panel. I am grateful for the invitation to be here today. The chair of the access panel asked me to represent the access panel, because I have several years of experience on

the panel and, as a disabled person, I have the experience of what it is like to be disabled and living in Skye and trying to access services. I would add that we are a group of local volunteers, including people with different disabilities, carers and people with an interest in encouraging social inclusion and the creation of an accessible environment. We currently have only seven members, two of whom are qualified access auditors who studied at Heriot-Watt University to gain that qualification and I am one of the access auditors. We also provide a type of support advocacy service for people who cannot gain access to services and provide guidance to organisations and individuals within Skye and Lochalsh. We work closely with NHS Highland. We have a planning protocol with Highland Council; we advise on planning, building work, applications and things like that, and lots more.

Q232 Chair: Great. I am very grateful to all of you. We have our first piece of literature presented today and it is good to see an all woman panel, after the last one being all male. Perhaps we could go one by one. I would be interested in all your views about the particular services that you offer. What we want to hear about are the challenges and issues that you have serving an island community and your view on how they may differ from services that may be provided in constituencies that we represent in central Scotland. Maybe we will start with Ms Mackenzie this time.

Sandra Mackenzie: The biggest challenge that we face at the minute is the lack of staff in the NHS. We are on our fifth locum psychiatrist at the moment in Skye and Lochalsh, which is not very good. We supported 145 people with just six employees in 2014 to 2015. The majority of our funding comes from the NHS Highland. A lot of the people we support are single who suffer from mental health problems. We do what a family would normally do. The difficulties for us are that there are no other services in the area, so where we differ from Glasgow is that there is no choice and the same with Inverness, although they have fewer services as time goes on.

Judy Footit: I would echo what Sandra said. Our advocacy organisation mainly provides mental health advocacy. Part of what we do is to help people to get the best out of services, to help them get their voice heard and to encourage the development of services to be built up around the carers' needs. The lack of services on the ground is quite disheartening. People can be assessed and they can have an assessed need, but unfortunately the services are not available to provide for that assessed need. That then has a knock-on effect on people's wellbeing, because they are not receiving a service that maybe a policy would allow to build a proactive and systematic approach to service development and service delivery. In fact, it has to be ad hoc, it has to be reactionary and it has to wait until people are right at the end of their tether before any services can be provided. That does impact on people.

As far as older people are concerned, living in such a remote and rural place puts limitations on everybody. That impacts higher on older people who may have problems with mobility. It is also the fact that a lot of older people come from outwith the islands, so the family support services aren't there. People like Sandra's organisation can fill that niche, but the gap between services that would have provided those things and a family don't exist anymore.

Q233 Chair: We want to look at that a little bit more with you and some of the demography issues and challenges. We will come to that. Dr Gould, could you give us your view about the specific challenges that may be in the Island or Highland areas?

Dr Gould: I would agree with everything said so far. I think one of the things is that there is always an assumption that everyone has a telephone or a computer or internet access or a mobile phone. That is not the case. As you will have discovered, there is no signal throughout a lot of the areas of the island. There is an assumption that everyone can read and write. This is not the case. In a small community people who cannot do not want everyone else to know about it, so it is difficult for them to achieve help very often. There is also an assumption that everyone has a helpful friend, neighbour or relative and that is not the case either.

I would certainly say that personally I have had a lot of experience of having to travel far afield for services to get to a crisis point, and the service not being available then to pick up. That is echoed a lot. We also have to do things, such as a disabled child enters a school and there are no plans for the school to have an accessible toilet and we have to fight and fight to get something like that installed.

Q234 Chair: Ms Hannah, do you have anything to add to the peculiarities of Highlands and Islands services?

Morag Hannah: Can I just read a short statement to you?

Chair: Of course, as long as it is short.

Morag Hannah: It is short, but it summarises the statistical analysis from Skye and Lochalsh Citizens Advice Bureau in 2015 to 2016, “In the last year we had 5,712 individual client contacts in our area. That 5,712 generated over 12,000 actual issues all requiring support and representation; 20% of that was date-related issues. However the majority of the work at 48% is benefit-related in our area. Looking at the older demographics, there was 3% of that, in attendance allowance, pension credits, housing benefits, home visits, but the large majority of the benefit-related issues, when they are broken down, are the disability benefits, personal independence payment and ESA. The demographic of our clients in a year, 38% are aged 44 and under, 34% in the age bracket 45 to 59 and 27% of age 60 plus, meaning that 72% were actually of working age. There is an equal split of male and female clients. 35% of our clients overall said they were unable to work due to long-term ill health or disability. To summarise, the majority of our client base is single, unemployed, either with unsecure tenancy, in debt arrears and/or limited employment opportunities with seasonal work being particular to this area. The total client financial gain for last year recorded with Citizens Advice Bureau was £1,163,294. The majority of this is benefit-related and the reason for clients presenting to the Citizens Advice service is the complexity of the claims process, unable to access hardware technology to complete the necessary digital forms and it is also to note that 38% of these clients said they also had hearing responsibilities”.

Q235 Chair: I am grateful for that. One of the things that we are doing—and the major thrust of this inquiry—is looking at the changing demography that we have in Scotland, with our increasingly ageing population and maybe the necessity to change public policy perceptions about how we address some of these issues. We are grateful to you, Ms Hannah, for giving us

the breakdown of CAB contacts, but can the rest of you start to talk about whether you have had to redesign the services that you provide because of an ageing population? Again, because we are here in the Highlands, if there is anything specific about the Highlands we would be interested to hear that too. We are going to start with you this time, Ms Footit, if that is all right.

Judy Footit: We carry on increasing our capacity as an organisation. We have done training on stroke and dementia. We have done training on financial abuse, doorstep scams, and things like that, because we recognise that those things impact on older people. Organisationally, going forward, we are considering partnership with a cancer advocacy organisation for over 50s. At the moment over 65s makes up just under one-third of our referrals. We do expect that to rise, but we expect it to rise in line with an overall rise in demand for the service. We do have capacity at the moment and we are looking to the future, but a lot of our work is specifically with older people. I am thinking of things like the Adult Support and Protection (Scotland) Act, which impacts a lot on older people. Organisationally, our manager is part of a subgroup that looks after that. I think she is also part of a subgroup with the access panel as well, and things like that. So we do have a mind and a view to going forward.

As far as being in the Highlands and Islands, it is the remoteness and rurality that affects most people at the bottom of the pile. That again is going to impact more on an ageing population, because of the difficulties we have talked about with social support, and also transport, mobility and public transport is obviously a feature there. I came from Kyle today, but the earliest I would have been able to arrive here by public transport would have been 12.45 pm, so I had to get a taxi. So if an old person has an early appointment, say in Broadford Hospital and they live in Kyle, they are going to have to get a taxi, so it impacts financially as well as socially on people's health and wellbeing.

Dr Gould: Recent statistics for Scotland as a whole have shown that, between 2006 and 2031, the number of people aged 75 years and over is projected to increase by 81%. However, the number of people aged 75 years and over in Skye and Lochalsh is projected to increase by 143.5%, so you can see that compared to the national average we are much higher.

Q236 Chair: Just on that, do you think there is preparation in place to accommodate this in what you have observed? Obviously it does concern you, as you are shaking your head like that.

Dr Gould: No absolutely none, so very concerned, yes. I have been attending meetings for eight to 10 years where I have been continuing to bring this up. The Scottish Household Survey 2012 estimated 34% of households in Scotland contained at least one member with a disability or a long-term illness. However, in the Highland region the average is 39%. Furthermore, more than half the population aged 75 years or over would be considered disabled under the legal definition; under the original Disability Discrimination Act and now under the Equality Act, although they may not consider themselves disabled nor may they be seen as disabled by those who interact with them on a daily basis. We have a growing population that is an ageing population. At a meeting last week I was told by somebody who was a retired nurse, "There are so many people who are disabled. I am so glad your group exists because you are showing us that people care".

My generation remember how disabled people were treated when we were younger and we don't want to admit that we are disabled because it is a very negative word. I have to say that the terminology is so negative that most people do not use it. I am using the word "disabled" today, not because I think I am disabled; it is society that is disabling me. I have a condition that could be classified as an impairment but I don't think I have anything wrong with me. This was the person I was meant to be, genetically. It is society that is preventing me from doing things.

When I compare how things are for me five years on—after using a wheelchair for five years—my world has collapsed; absolutely collapsed. I go out of the house maybe once every 10 days because there is nowhere to go except the co-op and I cannot even do my own shopping. However, having said that, more people are beginning to realise that disabled people have rights and are requesting our services so much. I work from home and I had five days off last year because the access panel's work was so enormous.

Q237 Chair: One of the things we were reminded of, when we were taking evidence in Edinburgh with some of the pensioners' organisations, is that we were raising the term "dependency ratio" and they were correcting us to say that older people make a significant contribution to the economy. They mentioned things like childcare, so making sure that they were available to assist and help out, particularly in rural communities. We were always reminded about how we use language and how the conversation about these issues should be conducted. It is good of you to remind us of that, Dr Gould.

Ms Mackenzie, do you have anything to add to any of the issues about the change in demography?

Sandra Mackenzie: Yes. On the mental health side, the person is going to continue to have their mental health problems. However, we will then maybe work more closely with other agencies like Alzheimer Scotland. Because we see people for a great amount of time every day we can notice little bits of change in people's health and are able to pass them on a bit earlier. With the age thing, it is really hard. I have quite old parents and neither of them sees themselves as old and they will not join into pensioners' clubs and things because they don't feel that they are old. So it is quite difficult, especially if people from the area do not see themselves in that kind of way.

Q238 Margaret Ferrier: Going back to the question the Chair asked about the ageing population and changes you expect to make to your services, have you all prepared for these changes to come in? What kind of changes to your services do you think you will need to bring in?

Sandra Mackenzie: We will continue to do what we do. The age of the person does not really matter so much. It is the funding to cope with that ageing that will be the problem for us.

Margaret Ferrier: Anyone else?

Dr Gould: As I have said before, we are seven and quite a lot of us are disabled and have major health issues, so we have to continue doing what we do. What would improve the way we can provide our services is if other service providers and other organisations, including the local authority and NHS Highland, worked better with us; instead of just

having a tick-box mentality that they have attended a meeting and listened to what we have said but can go home and ignore what we are advising and the guidance we are giving, which is best-practice guidance—British standards—on how to make things accessible for disabled people.

We work with architects; we work with applicants; we work with a lot of people and I have yet to find one person who has ever read this so we are not getting things that we need. In small businesses round here the tendency is to call in a builder or a joiner and say, “I need a ramp” because in their view apparently disabled people only use wheelchairs; there are no learning impairments; there are no hearing impairments; there are no visual impairments. That is not the case; but you will get a ramp provided by a joiner that goes straight up, is very sheer, is far too dangerous and likely to tip a wheelchair back, and has no landing at the door where you have to stop to pull the door open. So how can you use the ramp? We have planning saying a 1:12 ramp is all that is required—that is the minimum—but we are saying that research shows that we have an ageing population and, if an elderly spouse is a carer and pushing their spouse in a wheelchair, they cannot manage anything other than a 1:20 ramp.

The same for people who propel themselves in wheelchairs; we have lots of venues round Skye that when you phone up and ask, “Are you accessible?” say, “Yes, we are”. But when you get there you find you cannot get in or you injure yourself. We have had somebody injure themselves, losing control in a wheelchair on a ramp coming out of the building and hitting a wall. We have an attitude still that, “We will lift your wheelchair”. My wheelchair is 120 kilos without me in it. When we have discussed this with the police they now classify that as assault and no insurance is going to cater for wheelchairs being lifted or anything like that. There is a very old-fashioned attitude and a complete and utter lack of knowledge as to what is required to make things accessible for people with a variety of different disabilities. If people would work better with us they would achieve a lot more.

Q239 Margaret Ferrier: That brings me to my next question. How can central and local government policy support older people and people with impairment to become more involved in society? What particular problems do you think that poses in rural areas? Do they come to you?

Dr Gould: I would encourage that to be completely read, thoroughly digested and that all the actions requested take place. We have parts of the Equality Act that are still not enacted.

Margaret Ferrier: What about you, Ms Footit?

Judy Footit: The lack of an integrated public transport system and the lack of social supports—the paring of services to the bone, particularly for older people—has impacted on them and will continue to do so.

Thinking about how an ageing population affects us all—that is all of us—that means everyone in a job is going to be getting older and, because you are older and maybe not firm, as has already been pointed out, that does not mean to say that you do not perform your other functions as well. You may be a carer. Even if you are retired you may be a worker. Quite a few of our volunteers are older people. As an organisation, part of the way we deal with people is to recognise equality. If people need more support to bring their equality levels up to the level of, say, a younger person without impairments, then any

policy should really be looking towards all the activities and all the functions that older people, as an increasing proportion of our population, already perform. We are already relying on them. Thinking about the language we use and the conversations we have, any funding for older people should not necessarily be thinking of a frail, older person, as somebody who just needs to be given services. How do we start conversations that tap into that knowledge? Older people are what has helped to stick society together; kids learning at their grannies' knees, so that song and story and tradition; starting up conversation groups for people, say, with dementia. There has been a lot of co-working in dementia with the schools, which has social benefits; younger people benefiting from this resource. That is what older people are.

Morag Hannah: I will come back to an earlier point. We are seeing an increase in older clients, who are owner-occupiers, who can no longer effectively afford to heat their full home so they are living in one or two parts of the home instead of the full home. That is something that has changed over the last year. We lack mains gas; we have no access to dual-fuel deals for clients. The majority of the older population that we have seen on home visits have benefited from the croft-based grant scheme, which may have been 20, 30 years ago, but because of the situation they are in now they are no longer able to afford to maintain the properties, the upkeep of them, keep them warm and so on. At the time they were able to—they were crofters and able to apply for these schemes—but you are going back 20 or 30 years. They are now in the ageing population group and they are no longer crofters, so they can no longer access the crofters' grants to get their repairs done and so on.

Q240 Chair: One of the things that surprised us when we visited Orkney was the level of fuel poverty. It surprised us because it is renewable-rich and is able to supply most of its own energy requirements. Is there an issue with fuel poverty just now? Is it having a particular impact on older people?

Morag Hannah: Definitely. Not just older people, but there certainly is in relation to fuel poverty. We don't think we have healthy competition and people are very reluctant to switch to alternative suppliers. There is a real fear of doing that without support.

Sandra Mackenzie: They do not have access to the internet and even if they did have access they would not even know where to begin doing that. That is another issue—I know it was spoken about earlier on—broadband. If there was Wi-Fi available, we as workers would be able to take equipment into people's homes and do things with them whereas we cannot at the minute because it is not there.

Chair: I see Dr Gould is keen to come in.

Dr Gould: Something I have come across only recently: when you need adaptations to your home you are required to make an application for assistance with the adaptations and you need three quotes, but if you cannot get those three quotes everything stops, it seems, and you cannot get those quotes because the people—electricians, plumbers, builders, joiners—have so much work. It is taking time away from that work to come to somebody to give a quote when they know they might not get the job. Months down the line people still cannot get a quote so they cannot get the modifications to their home that they need, which is a false cost because they require more care until they get those modifications.

Q241 Margaret Ferrier: My next question is about life expectancy. As people live longer they are going to become more dependent on public services. What is your experience of the health and social care needs of the ageing population in the Highlands and Islands?

Judy Footit: What services there are, are good. That is one of the strengths of the island community. What professionals are in post are known, but it has already been shown that there are a lot of posts unfilled, like our locum psychologist; I think this fellow is still a locum, isn't he? Yes. So we still do not have a permanent psychiatrist. What services there are, we tend to know each other. We know what services are available and we also know how to access them. As professionals we would be helping people to access what services there are. However, the problem comes with what funding is available for those services to spend.

I know people who have been assessed for need. For example, an older lady who uses a wheelchair who has her own health problems as well as mobility problems, who is a carer for her son, who is in his 40s, who has mental health and other health problems, and she has had a social work assessment and she obviously has care needs but they cannot offer her a service at the moment. That is just because the services are stretched so thin. She has to go on to a waiting list and there is a hierarchy of need and, in a time of austerity, we are now carrying on reaping the effect from 2008. It has carried on in practical ways.

As far as services being joined up, when the idea of integrated health and social care started to be rolled out in Skye Lochalsh first there was a local implementation group because there was a plan for it. All of the involved professionals and voluntary groups were part of this group. We moved through the stages from proposal to implementation and everything was done, so it was implemented, but we were not able to move forward as a group then because that is when the funding stopped. All the social cohesion and all the networking, the understanding of what was happening—we could spot issues and trends as they arose; we could talk about them with each other; we could plan and be proactive in planning these services—we tried to do it ourselves, just as a group, on our own time, but it started to impact too much on our work because someone would have to take notes, someone would have to type them, quite apart from having somewhere to meet. So, having gone from a very well-planned and very well-implemented group that would have had value in continuing a proper joining up of health and social care, I am afraid that went.

What it now means for integrated health and social care needs is that NHS are the bosses, NHS has a fixed budget, and we cannot vote for councillors who might make a difference at Highland Council level. I think that shows your Committee that policy is paramount. Policy must be very carefully phrased and written to take account of all this because the accountability is taken away from local government and given to a large body. I know health is a devolved matter, so as far as devolution is concerned that will be something for the Scottish Parliament to consider.

Q242 Chris Law: A direct question. Judy, one of the services that you brought up as difficult to access is integrated public transport and a key one has been the health services. Can you expand on transport? What other services are difficult to access on these islands?

Judy Footit: Some services are marvellous. Drop-in and social support in Portree: if you live in Portree that is fine but if you live in Kyle that is not fine. It means that if you took a bus you would probably have two hours before you could turn round and get a bus back. Also, things like the CAB.

Morag, you do an outreach one day a week, subject to funding?

Morag Hannah: Yes. We have two outreaches.

Judy Footit: Two outreaches. So on two days a week in Kyle—there is one in Broadford, isn't there?

Morag Hannah: Yes.

Judy Footit: So, in Portree, Kyle and Broadford there are outreaches but anywhere else is inaccessible.

Sandra Mackenzie: We also have an outreach.

Judy Footit: You have an outreach as well?

Sandra Mackenzie: Southend and Lochalsh, just one day a week, a very social outreach for Lochalsh.

Judy Footit: There is a resource centre in Portree that helps people with learning disabilities and also some older people. That is not accessible. That is the only centre and that is not accessible. We do not have that. The hospitals as well—one in Broadford, one in Portree—

Q243 Chris Law: You also raised that it is difficult to get access to the internet here and in some places there is none at all. Is that correct?

Dr Gould: Our members live across the whole of Skye and Lochalsh. If I want to email them a three-page Word document the majority of them cannot download the attached file because their broadband is so poor. Here in Sleat last week there was an outage of broadband—certainly across one whole village and other parts of Sleat—for several days, and up in the Carbost area two weeks ago we had exactly the same thing. So you can be emailing something to somebody and they never receive the email at all because they cannot get on the internet.

Other things I was going to say: wheelchair services is something that is not based on the Island here for disabled people. Also we have Motability. Everybody who pays for their vehicle through Motability pays the same as everybody else; they expect the same service as everybody else but they do not get it here. The RAC, which is the breakdown cover they pay for, does not come to the Island. What happens is somebody will be subcontracted to take their vehicle away from them and they have no idea when they will get it back. They are told by Motability, "We will have a replacement vehicle within two days". I have never known Motability achieve that in less than three weeks, so what are you supposed to do if you live somewhere, like a road that is full of potholes and that is the sort of thing you have to go through every day, when you cannot use your vehicle and you have a limited battery, which has to go uphill and downhill a lot? It means you maybe get a mile if you are lucky out of your battery instead of the 10 miles you are told you will get. I don't believe that some of the things that we are being provided with round here are fit for purpose.

If you have your vehicle you cannot get the train to Inverness because—nothing to do with the train station or the train being inaccessible, they are great—you just cannot park close enough; there is no disabled parking. You cannot walk 700 metres to get to the train. If you

use a power-assisted wheelchair, if you do that 700 metres that is 700 metres less you have in Inverness and you have to make sure you have enough battery to get back to your vehicle when you come home.

Also we have the problem that we have such an ageing population and we have very little in the way of on-street disabled parking bays in Skye; very little. When the access panel have been asked to contact the police to complain about abuse of parking without a badge in disabled bays, what we have been told is that they have not been marked appropriately, they have not been signed appropriately, therefore, the law cannot be enforced. So what is the point of providing the few that we do have? When they shop, people cannot buy everything they want in one shop—they have to move around a village—and if you cannot get parked, particularly in a busy season like the tourist season, you could have travelled 30 miles to get something and you cannot get parked. I have known it myself, having to wait up to one to one and a half hours just to get parked in a co-op car park.

Q244 Chair: Thank you. We are coming close to the end of the session. We are very grateful for all your evidence. One thing I want to pick up from what Ms Footit said was about the integration of health care and social work in local government, your own experience and concerns about local accountability and access to democracy. We do not have much time left, but I would like the views of the other panellists on the package that has been designed by Scottish Government in terms of the combination of health care and social workers. How has it been and have you identified any particular island issues with it?

Dr Gould: This is a recent review of respite and short-break provision for adult carers of adults in the Highland Partnership area. Even though someone mentions in it that there is a tsunami of dementia on the way, and lots of other equally frightening comments, it would appear there is absolutely no intention to increase respite space in Skye and Lochalsh and Southwest Ross.

My personal experience: three weeks ago my husband needed to go into hospital; he had been told for three weeks, “You need to go into hospital. You are very ill”. He kept saying, “I can’t. I am a 24-hour a day, seven-day a week, carer for my wife. She needs a care package to be put in place”. He was going seven days a week for treatment. He was told every day for those three weeks, “Don’t worry, we’ll sort that out”. Eventually he came home with a message that if I collapsed, “You’ve to press your red emergency button and call for an ambulance”, at which point I thought, “I am going to start asking where this care package is”. Nobody had told them. In the end he was taken into hospital and I was abandoned. The alternative was for me to go into a care home, in which my wheelchair cannot fit into the rooms, or another care home 80 miles away, when I was also being told I needed to be at his side at the hospital to learn how to do his treatment.

Q245 Chair: Do any of you on the left-hand side have a view about social care, health care mergers and the plans for it?

Sandra Mackenzie: I think it has taken a while to bed in.

Q246 Chair: Skye and Lochalsh was a trial area for this, wasn’t it?

Sandra Mackenzie: Yes. There are little bits that we have lost because Children and Families has been taken in a different direction. Where it was a bit more of a rounded service there are two different directions now. We have had situations where people have been sent home and provision has not been ready for them on their arrival, or nobody knows they are coming home. There are little teething problems like that that they could deal with, especially from Inverness to Skye.

Q247 Chair: How long has this package been in place, your arrangements in Skye and Lochalsh?

Sandra Mackenzie: Something like 12 years.

Chair: It cannot be that because it was only suggested three years ago. We will leave that aside just now. That is not important. Ms Hannah, do you have any views?

Morag Hannah: What we are finding, through our monthly staff feedback and discussions, is that clients in Skye and Lochalsh are now having difficulty just getting to travel to their local GP surgeries. So, yes; it is the travel to consultants at Belford and Inverness hospital but it is even just locally, 10 miles up the road; the affordability and the transport links.

Dr Gould: There are those who have to go further afield, even possibly London, for treatment. I am aware of somebody who has already spent in excess of £50,000 travelling to where they need to get their treatment because, although the NHS is free at the point of delivery, it is not free to get there and what you can claim back. They have had to spend so much more and have had to consider giving up on the treatment now.

Chair: We are very grateful for your evidence. Again, it is such a range of services and we sense that Skye is well provided for. We are really grateful. If there is anything else that you feel we have missed, anything you want to add to this inquiry, as always, we are open for further written evidence so please get in touch again. Thank you very much for attending.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: **Ian Blackford**, Member of Parliament for Ross, Skye and Lochaber, **Gregg Brain**, and **Kathryn Brain**, gave evidence.

Q248 Chair: Thank you very much. We are very grateful to both you, Mr and Mrs Brain, and Mr Blackford, for agreeing to this session at short notice. I think it is important to hear your story, given how extensively it has been reported in the course of the past few weeks. Maybe just a brief summary; first of all, tell us who you are, for the record, and then perhaps a summary of where we are and what has happened in terms of your own particular case.

Gregg Brain: I think a brief summary would be impossible in dealings with the Home Office. Our situation is that we came over here in 2001 on a belated honeymoon, fell in love with the country—the Highlands in particular—came over in 2005 with the holidaymakers' glasses off to see if we could make a stay over here work logistically. We were looking at the cost of living, the sorts of jobs that we could do. We realised that study was probably our best path forward. Kathy enrolled, was accepted to do a degree course at the University of the Highlands and Islands, although it was the Millennium Institute then.

Kathryn Brain: The UHI Millennium Institute. It was as a result of the Highland Homecoming programme, which was promoted in Australia that got us thinking of the student visa route with the post-study work visa as an option

Gregg Brain: In the course of planning ahead, in terms of uprooting ourselves, years of researching it, then probably a year in the planning and execution to move from Australia to Scotland for Kathy to do her four years of study and then move on to the post-study work visa, there was about seven years of planning put in place and executed to then find out—it was probably over a year after we were here that we found out—that the post-study work visa was being retroactively abolished. Even when we did find out we did not realise that it was retroactive and that it applied to us. Through the enormous efforts of some close friends who publicised our situation, and through the tireless representations of our local MP, we are now in a situation where we have till 1 August to submit a complying application. We are still waiting on advice from the Home Office as to even what form it is we are supposed to be filling out.

Q249 Chair: Could you help us a little bit more to understand where you actually are? You have been given temporary leave to remain within the United Kingdom.

Gregg Brain: We have.

Q250 Chair: In that period you have to find a job that meets the requirements of the tier two visa route to remain in the UK. Is that correct?

Gregg Brain: That is correct. The requirements for the tier two work visa, if I can summarise those: there is about a 1,500-page document called the Standard Occupational Classification Codes, which describes the various jobs, likely titles and typical responsibilities. It has to fulfil one of those as well as minimum salary criteria. What you are effectively having to do is go straight from study—although we have been given two months under the current arrangement; if you are finishing your degree you would have typically four months—into a fairly successful, high-paying position with a signing bonus, effectively, because your employer will have to pay the Home Office about £2,000 and is probably going to have to pay an immigration lawyer a similar amount for the application in professional fees. So you are walking in cold to an interview saying, “Not only am I the most outstanding application you are going to see today but I am worth spending £4,000 over what you would spend on everybody else”.

Kathryn Brain: For the sponsorship licence.

Gregg Brain: Together with dozens of hours of your own time in preparing the application.

Q251 Chair: There is also the fact that the salary has to be of a level of £20,800. Is that correct?

Gregg Brain: That is the minimum salary; it is higher for some of the listed professions. Yes.

Q252 Chair: You are currently in the process of trying to find a job that meets all those requirements, which gets your salary of £20,800. If you do not meet these requirements, what happens next?

Gregg Brain: If we do not meet these requirements we would have absolutely no chance of making a complying application. We are very fortunate that over the time we have been here we have been close to achieving that three times, despite the odds being against us. At the moment, Kathy has an offer of a job with a local community-funded distillery, GlenWyvis Distillery, as their history curator. This is a distillery that has links to the Ferintosh distillery of Burns' fame.

Q253 Chair: You said you became interested in Scotland when you visited here; you had made up your mind you would like to make it home. Did you get any indication when you first applied for the study visa that there was ever going to be an issue further down the line? Did you come here with full confidence that it would be a matter of doing your qualification, you would find a job through a route that was described to you and one that you found was going to work for you?

Gregg Brain: Certainly. I would like to correct some of the Westminster record on the subject. Mr Brokenshire listed in an Urgent Question just about every transaction we had had with the Home Office and made a point—and repeated it twice—that we arrived in June 2011 when the announcement for the revocation of the post-study work visa had happened the previous March, three months beforehand. There was one transaction that Mr Brokenshire omitted from his chronology, which was that our visas were applied for and granted in 2010. The year before this was announced.

Q254 Chair: 2011 is when the post-study work visa was abolished?

Kathryn Brain: When the announcement was made.

Gregg Brain: March 2011 was when the revocation was announced, and I use that word advisedly. The Home Office takes an enormous amount of detail from people in visa applications. We had to supply 15 years' worth of photography of the two of us together, to prove that we were in fact a stable couple and that this was not some sort of a scam that we were trying to get into the UK on. We had to provide contact addresses through which they could contact us in Australia, and a prospective contact address in the UK, in addition to mobile phone numbers that we would have still valid for our first few weeks in the UK, and email addresses. It would have been a fairly straightforward matter for the Home Office to send a bulk email to people likely to be affected by a change in the visas saying this was coming up. I have no record of having received one.

In May 2011, after this announcement was supposed to have occurred, we were advised by our very successful and very helpful immigration consultant in Australia, who helped to get us over here to the UK, that the post-study work visa was a valid pathway; that we should be getting ourselves set up—planning years ahead—and doing these things to make sure that we had everything in place, all our ducks in a row ready for that application. That was weeks after the announcement. People whose jobs were on the line and were keeping themselves up to date were not aware of it.

Q255 Chair: You will probably not be aware that this Committee has done a report, which is ready to go. We had to wait until the European referendum was concluded. I would like you to have a look at that when it is produced to see if there was anything available in what we say that would have helped your situation.

Can I ask you, Mr Blackford, about the type of representations you have made to try to secure an arrangement where Mr and Mrs Brain are able to stay in Scotland?

Ian Blackford: When Gregg and Kathryn first came to me it was during a recess period. That proved to be a bit of an obstacle in terms of trying to get an audience with the Minister; it proved to be difficult. It is fair to say that I, and my office, bombarded them to make sure we got an appointment and the first day that we got back after recess I had that meeting with them.

All the way through, what I have said to the Minister is that there was a breach of faith and a breach of trust by the UK Government. Gregg and Kathryn took the decision that they wanted to come and contribute to highland life; to make a contribution to the growth of our economy; Lachlan studying at the Gaelic-medium unit at Dingwall primary school; important characteristics in terms of what we need: young families to come and live and work in the area to deliver prosperity in the Highlands. I explained to the Minister that they came here on an expectation that they would benefit from the post-study work visa and that this had been, as Gregg has said, retrospectively removed. His argument was that, if he did this, he would be creating a precedent and there would be lots of other people. I have long argued that given that most people—if not everyone we have met—have gone through that process, hardly anybody would be affected by this. Indeed I had an answer to a Written Question I put down last week, but they will not tell me how many people are in this situation because they argue that the cost would be disproportionate. In other words, they know there is hardly anybody there and he is not willing to do the right thing and give the family the opportunity to work in the interim while they satisfy the criteria for the post-study work visa.

While the Minister has been helpful to an extent, insofar as he has granted extensions for the family to satisfy the criteria, it has put enormous strain and pressure on the family. As Gregg has explained, they have been very close to satisfying the tier two visa requirements in a number of instances.

The whole point about granting the family the right to remain under the post-study work visa is it does two things. One, it grants them sufficient time to be able to satisfy the criteria, which is all they are asking for. No one is asking to create an exception of a long-term right to stay. What we are asking is that the family be given the opportunity to meet the criteria, which should have been the case because they should have benefited from this in the first place. The second thing is that, while the family are going through this process, they are not entitled to work so Gregg had to give up employment. The family are not in a position where they can support themselves. This makes no sense. All we are asking is that there is compassion shown toward the family. That is the argument I have had in all the meetings I have had with the Minister; I have raised Urgent Questions; I have had Oral Questions; I have had Written Questions. I would have to say that has been supported by a large number of MPs across parties. I am very grateful for that because I think when most people hear the story they are rather perplexed that the Government would behave in such an inhumane manner, because that is what it is.

Q256 Chris Law: A question to you, Ian. Can you give examples of other experiences that have made it difficult for your constituents to remain in the UK after studying here in Scotland?

Ian Blackford: I am not aware of any other situation similar to this. I have other immigration cases that I am pursuing. You will appreciate that, given that those are not in the public domain, I cannot go public on them but there are other instances, I would argue, of people who have been treated in an unfair manner.

I think it comes back to a basic issue of the Highlands here: as the Member of Parliament for Gordon, Alex Salmond, has famously said on a number of occasions, “We’re not full up”. We need to grow the highland economy. Here we have a family, and there are others that want to contribute to our life here and the Government are acting in a way that is detrimental to our interests.

Gregg Brain: Can I make a comment as well?

Chair: Yes, please.

Gregg Brain: As I am sure the panel is well aware, we were unfortunately in the situation where we are the subject of global attention a few weeks ago when this story broke. With the instant connectivity of the internet and social media, our profile on Facebook was hitting over 30,000 shares at one point. I am not aware of one other person who has stuck their hand up anywhere and said, “Me too” for the post-study work visa issue.

Chair: That is very important.

Q257 Margaret Ferrier: Obviously one of your main concerns, which we have heard throughout all of this, is about your son and the fact that he is attending the Gaelic-medium primary school in Dingwall. One of his teachers has said that moving him from here back to Australia would have an adverse effect on his studies.

Kathryn Brain: Indeed.

Q258 Margaret Ferrier: We can see that is a major concern, apart from the financial side of things. How difficult has it been to find work with a tier two sponsor and what kind of jobs have you been looking for?

Gregg Brain: If I can cover off the comment as well as the question? Lachlan’s education through the Gaelic medium was something we decided on as being very important for him; the opportunity to be brought up bilingually from an early age was important. Being of highland descent—my wife’s maiden name is Munro; my family on my mother’s side are McKinnons and McMillans from Skye.

Kathryn Brain: Just up the road.

Gregg Brain: My mother’s ashes are spread over a graveyard at Cill Chrìosd on the Elgol road not many miles from here. Bringing Lachlan up in the culture of our families has been

something that was very important to us. We felt it as a duty almost to help reinvigorate Gaelic culture. I understand Mr Danter, one of your earlier witnesses, spoke about a need for “breeding pairs” I think he quite bluntly put it. I would submit you have them in front of you. That has been something that has been very important. I am linguistically challenged. I freely admit that. Yes. My wife is fractionally better than I am. Lachlan is far better than either of us. For the two of us about as much as I could say is, “Tha beagan Gàidhlig agam” but Lachlan is fluent for his age and stage of development. He has competed in mods for four years now. He has had no formal education in English; that ordinarily starts at P4 in Gaelic medium. That means, if we were to go back to Australia now, he would be going back into probably P3, probably the second half of P3 because it runs on a calendar year basis in Australia, having had no formal education in English. It would place him at least two years behind his peers academically. No matter how successful and clever he sees himself as now, if you get told in the most constructive terms, “No, you’ve got it wrong. Do it again” that will impact on your self-image and to how you view education, probably for the rest of your life. For James Brokenshire to say that this would impose—I think the exact words were—“no unreasonable difficulty”, is something I find astonishing for a Government who would penalise somebody who keeps their children away from school for two weeks.

Q259 Chair: You will know the focus of this inquiry is to look at particular issues to do with population and demography in Scotland. We have heard quite compelling evidence that there are specific challenges in Scotland. We are hearing positive new stories about the Highlands of Scotland and about how the population has increased, which we are all really grateful for and happy to hear, but there are still massive issues. We have heard again today that there is a disparity around the highland area. Mr Brain, I think it was you who said that it is the breeding pairs, immigration, that has helped secure this. What particular skills would you be in a position to bring to Scotland in order to try to meet some of the challenges we have with our immigration and demography?

Gregg Brain: My own skill set is in civil policy design and health and safety, although my qualifications were not recognised when I came here and I had to study further, at my own expense, for what is called local NEBOSH accreditation. It sounds kind of sad from my own perspective; the main thing I would like to think I am bringing to Scotland is my son. He has been our primary motivating factor here.

Ian Blackford: Yes, this is a very important topic that you are raising, Pete. Let me give you an example of the part of Skye that I live in—Waternish—which, like other parts of Skye, has seen an increase in its population over the last 50 years. I know you covered that this morning. 35% of the population of Waternish is over 65, so when we talk about the demographic challenges that we have in Scotland that is in much sharper focus here in the Highlands. While there are many good stories to be told I think the existence of the University of the Highlands and Islands is transformational in allowing young people to be educated here up to degree level, something that could not happen in the past and Kathryn, of course, has come in and participated with that.

But we need to create a competitive advantage in order that young families will come and want to live here, so the major challenge I believe that we face is one of connectivity. That is true if you are talking about traditional transport connectivity. It is also true when you talk about digital connectivity. When you come here to Skye today I guess some people when they come here for the first time might be surprised at the size of the island, and just

simply the task of getting around it: the task of getting here and the task of getting off here. We faced some issues with the ferry from Armadale over the course of the summer period, and the way that we are not being fairly treated in terms of making sure that we have a ferry that is fit for purpose. We have one road off Skye that regularly gets blocked by traffic accidents and so on and so forth. There is enormous investment going on in the A9, which of course we all welcome but we also need to pay cognisance of the requirement for decent road connectivity on the western side of the country as well.

Then of course you come to digital connectivity. You will have experienced just coming here the difficulty of getting mobile reception as you travel from the east to the west side of the country, and then broadband has been covered. We are going to lose people if they cannot get the basics of life, which is what connectivity is, so we need to make sure that Government—and that is true whether it is in London or Edinburgh—recognise the challenges that we face and give us the helping hand that allows us to help ourselves.

Q260 Chair: Could I put two points to you in response to all that? You are right about the dependency ratio because this Committee has heard that we have a shrinking working-age population, which is therefore expected to support an elderly population that is described as “economically inactive”. There is a conversation about that too, about what we mean by these terms. It seems like Scotland lags behind the rest of the UK when it comes to that dependency ratio and we also lag behind the European average, and it seems again that the Highlands lag behind the rest of Scotland when it comes to this. How do we start to address this particular issue? How do we grow the population of Scotland to try to address this? Where do couples like Mr and Mrs Brain fit in to how we achieve that?

Ian Blackford: We need to make it a place where people can compete. I can give you an example of a business based in Ballachulish that is a world-leading business in rope access, but because of problems with connectivity they have had to open an office in Glasgow. A business that is based in the Highlands that is thriving, in order to compete effectively has had to go away. That is not right, and that is what I mean about making sure that we have the right level of connectivity. If we can offer people digital connectivity and decent transport connectivity, an airport on Skye, for example, then we will increase the opportunities for people to locate.

There are more Greggs and Kathryns, whether they come from Scotland or further afield, that want to be part of the story of the growth of the Highlands. This is a tremendous place to live and work. Digital connectivity should open up opportunities for people to run businesses in the Highlands and Islands. I think you only have to look at what is happening in Sleat and you can look at the success around the college. Sleat has been a success story. You can see other businesses that have developed there. There is an architect’s business in this building, for example. There is the new distillery that is coming here, so this is a beacon of hope but it is about creating more beacons of hope throughout the Highlands and Islands, people recognising that you need to put that desire of delivering decent social services so we can look after our elderly with an entrepreneurial culture. But for an entrepreneurial culture to develop you need the tools to allow you to do that, and that is where the Government comes in.

Gregg Brain: Can I also make a point here? There is an enormous resource waiting for the Highlands to take use of it and that is the Scottish diaspora. If any of you have ever been in Eastern Canada, Australia, New Zealand or South Africa on 1 January you will have seen that there are none so Scottish as diasporic Scots.

Kathryn Brain: That is where we came in really.

Gregg Brain: For tens of thousands of them, millions of them, there is a dream that they would one day return to live in Scotland. Of those millions there are thousands who would actually get up and do it if they could see a way.

Q261 Chris Law: On that note a very straight question: would Scotland clearly benefit from having its own immigration policy?

Ian Blackford: Chris, there is absolutely no question because we have an immigration policy that is not fit for purpose. That is really what Gregg has just described. I use the expression that Alex Salmond has used many times, Scotland's not full up. We need to counteract the challenge we have from an ageing population. We need to attract people in, whether that is from the diaspora, whether that is from Europe. We need to disengage ourselves from the horrible immigration debate that has been part of the EU referendum. We have all seen the increase in hate crimes that has developed, particularly in England, that has developed over the course of the last few days.

We really need to start to tell the story about how immigration enriches us. The positive story about how immigrants can bring economic prosperity to an area, how we can revitalise the Highlands. So absolutely, yes, we need to have control of immigration policy in Scotland so we can define an immigration policy that is fit for purpose for us about making the Highlands and Scotland a destination

Q262 Chair: We heard this morning from Professor Hunter. I know you are familiar with his work. He talked about the centuries of emigration from Scotland and how there is a particular different attitude towards immigration here in the Highlands. Is that something—again, as a Member of Parliament for this area—that you recognise and does that, therefore, mean that we should look at the Highlands as a different area, maybe not just from the whole of the UK but even from Scotland when it comes to these issues?

Ian Blackford: Absolutely, because as I travel around the constituency—as I have done before being elected and over the course of the last 14 months—I cannot recall a situation where people have talked negatively about immigrants coming to the Highlands. People welcome the likes of Kathryn and Gregg and others, because we recognise that is what shapes us. This has historically been a nation of migrants. We are a mongrel nation, as we have been described before, so we have nothing to fear from migration. We want to encourage migration to Scotland and particularly to the Highlands.

Q263 Chair: Just on the European referendum and the outcome and result, was I correct in hearing throughout this case, and when it has been highlighted in the press, that those that were advocating a leave vote suggesting that cases like your own may be looked at more favourably if we were to leave the European Union? Was that something I heard or was that something that you took seriously?

Gregg Brain: I took it very seriously. I don't think my reaction was entirely positive. Michael Gove did make specific comment on BBC Scottish breakfast radio, I think, referring to that family in Dingwall. I can only assume he meant us.

Kathryn Brain: Australian family.

Gregg Brain: Australian family in Dingwall.

Q264 Chair: How many Australian families in Dingwall are there?

Gregg Brain: Save for the name he was fairly specific that families like us would benefit from a post-Brexit UK where a Scottish voice would be given a greater hearing in immigration matters, and I think he said that they had approached Holyrood with an outline of how a partially devolved—at least—immigration policy might look in a Brexit scenario. My comment, in response to that, was simply at the time that any restrictions on our remaining in the UK were not coming from Holyrood or Brussels.

Q265 Chair: I would imagine this is something that your Member of Parliament would like to remind the current Justice Secretary about.

Ian Blackford: Absolutely. I have a correspondence ongoing with the Immigration Minister. I see I have had another letter this morning, although I cannot open it. I will be saying to him, “Look, we need to go back to the basics here and the basics are that you have the power to give this family the right to stay under the post-study work visa. You need to re-institute that. Don’t hide behind fig leaves about what you could change in the future, but actually dealing with the here and now do the right thing. Give the family the right to stay. Give them the right to go back to work and to be able to make sure that they can look after their own interests and that they can provide the living for Lachlan and for themselves. Give them the time to be able to qualify for the tier two visa that they need to do. Do the right thing in the short-term, which is the right to live, so don’t hide behind an EU referendum. Let’s take what has been disgraceful politicking from the Justice Secretary out of this and do the right thing by the family”.

Q266 Chair: I know, because I have observed it in Parliament, you have had meetings with the Minister, you have had written questions and you were even granted an Urgent Question from the Speaker. What more is there you feel that you can do in order to make representations on behalf of the family?

Ian Blackford: I have to say it is absolutely fantastic that this Committee is taking an interest in it so that all helps. I know that the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee, Keith Vaz, has also said that he wants to see the family come and address that Committee as well. Over the course of the next few weeks, we need to increase the pressure on the Government to say to the Minister, “Look, you still have it within your power to do the right thing. Your answer to me, your written answer last week, really does bring home to us that there is hardly anyone at all that would be in the same situation that Gregg and Kathryn are, so give them that opportunity to stay under what is rightfully theirs, which is the post-study work visa”. That is what we are asking for and I will continue to ask for in the short term.

Q267 Chair: I have been asked about this by the media this morning. The way that I described it and the way that Mr and Mrs Brain have been treated is almost like a second highland clearance. I feel we are now removing people of economic activity like there was during the first clearances. I do not know what your views are about that or Mrs Brain’s are.

Ian Blackford: Can I just say something specific to that? I used that language and I was criticised for it but I think it is absolutely right and it is particularly right that the whole story of clearance was about eviction. Because Gregg and Kathryn are in the situation that they don't have a long-term right to stay here they were evicted from the house they were living in because they were classed, effectively, as illegal immigrants, for want of a better term. That whole linkage with the highland clearance is correct because, frankly, that is the way they have been treated.

Q268 Chair: Does Mr Brain have a view about that? You are obviously somebody interested in the history of Scotland in the area, where you are and how you fall into that particular historic episode.

Kathryn Brain: The reason we have Australian accents is because of the clearances to start with.

Gregg Brain: The reason we are talking with these disgustingly flat accents is precisely because our family saw no reasonable option but to throw everything that they had in a bet on a better life in another country. Far be it from me to make any link. It has already been made and I would like to discourage any links between our previous landlord and Patrick Sellar. He has made his own decisions in his own interests.

But as I said to you earlier, we made a plan here based on a six or seven-year plan. Theresa May said in 2014 that she would welcome immigrants that were willing to culturally assimilate and pay their own way. We would like to put a bit more into that offer from our end and say that, not only would we be willing to do that but we would be willing to live and work in what is comparatively a sparsely populated and economically depressed area of the country.

There are two circumstances where you do not need an immigration policy. One is where you let nobody in and one is where you let everybody in. Outside of that the purpose of an immigration policy must be that you select only those people that are a net asset to the national interest. The detail is where you get the problem. But if you have a family who have been working, and we brought approximately £200,000—and it came over piecemeal at different exchange rates, so I cannot tell you what the actual value was—of our own cash to this country. In the last four years while I have been working here we have paid something like £40,000 or £50,000 in taxes.

Kathryn Brain: With no recourse to public funds.

Gregg Brain: With no recourse to public funds. It is an express condition of our visa. To do all of that, planning seven years ahead, you can understand why I feel that this is an astonishing breach of faith to have recently received a letter from James Brokenshire where he said, and I quote, “Applicants should never assume that provisions in place at the time of their initial entry to the UK will continue to be viable options in future years”.

Q269 Margaret Ferrier: A final comment, and as you said it is what Lachlan will give back to the local area in the years to come, setting aside yourselves, Gregg and Kathryn. It is what Lachlan will bring to this area going forwards. The world is his oyster.

Gregg Brain: Yes. We have a boy here who is seven and a half years old. He is fluent in two languages. He is doing very well at school competing confidently on public stages.

This is a lad who has a very bright future ahead of him, who has the ability to contribute linguistically and culturally to this country. He has friends of ours he spends time with who are poets, musicians, performers, professors, linguists and lawyers. He has an astonishingly broad cultural base to which he has been exposed. He has the opportunity to contribute so much to this country.

Kathryn Brain: He has already expressed an interest in becoming a Gaelic teacher one day, so that is something he has decided.

Gregg Brain: That may change next week.

Kathryn Brain: Who knows?

Gregg Brain: He may be a Gaelic teaching astronaut.

Q270 Margaret Ferrier: Is there much call for that in Australia?

Gregg Brain: No, and in fact to get back to your question about his education our best outcome, were we to return to Australia, would be that he would get a bilingually fluent Gaelic and English teacher who could explain the differences in orthography, the differences in spelling conventions, syntax, grammar and take him through that. The chances of that occurring are essentially zero.

Q271 Chair: We are eternally grateful and thank you for that and I hope you do have a look at our work and people study work schemes. As part of this inquiry it is quite likely we will be talking to UK and to Scottish Ministers about some of the major themes we are looking at. I would suspect we would want to raise this with UK Ministers, once again given that you have come along here today and given us quite compelling evidence. We will also want to ask the Committee the point that you and Mr Blackford made, Mr Brain, about how many other people are in your situation. If that cannot be answered through a written question there may be other means available to try to secure that information.

Gregg Brain: I also reiterate an implication I think you made earlier on this last week that a lot of what you have heard today has been personal, which I am quite grateful for. There has been a lot of talk about numbers and statistics about arbitrary limits for immigration, about scores on immigration applications forms. All these things have enormous human impact and something that is completely lacking—I would not even say sadly lacking, I would say completely lacking—from the immigration process is compassion. There seems to be no allowance, whatsoever, for the human impacts of the decisions that are made.

Kathryn Brain: That impacts not just on us personally but it is the community we are part of.

Gregg Brain: Not just on us and Lachlan but the wider community. We are aware of friends who are shopkeepers in a very small rural village who, despite their visa troubles—and they are not anxious for public attention so I will not mention their names—are the lifeblood of a small community. You have to travel 30 miles to get—

Q272 Chair: Just on that, as a Member of Parliament I know Mr Blackford cannot raise other specific issues and cases, but I think since your case has emerged all of us have been

contacted by individuals and constituents who are not in the same situation but in the same spectrum of difficulties of their experience in this, and I have personally had that in my constituency and other colleagues have. One thing you may have usefully added to is the debate about all this and I do not know if you have any views about the response you have had, particularly to the media appearances you have made. I do not know if there have been petitions set up or messages of goodwill. I do not know if you have anything you want to say about that but, certainly, the way I have observed this there is a message that has quite clearly come through about all of this and what has happened.

Gregg Brain: We are enormously grateful that our situation has had some sort of cut-through on the immigration debate in this country. We have been absolutely overwhelmed by the support we have had. We have had some close friends who set up a Facebook page, who were talking to their friends in radio stations and media, who got the profile, the snowflake that started this avalanche. It is something that we went into with no small degree of ambivalence. We did not move to a small village in the Highlands for the attention. It was something we were not anxious to do but, again, Lachlan is our prime motivating factor. If it was going to be able to do something that would help him then there was no barrier we would not consider. We have been really fortunate that we have had incredibly loyal friends, an MP who we would send e-mails to after midnight to have the phone ring 30 seconds later with a response.

Kathryn Brain: You were awake because we just hit the send button.

Gregg Brain: We said, "It arrived in his email." I don't know what it is about our particular story, and it is no credit to us that it is something that has captured the nation's imagination but I am glad that it has. I am glad that it has brought this to attention and people, like our friends in Laggan, the Phillips family in Glasgow, Mr Manonga with his citizenship application and dozens and dozens of others with parallel applications.

Q273 Chair: Can I suggest to you that the dignified, articulate and passionate way that you have put forward your own personal circumstances was an enormous chime with the Scottish people and the Committee wants to congratulate you for the way you have pursued this? We will see what we can do to pick up this issue in the future.

Ian Blackford: Can I say one thing on that, Pete, because I think it is important? At one point the Minister said to me, "You are going to make sure on the basis that I have not done what you want us to do, you are going to get maximum publicity". I said, "Yes, because you are not doing the right thing. If you did the right thing this story would go away", because Gregg and Kathryn have no real desire to be front page of the newspapers. If the Minister responds in the correct manner this story will have an ending and it will have a happy ending.

Gregg Brain: Can I honestly say that we don't see this as a nationalistic or a party political issue. We see it as a bureaucracy issue. I have had difficulty with some of the answers we have had back from the Immigration Department, and from Mr Brokenshire personally, and that has caused difficulty in the way I view how things have occurred.

At the outset of this if Mr Brokenshire had wanted to appear beside us at a press conference saying, "I have reviewed the further leave to remain applications they made. I acknowledge that there were errors of fact and law in it such as there were, but I have ordered a review and as such I have decided that we will go forward with a two-year

further leave to remain and a right to work. I cannot give you a post-study work visa because they do not exist anymore but I can do two years under the FLRO with a right to work. That is within my remit and I am making this decision because it is the right decision in the national interest". I would have happily stood there smiling, shook the man's hand and that would have been the end of it, if he had done that with a confidentiality agreement.

We are not doing it for the attention and, look, I thank you for your comments. I thank you for the time you have given us today. I really do appreciate it. If it helps us and people in similar situations then, as I have said to other people before, when we started out with this we were just complaining to anyone who would listen. Since then we have realised that we can become global headlines if that is what it takes. We can change the face of the immigration debate in this country if that what it takes. If you would pass on to Mr Brokenshire we will not go away.

Chair: Yes. I am really grateful, and I think all the Committee are, for coming at short notice and giving us that compelling evidence and, as part of this inquiry, we will most definitely be raising this in any way that we can, so thank you for coming today. Again, if there is anything further that you observe in the course of the inquiry, you might want to look at the Minister's evidence, for example, and want to contribute to this inquiry please get in touch with us again. Thank you for your time. Thank you, Mr Blackford, for coming along too.