



COMHAIRLE NAN EILEAN SIAR

Building our communities

My job is to give these young people a voice, says Alison

By Katie Macleod

Who Cares? Scotland is a national third sector advocacy and membership organisation that works with care-experienced and other young people in a range of different ways. In the last year in the Western Isles, the work of Who Cares? Scotland has been wide-ranging, from independent advocacy work to the organisation of fun events for young people throughout the islands.

"Nationwide, the focus of Who Cares? Scotland's work is supporting children and young people with experience of being in care, whether at home, with foster-carers or relatives, or in residential homes," explains Tom Boyd, the organisation's Advocacy and Participation Manager for the north of Scotland.

"It's also about supporting those who have left care and are making that often very challenging transition into early adulthood. In the Western Isles, Who Cares? Scotland's service is broader still, with Alison Frizzell working alongside and supporting not only children and young people with experience of care, but also a broad range of other young people who might benefit from the service."

Alison has worked for Who Cares? Scotland for four years, building relationships with young people throughout the islands to support them in having their views heard. "My job is to give these young people a voice," says Alison. "In terms of advocacy, it's about turning up the volume for vulnerable young people and care experienced young people who often don't have a voice. They're used to people making decisions around them, as opposed to making decisions that actually involve them."

At Who Cares? Scotland, advocacy is relationship-based and built on trust, with the needs of the young person at the centre. Advocates like Alison listen to young people, help them understand and exercise their rights, and express their views, ensuring their voices are taken into account in what can be a complex system. This advocacy support can be varied, from helping a young person who's got into an argument with a friend, right up to formal meetings and Children's Hearings.

During Children's Hearings, a Children's Panel will be making decisions about a young person's life, and it is often a frightening prospect for the young person in question. A typical advocacy case – and one that occurs in the Western Isles – would involve supporting a young person before, during, and after a hearing. As one young person on the mainland described it, having an advocate at a hearing "makes the whole situation a little less tense," allows them to think about what's important to them, and ensures that they are supported to express that in whatever way suits them best.

Another key aspect of the work of Who Cares? Scotland in the Western Isles is participation, where children and young people come together to have fun and develop confidence as well as connections with their peers. There are currently two groups of young people who meet on a fortnightly basis with Alison and Erica Clark, Community Learning and Development Worker at the Comhairle. These are Young Islanders, a vibrant, growing group of young people in S1 – S4; and another group of S1 pupils, one which grew out of an enhanced

Young people launch National Care Day 2018 alongside the First Minister



transition project last summer, aimed at supporting young people with the move from primary schools to The Nicolson Institute.

Both groups have been involved in a variety of activities, including many that ensure that their collective 'voice' is being heard. One recent example was the workshop held in September 2017 with a team from the Children and Young People's Commissioner's office, which wanted to get young people's views on what they could do for them. "The group were fantastic and loved this session," says Alison. "It was another opportunity to ensure young people's voices from the Western Isles were contributing to developing an important national role."

On International Women's Day in March, the Young Islanders group celebrated by inviting guests for coffee and cake; unbeknownst to their guests, each member of the group had chosen one of these women as an "inspiration," and had written tributes which were read out on the day. To give the event a fun twist, the young people were then presented with their Saltire Youth Volunteer Awards as a surprise. "They were absolutely thrilled, it was such a lovely day," remembers Alison.

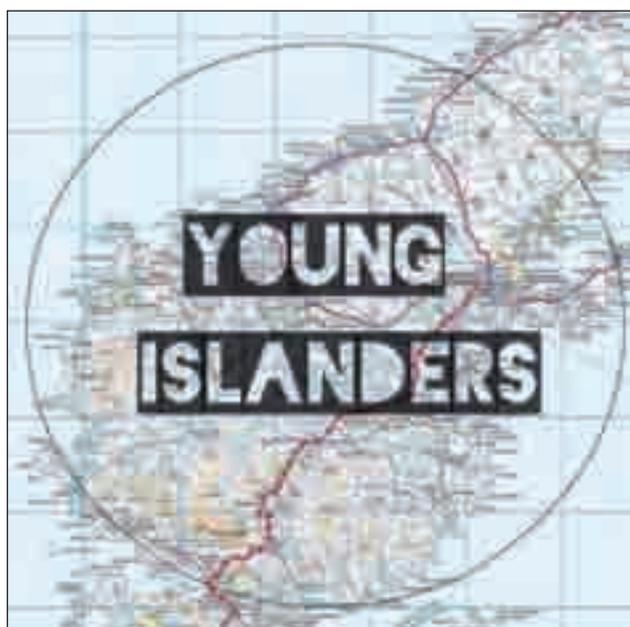
As 2018 progresses, there will be even more opportunities for care experienced and other young people in the Western Isles to get involved with Who Cares? Scotland events, both locally and nationally. This month, a young person from the islands will be participating in one of the Who Cares? Scotland Wild Camps, which are held in remote locations and focus on developing young people's leadership skills. As in the past, young people from the Western

Isles will also be attending the annual Who Cares? Scotland Summer Camp in Struan, where, as Tom notes, they can "grow in confidence, make new friends, take part in activities, and simply have a blast."

Then there's "Journeys in the North", a creative engagement art project that has recently been launched in various locations across the region. Local artists will be working alongside young people to create powerful exhibits in a range of mediums based on the theme of 'journeys'; in the Western Isles, the finished works of art will be exhibited at the end of June, before travelling to an exhibition in Inverness, and moving south from there. "It's really exciting," says Alison, adding that young people will get the chance to travel with the exhibition as it journeys, shaping how it's presented.

It is opportunities like these that Alison says are invaluable for care experienced and other young people in the Western Isles. "Some of these young people have never been off the island, and it gives them opportunities that their peer group take for granted. It can be as trivial as going to McDonalds as soon as we hit the mainland, to going to celebrations and conferences and meeting other young people from all over Scotland, where they really begin to feel connected and realise that they're not on their own."

"I never cease to be humbled by the children and young people I work for, and the difference that having a voice can make for them," says Alison of her role, and the impact advocacy can have on a young person's life. "I love seeing the transformation of a young person being able to find their voice and then use it. That's achieved by the relationship we're able to build with these young people over time."



Summer Camp 2017