ISLAND SCHOOLS PROJECT

on how a future project could be shaped based on learnings from *'Island Explorers'*

1. PURPOSE STATEMENT

The purpose of this scoping report is to provide a basis from which an Islands Schools Project could be developed. It provides a review of *Island Explorers* and its approach in order to develop a larger, more expansive programme that focuses on island-to-island connection and includes a legal dimension. The report provides an overview of what a future Island Schools programme could entail, and the resources required to develop and pilot such a programme.

The *Island Explorers* programme, developed by the University of Strathclyde, forms the basis of this scoping report. Its approach to lesson plans, its reach and scope are all part of the analysis.

2. CONTEXT and BACKGROUND

2.1 Review of Island Explorers

Island Explorers, in its original incarnation, was an interdisciplinary educational programme that used the unique context of island life around the world to introduce primary school pupils (ages 7–12 years) to global sustainability challenges and the UN sustainable development goals (SDGs). From 2018 to 2021, the programme engaged more than 2000 pupils across Glasgow and the Outer Hebrides, and in 2022 led to a spin-off 'Ocean Explorers' programme run under the GCRF-funded One Ocean Hub, reaching pupils in 4 schools across the Solomon Islands.

The programme was designed based on 4 progressive stages to correspond to 4 year-groups in Scottish Primary Schools (Primaries 4-7). Each year-group focused on a different sustainability challenge, using the context of a different island.

Designed to foster global awareness and encourage creative problem-solving, *Island Explorers* sought to connect Scottish pupils with their peers on islands in diverse cultural and geographical settings.

Each participating class followed an immersive six-lesson journey, combining elements of science, engineering, social studies, and the arts. The programme was structured to align with the United Nations SDGs, using these goals as thematic anchors for learning and exploration.

2.1.1   International Island Partnerships

A distinctive feature of *Island Explorers* was its partnership with schools located on islands across the globe. These collaborations served as entry points for pupils to explore real-world sustainability issues in a personal and engaging way. Each year group focused on a different island and challenge:

- **P4 – Hawai'i (USA)**
  Sustainability Challenge: Ocean Plastics, *UN SDG 14: Life Below Water*
  Partner School: Punahou School, Honolulu

- **P5 – St Vincent and the Grenadines**
  Sustainability Challenge: Sustainable Energy, *UN SDG 7: Affordable and Clean Energy*
  Partner School: Fitzhughes Government School, St Vincent

- **P6 – Great Cumbrae (Scotland)**
  Sustainability Challenge: Food Security, *UN SDG 2: Zero Hunger*
  Partner School: Cumbrae Primary School, Millport

- **P7 – Île de La Réunion (France)**
  Sustainability Challenge: Marine Biodiversity, *UN SDG 14: Life Below Water*
  Partner School: École Saint-Leu Centre, Réunion

These partnerships promoted cultural exchange and helped pupils understand sustainability through the experiences of children living in different island environments.

Each year-group followed a consistent structure across six lessons:

1. **Introduction to the Island** – Geography, culture, language, and daily life

2. **Exploring the Sustainability Challenge** – Key facts and impacts

3. **Investigating Solutions** – Research into local and global responses

4. **Design and Build** – Pupils develop and prototype creative solutions

5. **Presentation and Evaluation** – Pupils pitch their ideas in a classroom 'Dragon's Den' format

At the end of the programme participating classes were invited to attend a 'celebration event' hosted by the University of Strathclyde. The event brought together pupils from multiple participating schools and was hosted by the University Principal who awarded prizes for the most innovative solutions developed by the pupils.

Participating schools received a comprehensive teacher handbook and accompanying class PowerPoint slides, pupil workbooks, and practical resources required to run the programme. Activities were designed to be low-cost and did not rely on high levels of technology, with schools encouraged to use recycled materials for prototyping their proposed solutions. All schools/classes joining the programme each year received a 1-hour teacher training session, led by the University team. This session introduced teachers to the programme and resources before implementing them in class. These sessions were gratefully received by the schools and facilitated discussion between

the programme team and teachers on how to further develop and adapt the programme.

2.1.3   *Global Goals*

The *Island Explorers* programme introduced pupils to the concept of sustainable development in an age-appropriate, experiential manner. By investigating real-world challenges and connecting with peers globally, pupils learned the importance of collaboration and inclusivity in achieving a sustainable future.

The programme's alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Goals ensured that each stage was globally relevant while remaining locally meaningful. Over four years, pupils not only gained a deeper understanding of specific challenges such as plastics pollution, food security, or renewable energy, but also began to recognise the interconnections between these issues as they progressed towards Primary 7.

2.1.4   *Flexibility and Adaptation*

Nine primary schools in Glasgow embedded *Island Explorers* into their curricula. The programme was designed to be progressive – building year on year – but it also allowed for flexibility in delivery. Schools were encouraged to adapt the programme to suit their own classroom environments and learning needs. As one participating teacher remarked:

> "Our Island Explorers got so much out of it and were able to apply and learn new skills throughout the lessons." (P4 Teacher)

When schools in the Outer Hebrides were added, the programme was translated into Scottish Gaelic, and the programme adapted to suit the composite classrooms of

the small island schools. These schools focussed on one stage, using it as a topic of focus for multiple aspects of the curriculum over a full term (STEM, art, language).

Through its interdisciplinary and globally connected approach, *Island Explorers* offered a meaningful way to introduce young learners to sustainability, while encouraging curiosity, empathy, and innovation.

2.1.5   Resources

Island Explorers was developed as a public engagement project run by the University of Strathclyde. The programme had no directly allocated staff time. Internal funding of £2000/per annum was allocated to supply the practical resources, including pupil workbooks for all participating schools. These funds were also used to host the annual 'celebration event' and covered school transport costs and venue hire for the event. University staff time was used to:

- research, develop, and design the programme resources: teachers' notes, lesson PowerPoint packs, pupil workbooks, and practical resources;
- recruit schools and provide annual communication with the schools to determine programme registrations;
- design and deliver annual teacher training in all participating schools;
- where requested, and feasible, deliver lessons in class;
- develop and deliver the annual celebration events.

2.2 Critical Review

From its inception in 2018, the Island Explorer's programme was initially designed specifically for use in schools in the city of Glasgow. Starting with 2 Glasgow primary schools, the programme quickly expanded, primarily through word-of-mouth between teachers, to 9 city schools (with 4-8 classes participating in each school). In 2020, the University of Strathclyde team behind the programme expanded it to schools in the Outer Hebrides. The programme was progressively adapted to meet the changing realities of operating it in multiple schools, across a larger geographical area. This learning experience allows us to reflect on the programme with the intention of building on it in such a way as to enable any future programme to be educationally rich, adaptive, and scalable.

2.2.1   Programme Resources

A key feature of the programme was its comprehensive resources for both pupils and teachers. These allowed teachers and schools to enter into the programme with no cost, and minimal resource preparation. This was a major attraction for resource-strained schools and allowed all schools to participate. Equally, the stages within the programme were open in such a way that schools could expand upon each lesson, using it as a focus for other topics (e.g. language) if they chose to. The resources were developed for the weekly STEM lessons of city schools in Glasgow – hence the 6-lesson format. Moving to composite classes in rural island schools, these had to be redeveloped into blended stages and translated into Scottish Gaelic.

While the resources were a key enabler of the programme's expansion, adapting the resources to suit different classroom settings became a challenge to scalability.

2.2.2   International partnerships

A unique feature of the programme was its international connections with island schools. However, as more Scottish schools joined, it became impractical for every school to be truly connected with the partner school – beyond the initial video introduction. This element requires deeper consideration to the practicalities of connecting schools around the world.

2.2.3   Programme Scope

From its inception, *Island Explorers* encouraged pupils to create solutions to the challenges they studied. Typically, these focussed on STEM-based solutions following the STEM-based examples provided in the programme. Solutions centring on societal, political, or legal areas were also frequently presented by the pupils. These areas provide a natural avenue for the programme to expand into, providing more depth, and offering more opportunity for teachers to use the programme to cover multiple curriculum topics beyond STEM.

2.2.4   Key challenges to consider for redevelopment

The Island Explorers programme offers a proven framework for learning. Further development of the programme should consider:

- Scalability: design of the programme in such a way as to be used with minimal adaptation for different school contexts. This could be achieved by narrowing the age groups targeted by the programme but broadening the range of sustainability challenges on offer as a topic of study and considering targeting schools in island settings only. This would create a "library" of resources focussed on the sustainability challenges for one or two year-groups. The resources should focus on the sustainability challenges in general – not tied to a specific geographical location. Island schools should be partnered with another participating island school, and as part of the programme, the schools themselves research and present the background, cultural context, and geography of their island to their partner school. Both schools then select their sustainability challenge and present it in the context of their island before developing their 'solution'.

- Facilitating Partnerships: Schools valued the international collaboration, however this has to be practical (time zones, language barriers considered), equal, and be able to be taken forward by the schools independently of any central programme team.

- Level of support/Funding: *Island Explorers* had no directly allocated staff time and was developed by university staff. Physical resources were funded by very limited internal university funds. The programme operated based on principles of inclusion and equity such that all schools could participate with no financial burden. This however limited the number of schools that could participate each year, due to limited funding for practical resources, but also limited staff time to support the schools in participating.

3. PROPOSED NEW APPROACH

3.1 Developing an expanded islands-only school programme

The success of *Island Explorers* was inspiring and has motivated the development of a new approach that addresses the issues of scalability and sustainability that limited the programme's expansion. The new approach must aim to **be educationally rich**, **adaptable**, and **scalable** from the outset.

The unique aspect of the original programme was the opportunity for schools to engage with peers from around the world. However, limited resources meant that multiple city schools were connected with one single island school. This unintentional dynamic resulted from the original programme design of tying challenges and islands to each other. The proposed new approach would separate these, allowing schools to identify their own sustainability challenge, and then be partnered with another school. This would ensure each school has a one-to-one partnership.

For school-school partnerships to be meaningful, there should be a shared experience and relatability from the outset – we propose that this is their island setting. It is proposed that the new programme be exclusively a programme for island schools to engage with other island schools. It could be a programme ambition to spin-off a second programme 'city explorers' where city schools are partnered with other schools from cities around the world. Such a spin-off programme is not considered in the proposed pilot below.

3.1.1 Scope

The programme scope should provide teachers with enough information and resources to enable them to implement the programme with minimal additional preparation, but flexible enough that it can be utilised in a range of classroom settings and formats, without needing to be continually adapted to specific schools.

The progressive four-year structure of the original programme limited flexibility as it restricted which challenges could be studied by which age group/learning stage. Rather than 4 set topics over 4 separate year-groups, we propose offering a range of topics/sustainability challenges from which each participating school can choose one to focus on. All challenges would be developed for the same age/learning stage, therefore narrowing the target age group but broadening the topics offered. In practice this could take the form of a "library" of sustainability challenges, each challenge having a portfolio of information covering:

- What the challenge is, its causes, and its impacts
- Examples of the challenge from around the world
- Examples of existing solutions

Each challenge would have a set pupil workbook and teacher notes with suggested activities, developed and designed to suit one age group/learning stage. The challenges available could be drawn from the SDGs, therefore schools identify their own from a list of available topics.

The 6-lesson structure was developed specifically for the Glasgow city schools' 45-minute STEM lessons. A framework approach with key stages, as opposed to set lessons, would build more flexibility into the programme, allowing schools to adapt it to their own timetables and other projects and topics. Such a framework could include 3 key stages:

1. Explore our own island identity and identify the challenge most pertinent to us.
2. Introduce our island and challenge to our partner school
3. Explore/Identify solutions and presenting them

This framework approach would give schools the flexibility to implement the programme in a variety of ways including as a weekly lesson, or as a topic over a full term, a summer school project, or even as a focus topic of an extra-curricular club (such as a science club, or sustainability club etc).

3.2 Proposed New Programme Framework

The set nature of the original programme brought a STEM focus to the challenges and solutions. That said, pupils themselves often arrived at non-technological solutions, naturally identifying political, societal, or legal aspects requiring change to address the challenge. The proposed framework approach offers an opportunity to explore the chosen challenges in a more holistic way.

Within each of the 3 proposed stages, a number of topics could be included as outlined in the table below. The content of each stage can serve to include other core subjects, including, e.g. social studies, sciences, economic learning. As an example, if the chosen challenge focuses on ocean plastics, the content could include social studies (Where does plastic come from? How do we use it?), science/oceanography (How does the plastic circulate? How does it impact marine life?), economics (Why are we so reliant on plastic?). From a learning perspective, this offers the opportunity to develop a range of transferrable skills such as critical thinking, communication, negotiation.

Programme Stage	Programme Aims	Suggested Content
Stage 1: Our Island	Research own island, identify a sustainability challenge of focus	Explore the geography, culture, language, history, community, economy, and sustainability of your island to identify challenges affecting island life

Stage 2: Our challenge	Research the nature of the challenge identified. Connect with partner island school.	Research the challenge causes and effects from the perspectives of science, social studies, law. Present your island to your partner school, discuss your challenge.
Stage 3: Our Future	Develop solutions to the challenge	Research and examine existing solutions from around the world – these could be at different scales: local or regional programmes, through to global initiatives such as the Paris Agreement. Develop new solutions to the challenge and present them.

3.2.1   Adding a legal component

Given that solutions in the *Island Explorers* programme frequently included non-technical solutions that focused on legal settings and aspects, the proposed new programme would build a legal component into the programme aims. These would be linked to the wider learning agenda and would offer opportunities to include activities such as mock negotiations and debates, hypothetical legal cases, discussions around the future of the SDGs and the Paris Agreement. Potential solutions could include key activities, like recommended actions by community councils, attendance at community gatherings, policy drafting, and mock debates, further adding to the scope of subject-matter inclusion and learning outcomes. This would also allow us to connect the programme to ongoing legal developments in an age-appropriate way and to prepare pupils for the next stage in their schooling, deepening connections with partner island schools and empowering them to build confidence and deepen their sense of place in an island context and within the broader global sustainability challenge.

3.2.2   Island-Island interaction

Island-island interaction offers an exciting and unique dimension to the programme. Pupils take great pride in presenting their own island to their peers and are excited to meet new friends from different islands. It also offers a wider learning opportunity within the programme for teachers to explore. The interaction must be equal on both sides and will work best where both island schools are participating in the programme, but they need not be studying the same challenge. One-one engagement between schools is required for this engagement to be practical and sustainable. A list of participating schools/islands could be matched on an annual basis based on practical aspects such as time zone, language, programme timing.

3.2.3 Digital Platform

Based on the experience of *Island Explorers*, successful uptake of the programme in schools relies on both the quality of the programme design and content from an educational perspective, and in the accessibility of the resources and ease of implementation in a classroom setting. To enable the programme to operate at scale, the resources must enable teachers to implement it with minimal additional development, and with little reliance on a central programme team. To improve the scalability of the programme we propose the development of a digital platform to:

1. Host the library of resources which teachers can access
2. Provide a schools networking site to enable participating schools to connect with each other
3. Provide a central mechanism to obtain feedback

We propose that the design and specification of such a digital platform be scoped as a key output of the pilot project and be included within the funding requirements of any full programme which follows. The platform should be designed with teacher feedback from the outset, and a pilot programme would provide an excellent opportunity for this.

3.2.4 Resources

Here we have considered the resources required to develop a pilot programme only. It is proposed that, as part of this pilot programme, a sustainable and long-term funding strategy is developed.

A 12-month pilot project would be required to develop resources, recruit schools, activate and complete the programme in schools, gather feedback and carry out an evaluation, including securing funding for a full programme roll-out. Below we outline a proposed phased approach to the pilot project where each of the 4 phases lasts approximately 3 months.

Phase 1:   Development of programme resources – propose full development of one SDG resource targeting one age group. Resources to be developed include programme structure and design, pupil workbooks, teacher guidance, lesson plans and any other resources required to deliver the lesson (e.g. PowerPoint slide decks). Pilot schools should begin to be contacted and recruited in this phase.

Phase 2:   Engagement with pilot schools (recruitment and programme adjustment in line with school feedback). This phase should begin at least 6-8 weeks prior to the pilot launching in schools.

Begin scoping the design and specifications of the proposed digital platform, seeking input from technical experts and teachers as required – this will continue throughout phase 2 and 3, and be concluded during phase 4.

Phase 3:   Running the pilot in schools (approximately 6-8 weeks of active school time)

Phase 4:   Evaluation and write-up of pilot programme and development of larger programme framework and funding needs.

A pilot programme could target 4 island schools on 4 separate islands to provide a range of challenges, geographies, two full examples of island-island partnerships across varied cultural and geographical ranges, and to provide meaningful feedback and experience from which a full programme could be developed and rolled-out. We propose piloting this with 4 separate island schools to provide us with two examples that differ in geographic/cultural/time-zone matching. One matched pair could be, e.g. the Isle of Man and the Falkland Islands, giving an example of matched island school across geographies and cultural influences. Another matched island pair could be two Scottish islands (one in Shetland, one in the Hebrides, e.g.), giving us an example of closer geographic, cultural, and time zone match.

3.3 Pilot Project: Outputs

Output 1: Programme structure design: the framework of the Island Schools Programme will be developed. This framework provides the basis on which all SDG challenges will be studied, as well as the flow of the programme. This should also include the development of a unique brand for the programme and basic marketing materials (to be developed further as part of the full programme).

Output 2: SDG Resource 1: A full resource pack for at least 1 SDG to be developed and ready for implementation in schools. This resource should be evaluated by teachers and adjusted based on their feedback as part of the pilot. These resources include: programme structure and design, pupil workbooks, teacher notes, and any other accompanying materials

Output 3: Recruited schools: proposed 4 schools are recruited as the focus of the pilot, enabling two island-island partnerships.

Output 4: Digital Tool Brief: A briefing document outlining the functionality, parameters, and design of a digital tool to act as a gateway for the programme resource library, school-school partnerships, and programme evaluation. This should include a full costed design specification for inclusion in a full programme funding application.

Output 5: Full programme funding application. This should include an analysis of the funding landscape, and development of a targeted funding application (or multiple applications).

Beyond Island Explorers

i. Spin-off programmes and Links to Research and Higher Education

Island Explorers inspired further work at the University of Strathclyde. In particular, it served as a model for the **One Ocean Explorers** initiative within the One Ocean Hub. Utilising the Primary 4 framework of *Island Explorers, One Ocean Explorers* was implemented by Pacific Island Students Fighting Climate Change (PISFCC) in 4 primary schools in the Solomon Islands.

In addition to benefiting school pupils, *Island Explorers* also engaged students from the University of Strathclyde's LLM in Global Environmental Law and Governance. Each year, selected students volunteered to support Glasgow schools delivering the programme, strengthening the link between university education, community engagement, and global sustainability.

ii. Island Schools Programme:

Several other schools programmes have been developed, including "**Island Schools**"[1] a partnership between several European organisations, including Learning Hub Friesland (the Netherlands), De Jutter School (the Netherlands), University of Groningen (the Netherlands), IDEC (Greece), Gymnasium of Astypalaia (Greece), Universitat Politecnica de Valencia (Spain), University of Akureyri (Iceland), University of Strathclyde (Scotland). The project is co-funded by the EU Erasmus Programme and the EU.

Across Europe, island communities face unique challenges in delivering quality education due to their geographical isolation, small populations, and limited resources. A striking example is *De Jutter*, the sole remaining school on the Dutch island of Vlieland. Located two hours by ferry from the mainland, it now combines both primary and secondary education after falling student numbers prompted a merger. While this situation is rare in the Netherlands, it reflects a wider pattern observable across Europe — from Scotland to Greece and from Finland to Croatia — where island schools are adapting in creative ways to meet the demands of modern education.

Recognising the potential for collective impact, the **Island Schools** project was launched in August 2020 (initially under the name *iSHRINK*), supported by a three-year grant from the European Union's Erasmus+ programme. The initiative aims to foster collaboration among island schools across Europe, using sustainability as both a thematic and pedagogical anchor.

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[1] https://www.islandschools.eu/about-us

Led by a consortium of partners from Iceland, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Spain, and Greece, the project brings together academic institutions and island-based schools to co-develop innovative, place-based learning resources. These materials are designed to promote active citizenship and empower pupils to engage with the real-world sustainability challenges faced by their communities.

iii. *Island School Project Components of interest*

1. **Island Schools Matching Scan**
    To facilitate collaboration, the *Island Schools Matching Scan* helps schools identify counterparts working on similar sustainability themes. By completing the scan, schools are guided toward appropriate learning materials, matched with partner schools, and introduced to the Island Schools online platform for joint activities.

2. **Learning and Teaching Materials**
    The programme offers a comprehensive set of curriculum resources focused on sustainability. These are structured around key challenges such as Ocean Plastics, Sustainable Tourism, and Sustainable Transport. Materials are designed to be adaptable across diverse island contexts, enabling pupils to explore how other island communities address shared issues and apply these insights locally. The initial set of teaching packs is available in English, with translations and additional topics forthcoming.

3. **Island Schools Online Platform**
    A dedicated online platform supports the programme by connecting pupils and teachers across participating islands. It provides a collaborative digital space where partner schools can interact, share progress, and work jointly on sustainability-focused learning projects.

4. **Policy Development**
    Beyond classroom engagement, the Island Schools project aims to inform policy on sustainable education for island regions. A key component of this work involves the use of *back casting* – a participatory foresight method – through which pupils envision desirable futures for their islands and identify the steps needed to get there. These youth-driven insights will contribute to a set of policy recommendations addressing the role of education and young people in achieving sustainability on Europe's islands.