

Understanding Place

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Big Picture Thinking seminar series with
Argyll & Bute Third Sector Interface
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Session structure

- Exercise - how you think about space?
- What affects our understanding of place.
- Impact on policymaking and service provision.
- How we categorise place.
- Exercise - what elements would you include in classifications?
- Scottish Island Typologies.
- Presentation Q&A.
- Discussion - what is needed to improve the understanding of rural Scotland?

Think of a village, town, island or neighbourhood you know well.

If I didn't know anything about it, how would you describe it to me?

What characteristics would you emphasise to a funder?

What characteristics would you emphasise to someone making decisions affecting the place?

Can these be characteristics be measured? What data might you use?

What is space? What is place?

"Space, then, has been seen in distinction to place as a realm without meaning – as a 'fact of life' which, like time, **produces the basic coordinates for human life**. When humans **invest meaning** in a portion of space and then **become attached** to it in some way (naming is one such way) it becomes a place."

Cresswell, T. (2014). Introduction: Defining Place. In Cresswell, T. (ed.), Place: An Introduction, 13-30. John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, Newark.





The meaning we attribute to places can differ from person to person, may depend on an individual's specific background and circumstances, and can change over time.








WOOF'S BEDBEROM






Small Isles Primary School
Bun-sgoil nan Eilean Beaga


A846
Google Maps
Image capture: Dec 2021 © 2026 Google





20 Minute Neighbourhoods

Aims to provide access to the majority of daily needs (shops, banks, schools, etc) within a 20-minute walk, wheel, or cycle from home.

"What percentage of the population is more than 20 minutes from services by public transport?"

"Forget distance from services! Many live more than 20 minutes from the public transport!"

Respondents quoted in a report by Scottish Rural Action, January 2022

"It is an approach likely to be more readily achievable in urban places, towns, villages, and cities."

Local Government and Housing Directorate (2024)
Local living and 20 minute neighbourhoods: planning guidance, p. 3.
The Scottish Government, Edinburgh

Living well locally









It’s not just that rural and island areas are not urban. They are not *trying* to be urban.



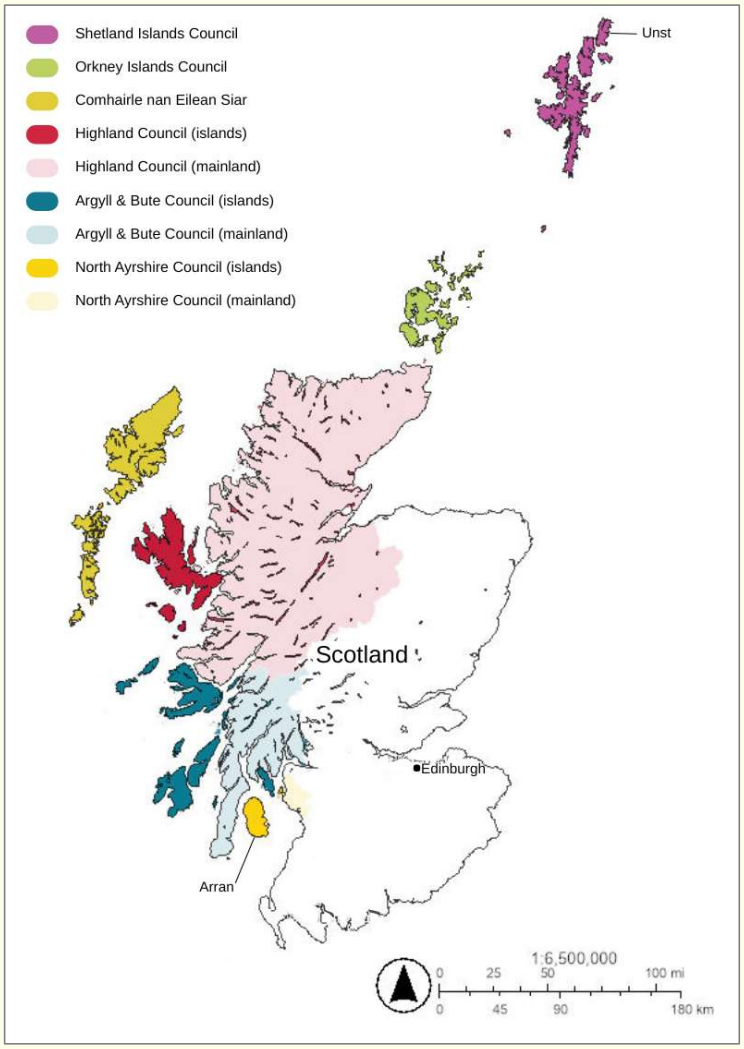
Rural Proofing

"Rural proofing is assessing what might affect outcomes in rural areas and adjusting policies or policy delivery when appropriate and practicable."

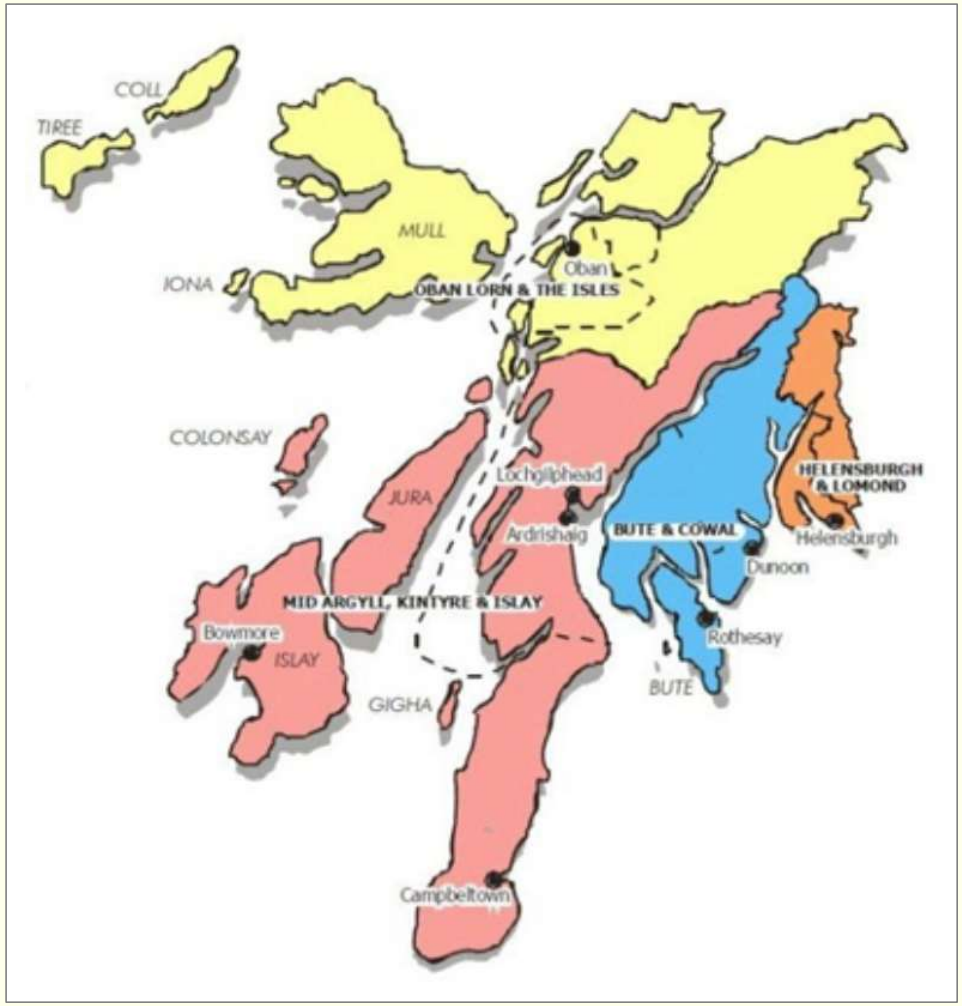
Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (2025). The government's approach to rural proofing, 2025. UK Government, London.

"If your policy requires rural or island exceptions it is, by its nature, an urban-centric policy."

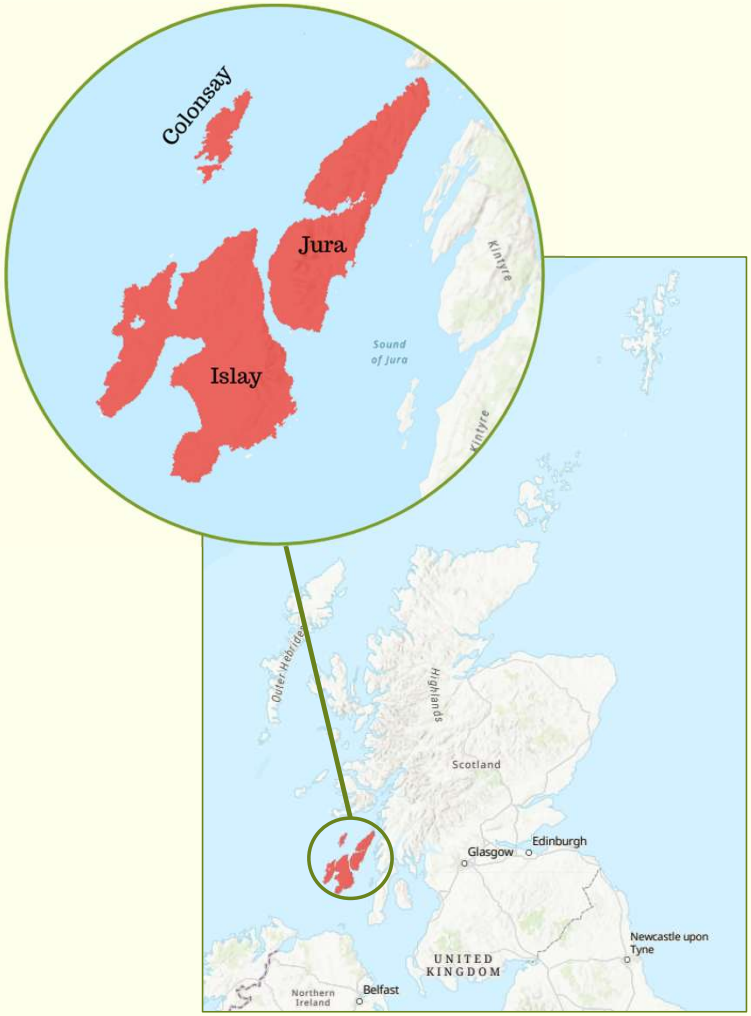
K Gow (on Twitter some time in 2023)



Scottish Local Authority areas with inhabited offshore islands



Administrative regions of Argyll and Bute Council – taken from https://www.argyll-bute.gov.uk/sites/default/files/building_standards_local_office_locations_-_january_2023.pdf



	Islay	Jura	Colonsay
Area (sq mile)	239	142	15.7
Population (2011 census)	3228	196	124
Population density (people per sq mile)	13.5	1.4	7.9
Whisky distilleries	9 (and counting)	1	0
Direct mainland ferry - vehicles	Several daily	No - travel via Islay	Daily Mar-Oct / 4x per week Nov-Mar
Direct mainland ferry - passengers	Several daily	Summer only	Daily Mar-Oct / 4x per week Nov-Mar
Direct mainland ferry berth	Kennacraig / Oban	Tayvallich (passenger only)	Oban
Cost return car & driver to mainland (Nov 2022)	£87.90	£115.86	£87.90
Airport	Yes	No	Yes
Primary schools	5	1	1
Secondary schools	1	None - pupils travel to Islay daily.	None - pupils board in Oban, coming home at weekends.
Grocery stores	Multiple	1 - community run	1 - privately run
Leisure centres / swimming pools	1	0	0

Comparison of various aspects of island life (2022): Islay, Jura, and Colonsay

Did we need another spatial classification?

(Some) existing classifications:

- Urban Rural Classifications[1]
- Deprivation measures
- Sparsely Populated Areas[2]
- Geographic Regions
- Local Authority Areas
- Data Zones
- Housing Market Areas
- Scottish Island Regions (2023) geography[3]

- Majority are designed from a mainland / urban perspective view.
- Larger islands can overshadow smaller islands within existing groupings.
- Combining small islands based on location can overlook differences between islands and skew data towards larger islands.
- Where more nuanced framing exists is tends to have a local authority focus.

Imagine you're trying to develop a framework that would help policymakers, funders or service providers understand the diversity of rural and island communities.

What characteristics would you want to include to help them understand how these places actually function?

How would you go about measuring them?

Report back on:

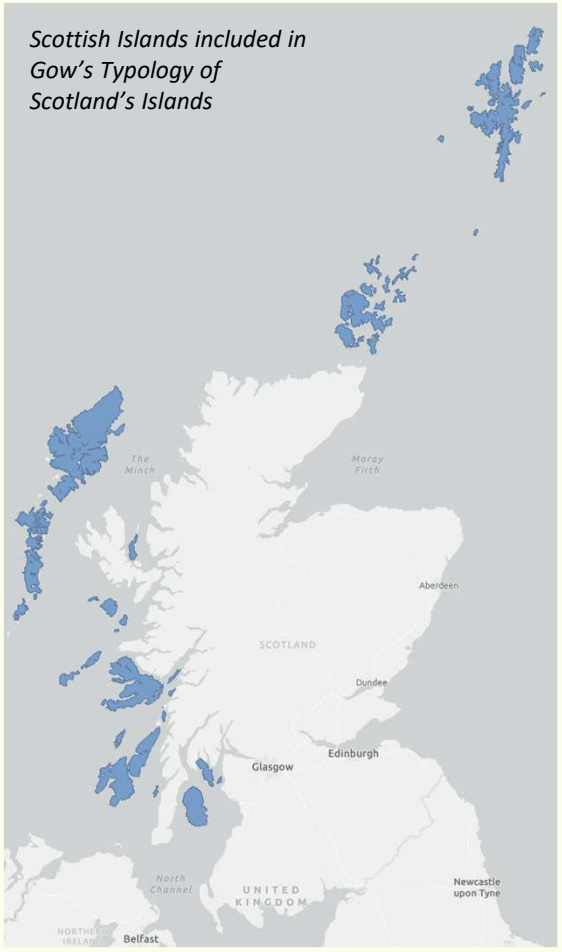
- (a few) characteristics you think are particularly important,
- possible ways of measuring them,
- anything you think might be missing from existing data.

Gow's Typology of Scotland's Islands: starting point

<u>Scope:</u> Inhabited offshore Scottish islands with existing communities, for which the relevant data are available, and which depend on maritime and / or air transport to access mainland Scotland.

- Baseline data – Island Boundaries 2022 dataset[4]
- Exclusions:
  - Uninhabited islands
  - Islands in in-land waters
  - Islands with permanent, fixed links to the Scottish mainland
  - Islands which are solely owned or managed for private interests (including religious purposes)
  - Single household islands
  - Islands with key data missing from the 2011 census

71 islands / 49 island groupings in Gow's Typology



1. Arran
2. Barra & Vatersay
3. Bressay
4. Bute
5. Canna & Sanday
6. Coll
7. Colonsay & Oronsay
8. Cumbrae
9. Easdale
10. Eday
11. Egilsay
12. Eigg
13. Erraid
14. Fair Isle
15. Fetlar
16. Flotta
17. Foula
18. Gigha
19. Graemsay
20. Hoy & Walls
21. Iona
22. Islay
23. Jura
24. Kerrera
25. **Lewis, Harris & Connected isles**
26. Luing
27. Lismore
28. **Mainland Orkney & connected isles**
29. **Mainland Shetland & connected isles**
30. Muck
31. Mull
32. North Ronaldsay
33. Papa Stour
34. Papa Westray
35. Raasay
36. Rousay
37. Rum
38. Sanday (Orkney)
39. **Skerries**
40. Shapinsay
41. Stronsay
42. Tiree
43. **Uist & connected isles**
44. Ulva & Gometra
45. Unst
46. Westray
47. Whalsay
48. Wyre
49. Yell

Lewis, Harris & connected isles comprising Lewis and Harris, Great Bernera and Scalpay.

Mainland Orkney & connected isles comprising Mainland Orkney, Burray and South Ronaldsay.

Mainland Shetland & connected Isles comprising Mainland Shetland, East Burra, Muckle Roe, Trondra, and West Burra.

Skerries comprising Bruray and Housay.

Uist & connected isles comprising Baleshare, Benbecula, Berneray, Eriskay, Flodaigh, Grimsay (NW Benbecula), Grimsay (SW Benbecula), North Uist and South Uist.

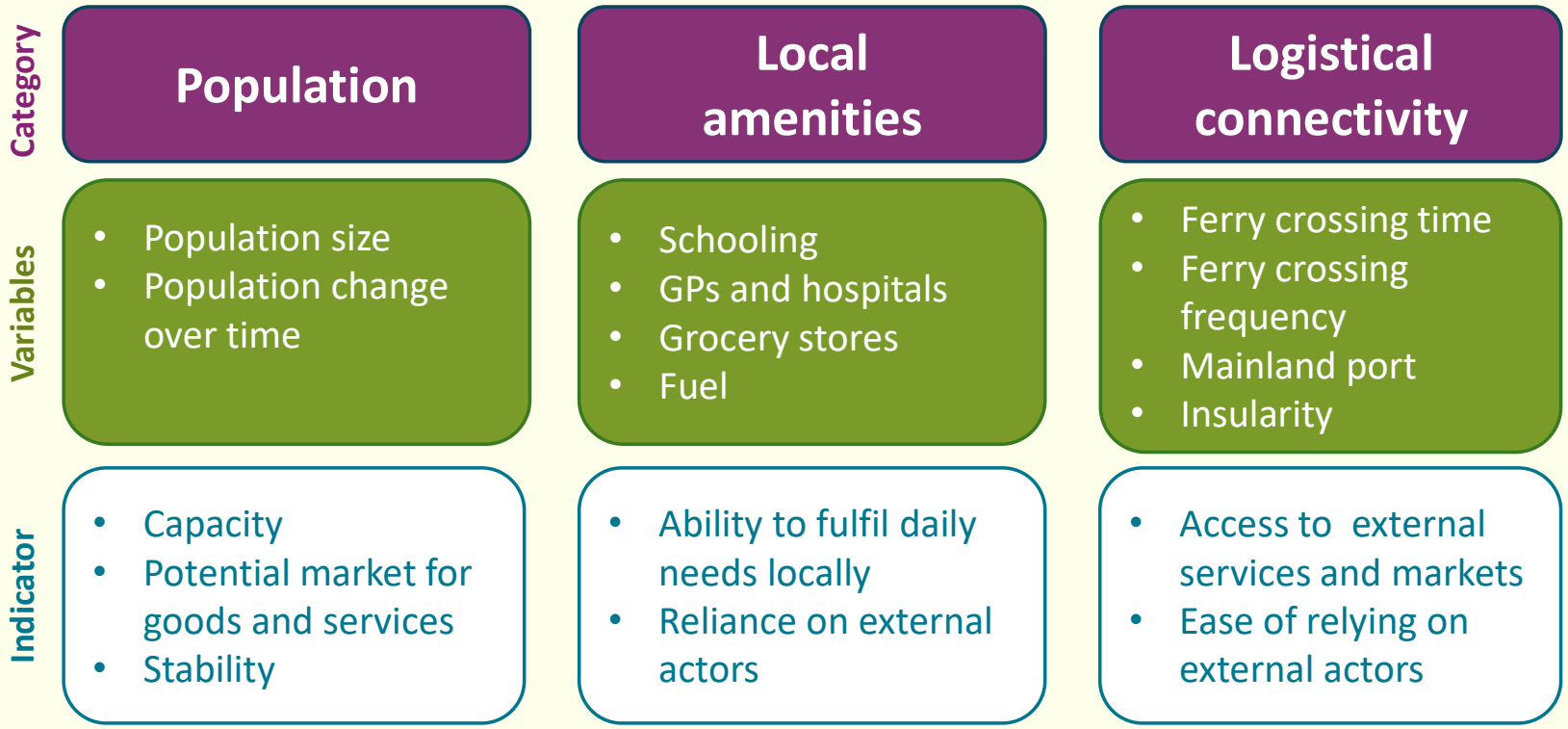
Capacity and reliance

- What capacity does an island have to provide for day-to-day needs and facilitate future plans?
- How much must an island rely on the outside world for this?
- How easy or difficult it is to rely on the outside world?

"… each of us must rely upon forces beyond our control – and just as often forces beyond our comprehension – in order for our plans to be successful."

(Smith, 2010, p. 135) [5]

Assessing capacity and reliance



Gow et al. (2026) [6]

Analysis

Canna & Sanday	0.7	0.7	0.6
Erraid	0.4	0.9	0.3
Fair Isle	0.8	0.6	0.9
Fetlar	0.2	0.1	0.8
Foula	0.6	0.6	0.5
Papa Stour	0.0	0.6	0.5
Skerries	0.5	0.6	0.9
Gigha	0.9	1.6	1.2
Hoy & Walls	0.9	1.3	1.3
Papa Westray	0.7	1.3	1.2
Rousay	1.0	1.3	1.2
Sanday	1.0	1.3	1.5
Shapinsay	0.9	1.3	1.2
Stronsay	0.7	1.3	1.4
Westray	0.8	1.3	1.5
Coll	1.4	1.1	1.1
Colonsay & Oronsay	1.3	1.1	1.1
Eday	1.0	1.3	1.0
Egilsay	0.7	1.3	0.6
Eigg	1.1	1.0	0.7
Flotta	0.3	1.3	0.9
Graemsay	0.9	1.3	0.6
Muck	0.9	0.9	0.6
North Ronaldsay	0.4	1.3	1.0
Rum	0.9	1.0	0.6
Wyre	0.9	1.3	0.6

Barra & Vatersay	1.1	0.9	1.7
Bressay	1.2	0.6	0.7
Jura	0.7	0.7	1.3
Tiree	0.9	1.0	1.7
Unst	0.7	0.1	1.5
Whalsay	1.2	0.6	1.5
Yell	0.8	0.6	1.7
Easdale	1.1	1.9	0.8
Iona	1.3	1.9	0.7
Kerrera	0.5	1.9	0.8
Lismore	1.4	1.8	1.2
Luing	1.2	1.9	0.9
Raasay	0.9	1.6	0.9
Ulva & Gometra	0.2	1.9	0.6
Islay	1.0	1.2	2.4
Lewis, Harris & connected isles	1.0	1.1	2.4
Mainland Shetland & connected isles	1.5	1.1	2.4
Uist & connected isles	1.3	1.2	2.4
Arran	1.5	2.3	2.4
Bute	1.2	2.4	2.3
Cumbrae	1.3	2.2	1.4
Mainland Orkney & connected isles	1.6	1.5	2.4
Mull	1.5	2.4	2.4

Island types: Gow's Typology of Scotland's Islands

- Connected Independent Islands
- Fragile Islands
- Independent Hub Islands
- Independent Outer Isles
- Semi-Reliant Islands
- Reliant Inner Isles
- Reliant Outer Isles

Important caveats:

- *This typology does not suggest a scale or a hierarchy.*
- *The typology compares islands to each other, not to other areas such as mainland Scotland.*

Connected Independent Islands

Population	Local amenities	Logistical connectivity
Higher than average populations which are mainly growing.	Highest level of access to local amenities.	High levels of access to mainland Scotland

- Arran
- Bute
- Great Cumbrae
- Mainland Orkney & connected isles[a]
- Mull

[a] comprising Burray, Lamb Holm, Mainland Orkney, and South Ronaldsay

Independent Hub Islands

Population	Local amenities	Logistical connectivity
Higher than average populations which are mainly growing.	High level of access to local amenities.	Mid to low levels of access to mainland Scotland

- Islay
- Lewis, Harris & connected isles[a]
- Mainland Shetland & connected isles[b]
- Uist & connected isles[c]

[a] comprising Great Bernera, Lewis and Harris, and Scalpay
[b] comprising East Burra, Mainland Shetland, Muckle Roe, Trondra, and West Burra
[c] comprising Baleshare, Benbecula, Berneray, Eriskay, Flodaigh, Grimsay (N), Grimsay (S), North Uist, and South Uist.

Independent Outer Isles

Population	Local amenities	Logistical connectivity
Mid-range population levels which are mainly declining.	High level of access to local amenities.	Low levels of access to mainland Scotland

- Barra & Vatersay
- Bressay
- Jura
- Tiree
- Unst
- Whalsay
- Yell

Reliant Outer Isles

Population	Local amenities	Logistical connectivity
Low population levels with a variety of growth and decline.	Low levels of access to local amenities.	Mid to low levels of access to mainland Scotland.

- Coll
- Colonsay & Oronsay
- Eday
- Egilsay

- Eigg
- Flotta
- Graemsay
- Muck

- North Ronaldsay
- Rum
- Wyre

Purpose of the typology

- ✓ Contribute to the data we have about islands.
- ✓ Allow comparison of islands to each other so we can identify:
  - differences between islands in close proximity;
  - similarities between islands which are geographically distant.

Island types: Scottish Government Typology

- Connected Independent Islands
- Independent Hub Islands
- Independent Outer Isles
- **Mainland-Connected Islands**
- **Outpost Islands**
- **Previously Inhabited Islands**
- Semi-Reliant Islands
- Reliant Inner Isles
- Reliant Outer Isles
- **Unserviced Islands**

Scottish Government (2024) [7]

Important caveats:

- This typology does not suggest a scale or a hierarchy.
- The typology compares islands to each other, not to other areas such as mainland Scotland.

Applying the typologies

Figure 4: Inhabited Scottish Islands by Local Authority area

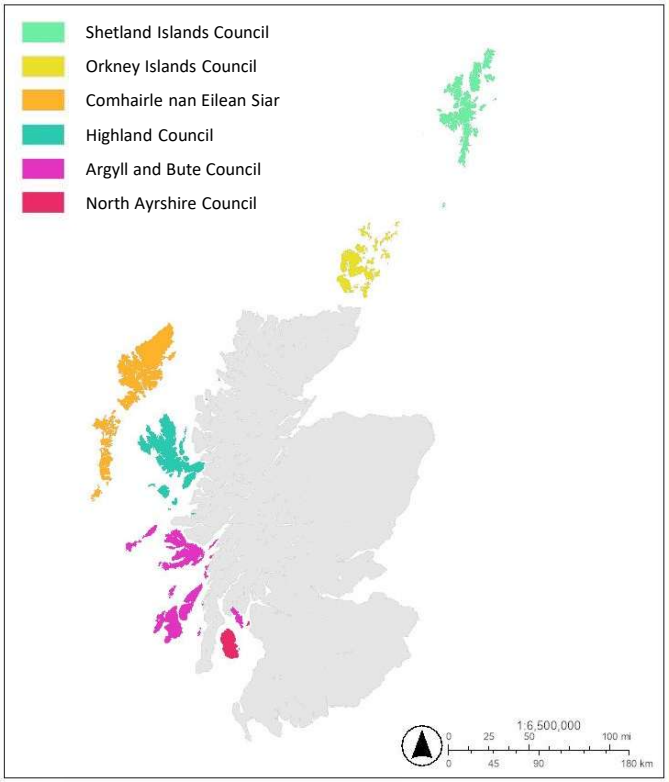


Figure 5: Inhabited Scottish Islands by Scottish Island Regions Geography (2023)[3]

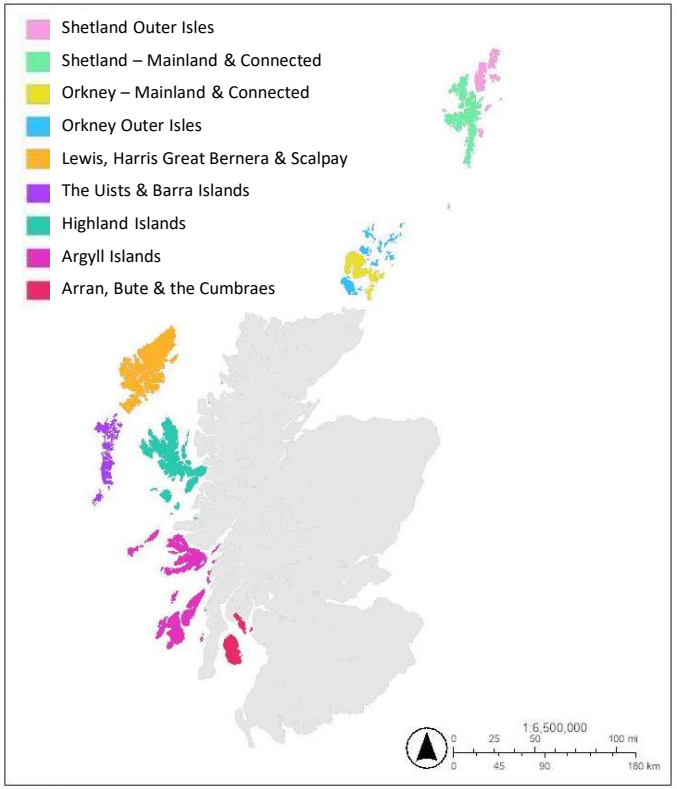
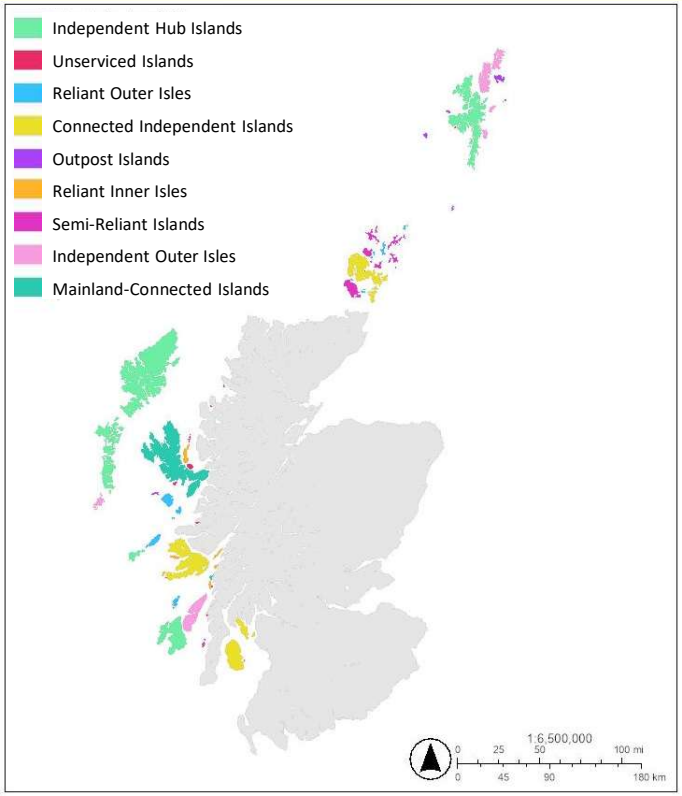
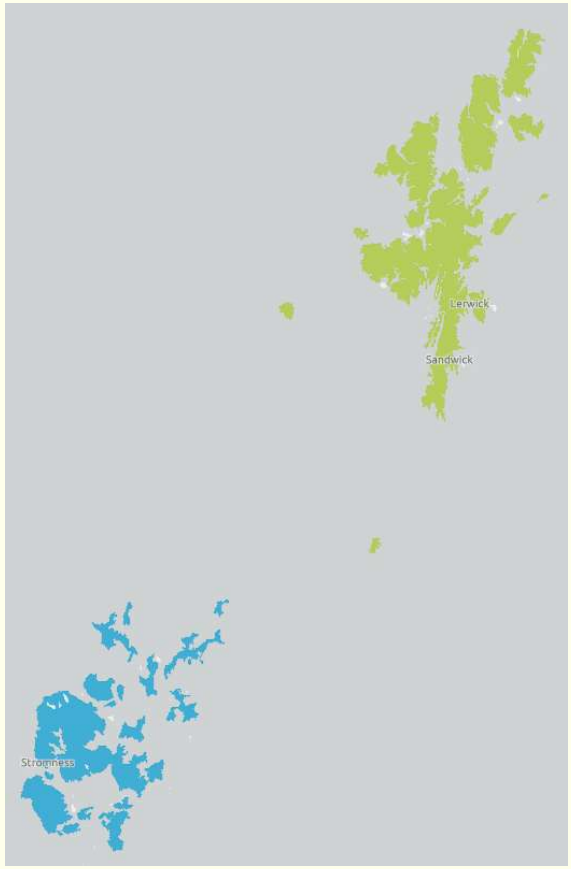


Figure 6: Inhabited Scottish Islands by Scottish Islands Typology (2024)



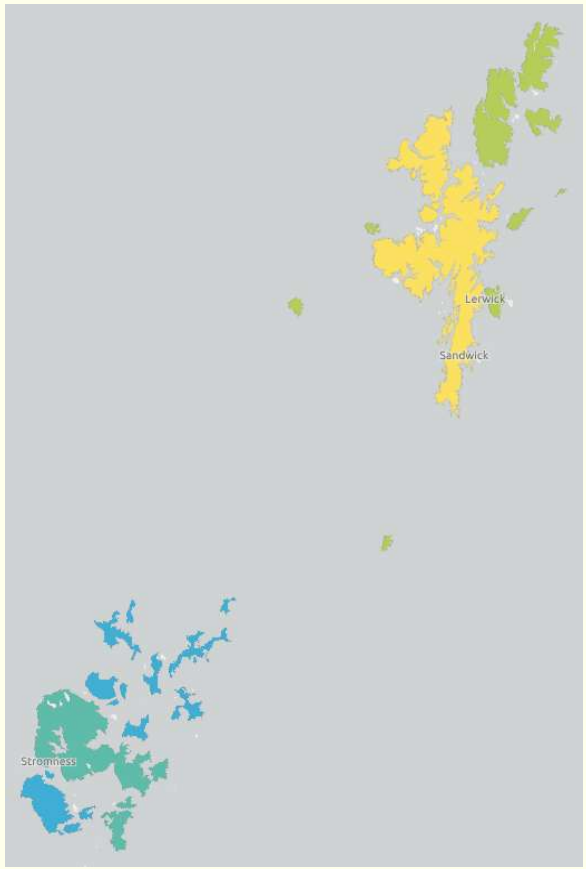
Inhabited Northern Isles by Local Authority Area



Orkney Islands Council

Shetland Islands Council

Inhabited Northern Isles by Scottish Island Regions (2023) Geography



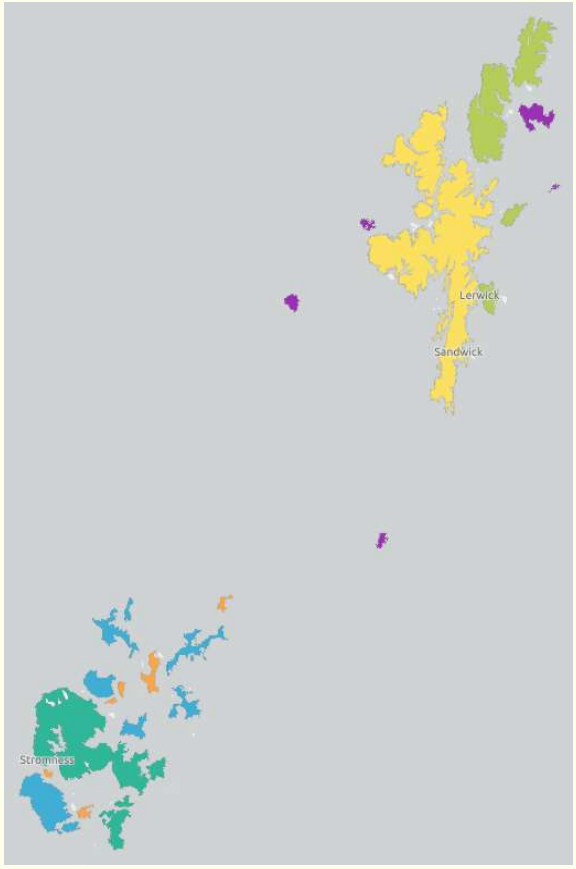
Orkney Mainland

Orkney Outer Isles

Shetland Mainland

Shetland Outer Isles

Inhabited Northern Isles by Gow's Typology of Scotland's Islands



Independent Outer Isles

Fragile Islands

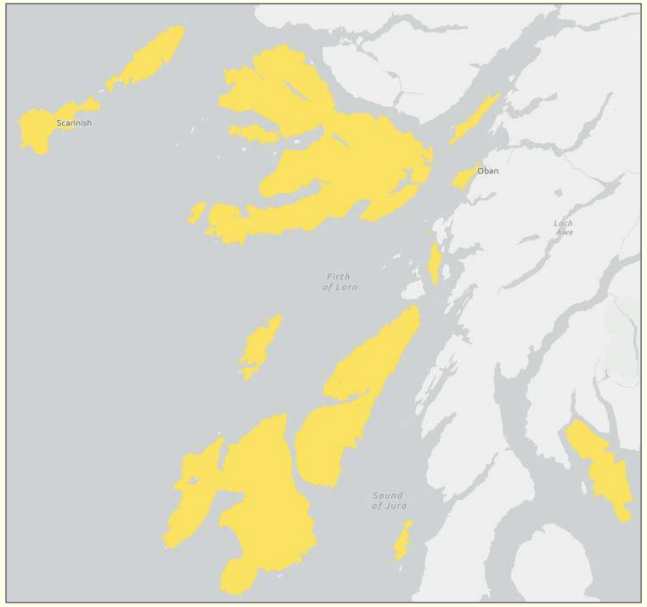
Independent Hub Islands

Reliant Outer Isles

Semi Reliant Isles

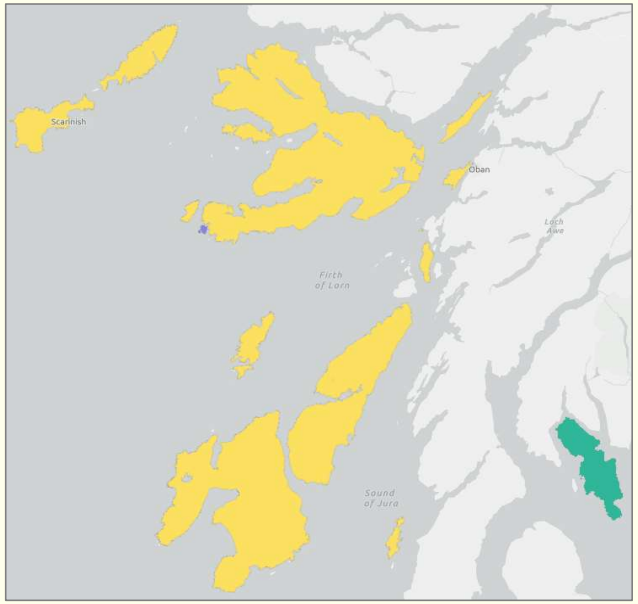
Connected Independent Islands

Inhabited Argyll Isles by Local Authority Area



Argyll and Bute Council

Inhabited Northern Isles by Scottish Island Regions (2023) Geography

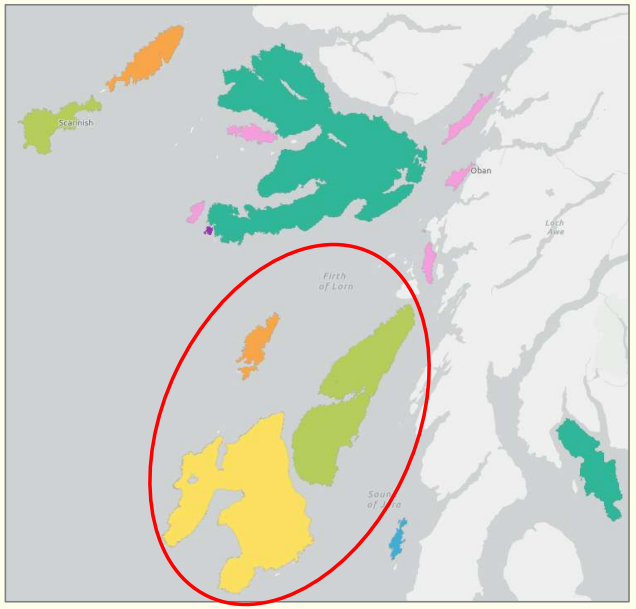


Argyll Islands

Arran, Bute and the Cumbraes

Not included in list (Erraid)

Inhabited Argyll Isles by Gow's Typology of Scotland's Islands



Independent Outer Isles

Fragile Islands

Independent Hub Islands

Reliant Inner Isles

Reliant Outer Isles

Semi Reliant Isles

Connected Independent Islands

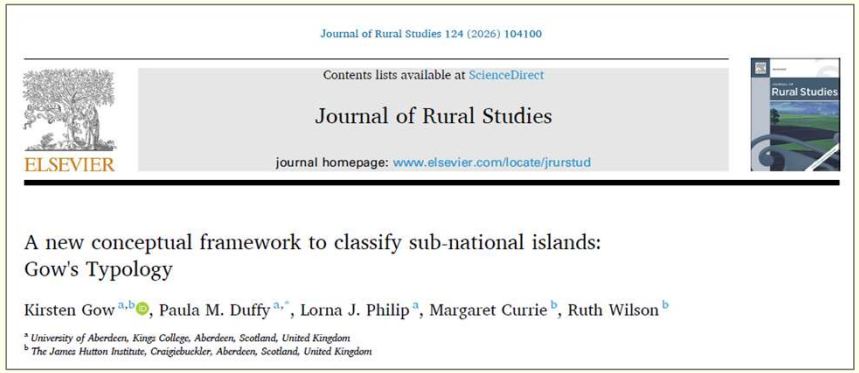
Using the Scottish islands Typology



- Helps policymakers understand the diversity of Scotland's islands.
- Supports policy development, service delivery and evaluation.
- Identifies opportunities for shared learning and collaboration.
- Provides an official evidence base for communities, funders and service providers.
- Can be adapted and expanded for other contexts.

Resources

- **A new conceptual framework to classify sub-national islands: Gow's Typology** (Gow, *et al.*, 2026)[6]
- **Gow's Typology of Scotland's Islands: Technical Note** (Gow *et al.*, 2023)[9]
- **Scottish Islands Typology Overview** (Scottish Government, 2024)[7]
- **Scottish Islands Typology Datasheet** (Scottish Government, 2024)[10]
- **Scottish Islands Typology Visual Summary** (Scottish Government, 2024)[11]


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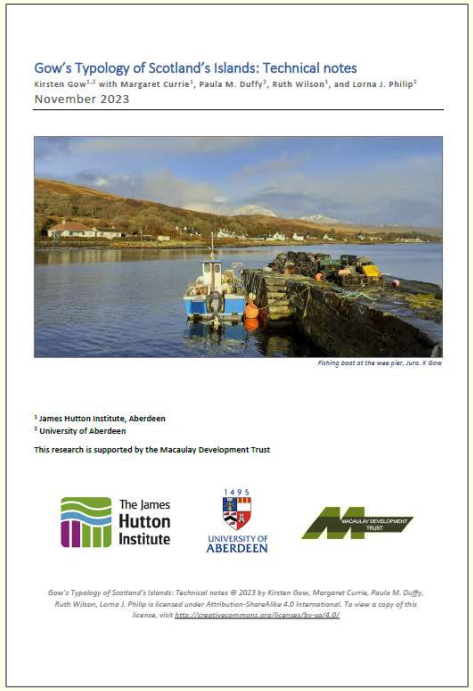
Journal of Rural Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jrurstud

A new conceptual framework to classify sub-national islands: Gow's Typology

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Gow's Typology of Scotland's Islands: Technical notes

Kirsten Gow[1,2] with Margaret Currie[1], Paula M. Duffy[2], Ruth Wilson[1], and Lorna J. Philip[2]

November 2023

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Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba

Scottish Islands Typology Overview (2024)

AGRICULTURE, ENVIRONMENT AND MARINE

social research

Q&A



Remote, Far Away, K. Gow

Discussion:

How could a better understanding of rural places improve the policies, services or projects you work on, and what information would you need to make that possible?

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