Making their voices heard…

By Katie Macleod

It’s been a busy few months for the islands’ young people, who have been making their voices heard in the Outer Hebrides at a variety of different events, on issues ranging from climate change to mental health.

The activities kicked off with the Young Leaders Conference on September 24th. Held in the Caolreids Hotel in Stornoway, the event was spearheaded by the islands’ two Members of the Scottish Youth Parliament (MSYPs), Sakshi Orchison, from Lewis, and Maria McGoldrick, from Uist. 35 young leaders who hold leadership roles in local organisations attended the conference, which aimed to encourage and inspire young leaders, volunteers, and activists.

Young people attended from organisations including Lewis Castle College UHI, The Nicolson Institute, Pointers Youth Centre, Who Cares Scotland, Harris and Stornoway Guides, and the sports and health sectors. They spent the day discussing and learning about the three main issues on the agenda: mental health; Personal, Social, and Health Education in schools; and climate change. The keynote speech on the day was given by John Loughton, a social entrepreneur and campaigner, who spoke with the young people in attendance about what it means to be a leader and making your voice heard.

On her official MSYP Instagram account, Sakshi wrote about the success of the event. “Marai and I will take your opinions and views about topics and issues we discussed today and we will show them to other MSYPs at our next sitting in October and other meetings and committees.”

Following the triumph of the first Young Leaders Conference, a similar event is now being planned for Uist and Barra in early 2020, with Sakshi and Maria involved in its organisation alongside Comhairle nan Eilean Siar’s Community Learning and Development staff.

The theme of climate change continued throughout the month, as a number of young people took part in an organised protest outside the Comhairle building in Stornoway to raise awareness of climate change. Maria and Sakshi were also invited to take part in the inaugural meeting of the Outer Hebrides Community Planning Partnership (OHCPP) Climate Change Working Group.

In October, it was time for Sakshi and Maria to attend their first sitting of the Scottish Youth Parliament in Dunfermline, Fife. The Scottish Youth Parliament is the democratically elected voice of young people in Scotland, comprised of MSYPs from all 32 local authorities. Sakshi and Maria were voted in as the Outer Hebrides’ MSYPs in March, and have been meeting their peers, attending local community and council meetings, and planning events like the Young Leaders Conference.

“MSYPs will consult with local young people before each sitting to get their views on the different motions that will be discussed.”

The 70th National Sitting of the Parliament saw more than 100 MSYPs get together in Dunfermline High School, and Sakshi and Maria were able to join in on a variety of discussions, including the launch of the grass roots phase of the Youth Parliament’s environmental protection campaign, Pack It Up, Pack It In, which aims to empower young people to speak out and take action to reduce pollution levels in Scotland. “I had such an amazing time, met great people, and learned a lot,” wrote Maria on her MSYP Instagram account.

Back in the islands, National Youth Work Week, which celebrate youth work across the country, took place between 4th and 11th of November. Throughout the week, Community Learning and Development staff were based in the islands four secondary schools, running interactive stalls with information and leaflets, and encouraging pupils to stop by and chat at lunchtimes about the key issues that matter to them. Some of the topics that were raised included the Pack It Up, Pack It In campaign; young people’s involvement in the upcoming 2020 Year of Coasts and Waters; and work on Film G projects for MG ALBA’s annual Gaelic short film competition.

Other recent events included the screening at Pointers Youth Centre of An Dràstal – a film created by local young people, examining how the climate emergency is affecting the Outer Hebrides – and the Uist Youth Café pop-up event on 13th November, which was held to gauge interest for after-school activities in North Uist. Hosted at the Cladach Kirkibost Centre, the Youth Café was open for S1-S6 pupils, who attended after school to take part in games, arts and crafts, enjoy home baking, and get access to free WiFi.

With a new year on the horizon, there’s more to come for the islands’ MSYPs and their peers. As Fiona MacInnes-Begg, Manager of the Community Learning and Development department, explains, the team “continue to seek and support opportunities for young people to move to the forefront of decision making, and ensure the views of young people are better represented.”