

Social Values Assessment Report: Isle of Iona

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Cover images

Top: looking North from Dùn Ì across the machair, white sands and azure waters of the North end of Iona towards the Treshnish Isles and the Isle of Staffa; Bottom left: croft fields and livestock on Iona's East side; Bottom right: the crossroads - where news was shared, pilgrimages pause, and corncrake spotters gather - with crofts beyond (all photo credits: Elizabeth Robson).

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Key Findings

The purpose of this social values assessment is **to understand the meanings, memories, stories, experiences, and feelings associated with Iona by people today**, and the ways in which these contribute to people's sense of identity, belonging, and place.

Key findings are:

- Iona's relatively small size belies the degree of **complexity** it encompasses, arising from its varied geography, the different communities of identity and attachment, and the density of meanings and social values associated with the island, some of which conflict or compete.
- Social values are often strongly informed by Iona's history and its spiritual and religious associations, the environment/landscape, people's social relationships, and the **intersection** of these.
- Places assume **different meanings** depending on the context in which they are encountered or discussed – for example, a familiar home, a site of spiritual reflection, a working landscape, or evidence of past human activity.
- Some values depend on knowledge that **is embedded in the specific places and social relationships of the island**. Familiarity with the history, landscape, stories, memories, and experiences of the people living and working on the land and surrounding seas is part of a distinct island identity and supports feelings of belonging. Such knowledge is shared across the generations, including with regular visitors in some cases, and is learned through repeated engagements with the environment.
- **Crofting/farming practices are valued** as part of island identity, for the ways in which they have shaped the landscape, and as on-going forms of care and custodianship – both directly, in terms of “*looking after*” the land (CS5_INT_001), and as examples of the island's co-operative spirit, which also contributes to feelings of homeliness and belonging.
- Some of the things that make Iona special are more **universal or shared** - for example the beauty of the landscape, its unique and ancient geology, and the intangible ‘atmosphere’. These are widely valued, supporting connections to Iona among a diversity of communities, from present-day residents to the international network of communities of interest and identity (including faith-based networks).
- Distinctions are made between **the religious and secular aspects of Iona** (socially and physically), although these boundaries are fluid and negotiated. Residents have varied relationships with the different religious communities and, while the formally consecrated spaces and religious monuments are mostly outwith the Trust's property, for many people, the whole island is part of their religious experience, meaning that environmental or secular features can assume a religious symbolism and values associated with their spiritual meaning.
- Participants in this assessment expressed feelings of belonging, moral ownership and custodianship, as well as multiple types of place knowledge and forms of care. This **diversity of values and density of connections** can result in tensions, with concerns raised about competing pressures, change, and future sustainability.
- Given past tensions between communities and the multiple, potentially contradictory or competing, social values associated with places in the Trust's care, future planning and management might be most productively achieved through adopting **a collaborative approach** that engages with the complexity and plurality of values and communities associated with Iona.

Context

The following is a summary of the property and wider research context. A more detailed description is given in Annex I: Property Description.

The property

Iona lies off the Southwest corner of the island of Mull in the Inner Hebrides (see Annex II: Maps). The island is 5.5 km in length and 2.5 km at its widest point. The landscape is rocky to the Northwest and South and flatter across the centre (East to West) and to the Northeast. The less rugged areas are cultivated as farms and crofts – other areas are used as common grazings – and the village (Baile Mór) sits on the East coast. The island's indented coastline includes rocky gulleys and white-sand beaches, popular with swimmers. The coastal machair grassland is used for grazing and to the West is the location of the island's golf course.

In March 1980, much of Iona, including its off-lying islands, was gifted to the National Trust for Scotland by the Secretary of State for Scotland. Excluded from the property are the Abbey which, along with associated ecclesiastical buildings and historic monuments, is owned by the Iona Cathedral Trust, and several houses, crofts and other buildings that are in private ownership.

There are five Scheduled Monuments wholly or partially on Trust land and the area encompassing the village is a Conservation Area. Iona has no formal natural heritage designations, but the diversity of habitats supports a wide range of species, including the globally rare corncrake. Iona is also recognised as one of the most geodiverse locations in Britain, with some of the oldest rocks in Scotland.

Iona is renowned as a centre of Celtic Christianity and a major pilgrimage site. The arrival of Columba in 563 AD established Iona as a base for early missionary work and, as it grew in importance, the island became the focus for considerable religious and political power. It remained a prominent religious centre and was the burial ground for Scottish and Norse royalty through successive centuries. The disruption of the 16th-century Reformation left the island without a formal place of worship until the Parish Church was established in 1828 and the Iona Cathedral Trust (est 1899) began restoration of the Benedictine Abbey (first service held in 1905, completed in 1913). In the 1930s, the Iona Community, an ecumenical Christian organisation founded by Rev. George Macleod in Glasgow and Iona, was given permission to restore and use the Abbey buildings. Today the Abbey is leased by the Iona Cathedral Trust to Historic Environment Scotland (HES), which is responsible for upkeep, conservation, and visitor-facing matters. The Abbey is used principally but not exclusively by the Iona Community (sub-leased from HES). Some of the privately-owned houses on the island operate as retreat houses, run by other religious groups.

The wider area

Iona is reached by ferry from Fionnphort, on the island of Mull, which is in turn connected by ferry to the Scottish mainland. Commercial companies run tours from Iona to the uninhabited Isle of Staffa and the Treshnish Isles, situated to the North (also properties in the care of the Trust). Tourism is an important economic sector for the island, with activity concentrated in the busy summer season and many businesses closing in the winter. The inhabited islands of Tiree, Coll, and Gometra and Ulva are also in the vicinity, and have interconnected histories. Many of these islands are visible from

Iona, forming part of the wider seascape, and all are situated within the Sea of the Hebrides Marine Protected Area.

At the time of the 2022 Census, there were 181 people living on Iona, 108 of whom had been born in Scotland. Of those economically active the week before the census, the highest proportion were working in Accommodation and Food Service Activities (42/115 = 36.5%). According to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, the data zone that covers Iona (along with part of Mull, Coll and Tiree) is ranked overall in decile 6, in the upper half of all data zones nationally. The area has a very low ranking for geographic access (1) and housing (2), and a very high ranking for health (9) and crime (9, indicating a low incidence), with education, employment, and income all ranked 6 or 7.

Management arrangements

The island and the Trust's visitor information centre are free to access. Iona is managed alongside Staffa, the Treshnish Isles and the Burg on Mull. During the summer season, rangers are on Iona several days a week and run a programme of walks and talks. The Trust collaborates with other landowners, crofters and tenants, and community organisations, to ensure co-ordinated approach to management and conservation. Maol Farm (formerly leased) had been taken back into direct management by the Trust shortly before the start of this assessment and the Property Manager was in residence in the farmhouse, giving the Trust a stronger presence on the island.

On-going projects

At the time of the assessment, on-going Trust initiatives/discussions included:

- Maol farm – renovations to the main house and re-roofing of a cottage (previously used as a residential property), which was the focus for an archaeological survey (Sept 2025).
- Facing Our Past – the interim report details connections to slavery at the property through the wealth and privilege acquired by the previous owners, the Campbell family (Dukes of Argyll), who have slavery connections over several generations. It also notes that the 8th Duke of Argyll was a prominent opponent of scientific racism (Melville 2022: 39).

Other activities also on-going during the assessment period included:

- In February 2025, the Iona Village Hall Community Trust and Iona Community Council initiated a consultation process, including a survey and focus groups, to understand the diverse needs and experiences of the community, as well as people's priorities for the future.
- In April 2025, there was a live public event at the Iona Village Hall, with contributions recorded for future release as an episode of *What We Do in the Winter*, a podcast which aims to allow the people of Mull, Iona, Ulva, Gometra and Erraid to tell their own stories of the islands, how they have changed, and how they fit into the world at large. The podcast is produced by Alasdair and Georgia Satchel, who are based on the Isle of Mull.
- Gaelic heritage – the Trust is a partner in the *Iona's Namescape* project, led by staff at the University of Glasgow, which is mapping Gaelic placenames on the island.
- Corncrake conservation – the Trust promotes national initiatives to preserve habitat for breeding corncrake through delayed mowing and set aside (for which government payments are available) and conducts annual population monitoring.

Assessment Process

Research approach

The approach was relatively rapid and intensive, with two week-long research trips to Iona in May and June 2025 involving both researchers. Due to the close historical and present-day links between Iona and the neighbouring uninhabited Trust properties of the Isle of Staffa and the Treshnish Isles, these were conceived of as linked studies. Co-ordinating the assessments enabled us to engage a range of people with interests in one or more of the islands while avoiding unnecessary duplication. The majority of participants engaged during the Iona research trips had some connection to the island (many being residents), even if the initial reason for approaching them was in relation to Staffa and/or the Treshnish Isles.¹ The total time spent on research activities that contributed to the Iona assessment by both researchers is roughly equivalent to **27 days**.

Recruitment and selection of participants

The focus for this study was on the engaging those with an established connection to or interest in Iona, in particular the island's permanent resident population and regular repeat visitors, as opposed to tourists/day-trippers. Given the Trust's areas of responsibility and care, religious communities and their holdings, including the Abbey and Parish Church, were largely outside the scope of this study, although the role they play in the wider social and physical landscape of the island is discussed.

Prior to the first research trip, contact was made with community organisations and key individuals. Information was also disseminated to local Trust staff and volunteers, and a notice was placed on a community notice board in the village and cascaded to a community Facebook group (posted by a member). Once on Iona, contacts were made by word of mouth and snowball introductions. In total **23 people** directly contributed to this study, 15/23 being Iona residents (see Annex III: Participants).

Research methods

This assessment made extensive use of ***in-depth, semi-structured interviews***, which were conducted with all the direct participants. The majority of the interviews lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours. Each interview involved one of the researchers talking either one-to-one or one-to-two with participants. All interviews were held in person, either in public places or in people's homes/accommodation or workplaces. During the interviews, people were asked about how they first came to know Iona, any memories, feelings, experiences, or stories they associate with the island, their experiences engaging with different communities, and what they think is important to preserve or change for the future. The discussions were free-flowing, exploratory, and responsive to the contributions of the participants. Interview design was tailored so that while the primary focus might be Iona, interviewees were also asked about Staffa and the Treshnish Isles. Likewise, interviews that focused on Staffa and the Treshnish Isles also included a section on Iona.

The interviews were complemented by ***participant observation*** (joining tours/walks,² and spending time in community spaces, such as the heritage centre), as well as observation in the places and

¹ Siân made a subsequent trip to the Treshnish peninsula on Mull in July 2025 as part of the Staffa and Treshnish Isles assessment, but those activities and participants did not contribute to this assessment.

² These include tours or walks that were open to public participation and walking with participants. The Iona Community's weekly pilgrimage walks are only open to their members and guests, so were not included.

wider landscapes that people were referring to in the discussions (such as the hill of Dùn Ì, the machair, the crofting meadows, and the shoreline and beaches of the North and West ends, including the Bay at the Back of the Ocean and the popular swimming bay of Port Ban). Interviews and observations were written up as fieldnotes.

Iona is a well-researched place. Cognisant of potential participation fatigue among island residents, efforts were made to avoid duplication with on-going projects or activities that had a similar focus and approach. This influenced methods choices as, for example, it was not considered appropriate to launch an online survey as there was a live community survey at the time of our assessment. Similarly, other projects had run participatory workshops focused on memory and/or place in the weeks immediately prior to our visits, so we chose not to propose participatory group work. Where material from these activities is publicly available, it has been incorporated into the analysis.

Finally, this assessment sought to synthesise and build on the extensive body of **existing research**. Much has been written about Iona, exploring the island from multiple perspectives. The focus for this assessment was on identifying and reviewing material that explores the values, experiences and sense of place, community identities (particularly of island residents), place attachment, and sense of belonging associated with Iona (see Annex IV: Previous Research). In addition to academic research, wider literature, websites, and podcasts were also reviewed.

Contextualising the in-depth interview material with the findings from other research supported the analysis and provides confidence in the findings. The time required for the review of existing material, analysis and discussion amounts to a further approximately **24 days** (in addition to the time spent on primary research activities).

Ethical considerations

Participation in this assessment is voluntary and based on the principle of informed consent. People were advised before participating about the purpose of the research, what participation would involve (time and activities) and how any data they shared would be used, stored and disposed of. Participants involved in interviews were given written information to keep and asked to sign a consent form. Participants engaged during participant observation were given information verbally. Participants could withdraw at any stage from the process and consent was regularly reconfirmed with people involved in more than one activity.

Another key principle is that of protecting participants and causing no harm, both during the activities or in the sharing and handling of resulting material. This assessment does not directly address sensitive topics, but any subject matter introduced by participants that appeared to be emotionally charged or distressing was treated with sensitivity during activities. Participation was kept confidential and all participants have been given participant codes in this report. Careful consideration has been given to issues of identifiability and content when using direct quotes and to how potentially conflicting values and views are presented.

Personal and research data has been kept secure and not shared beyond the research team. The methods and approaches adopted in this assessment were reviewed and approved by the University of Stirling General University Ethics Panel prior to commencing activities.

Findings: Communities

The assessment identified a number of overlapping communities or groups for whom the property has social values. These may be based on identity, location and/or interest, and include people resident or regularly present on Iona, as well as more dispersed individuals who maintain an attachment from a distance. They are not all communities in the formal sense but include looser groups of people with shared interests, who may or may not be associated through joint activities or organisations. They include:

- People with multi-generational family connections to Iona (often with links to specific houses or farms/crofts), described as 'island families'.
- Residents living permanently on Iona, considered to be 'islanders'.
- People involved in farming/crofting.
- People involved in fishing/sailing/boating.
- Members of the various religious communities (some of whom are resident on the island for a time, others maintain a connection from a distance or may visit periodically).
- People working/volunteering on Iona (seasonally resident or coming over from Mull).
- Previous residents who have moved elsewhere.
- Regular visitors (those who return repeatedly annually or more frequently).
- Artists and crafts people.
- Leisure and interest groups (e.g. golf, bird watching, geology).

Individuals may identify with more than one of these groups simultaneously or move between them depending on time and context. This is also not an exhaustive list and alternative community identities may be significant in other discussions.

In some contexts, distinctions are made among residents between people from 'island families', long-term residents (who have been present for decades), and more recent arrivals. Some residents also express an attachment to specific areas of the island (e.g. the West or North ends and the village). The other distinction is between 'islanders', who are making a permanent home on the island, and other, more temporary, residents, such as the staff and guests of the religious houses (discussed in more depth below).

Historic and contemporary patterns of migration from the Western Isles (including Iona) to the mainland and other destinations for education, work, and other opportunities mean that people may continue to belong and be considered part of the community while being normally resident elsewhere, demonstrated for example by the activities of the Mull and Iona Association in Glasgow.

The limitations of the assessment mean there are communities and groups who were identified but for various reasons could not be directly engaged in the assessment and whose views are therefore not necessarily represented in the current report (see Gaps/Future Assessments).

Findings: Social Values

What follows is a summary of the values identified and the activities and experiences that generate and sustain them (see Annex V: Statement of Social Values for a more detailed discussion). The assessment identified a dense web of connections and attachments, with social values often strongly informed by Iona's history and its spiritual and religious associations, as well as environmental concerns. The findings are indicative of the diversity of values for communities of locality, attachment

and interest at the time of the research, rather than a definitive appraisal. Where ‘visitors’ are referred to, it denotes regular or repeat visitors.

Islanders (residents living permanently on the island) describe Iona as having a **distinct social history and identity** rooted in the history of the village (with reference to key individuals), crofting/farming practices, island life (including the Parish Church and school), and the distinctive geology and environment, which has inspired artists and crafts people and supported the development of the island’s marble quarry. This identity is asserted in part to counteract dominant narratives of place associated with religion and tourism that create, for instance, an *“expectation that everyone is here for religious purposes”* (CS5_INT_009). While it is widely recognised that, *“tourism is the main source of income”* (CS5_INT_008), other aspects of life are often emphasised by islanders, such as crofting: *“[when asked] what happens on Iona, no one says here is a tourism provider, people say ‘Iona is a crofting island’”* (CS5_INT_012).

As this suggests, Iona is valued by a variety of communities that are themselves dynamic and evolving in response to external factors and internal changes. Complex distinctions are made among residents depending on the duration and the nature of their connection to Iona, those people with multigenerational connections identified as being ‘island families’. Distinctions are also made between islanders and members of the religious communities, in particular the Iona (Abbey) Community, who are often seen as ‘separate’, their stay on Iona temporary and based on their spiritual mission/role (also see MacArthur 2007b: 179). The multiple social values of these different groups, underpinned by different understandings of what Iona is as a place, can result in **competing or conflicting expressions of identity, ownership and belonging**. For the most part, these differences are carefully negotiated (Foster and Jones 2019: 1174). Both people identifying as members of the religious communities and islanders spoke about a need for ‘balance’ between the various activities on the island, but tensions remain (for example, around the recent arrival of a new religious community of Romanian Orthodox monks on the island and their purchase of multiple properties for use as religious houses).

Multi-generational connections underpin a sense of **belonging** both among long-established ‘island families’ and more recently arrived residents. One participant saying, *“my sons will already be second generation and now I’ve got grandchildren here too. It’s funny how quickly I can now say ‘well, my family has been in this area for quite a long time”* (CS6_INT_004). Other claims to belonging are rooted in depth of experience or family and community relationships, although these do not necessarily equate with someone identifying themselves as being ‘from Iona’ or being considered by others to be so. One long-term resident pointing out that those who see them as being from Iona *“don’t know the nuances of the generational thing of real indigenous families”* (CS5_INT_012). People expressed feelings of belonging to the island overall but also distinguished between parts of the island, for example feeling a connection to the West or the North end.

For those people who have grown up on Iona or lived there for a long time, there is an everyday familiarity to the **island as home**. One resident, who was born on Iona, reflected, *“[Iona has] always been home and never doubted it would be home. Living away made me appreciate that more”* (CS6_INT_010). People working together and **caring for the island** was mentioned as contributing to this feeling of homeliness, as was a sense of safety, that *“in a way here you can withdraw or are protected from things”* (CS5_INT_001). The history of houses and crofts is an important locus of social value, situating people in wider social networks and the spatial history and organisation of the island. Similarly, boats of various kinds – rowing boats, fishing boats, ferry boats, Staffa tour boats,

puffers and steamships (e.g. King George V) – are a rich source of social values, embedded in stories and memories that connect people and places.

For repeat visitors and seasonal workers too, a sense of **familiarity and home-making** generates feelings of belonging and that they are contributing to the island or are part of island life (also see Bhattacharjee 2018). Important in this are the interactions between repeat visitors and residents, through which place knowledge and social relationships are established. These relationships and experiences sit alongside (without apparent conflict) visitors' feelings that Iona is a special place beyond the day-to-day that offers an opportunity to "*step out of the world*" (CS5_INT_005).

The agricultural character of Iona, in particular the long history of **crofting and farming**, is highlighted as part of the island's identity. Actively working the land is a focus of social values, generating feelings of belonging, moral ownership, and custodianship, and is seen as a **form of care** (also described in other research, see comparators in Annex VI – Balmacara Estate). For example, one participant described themselves as "*a steward*" (CS5_INT_012). Some people suggested that reducing crofting activity could allow the land to "*regenerate*" (CS5_INT_007), while others argued that crofting practices created the landscape and support **biodiversity**: "*They [conservationists] have these ideas about the machair and the wild flowers but if you stock it right you get the flowers and if you shut it off it gets rank and within 2-3 years and the flowers aren't there*" (CS5_INT_002). Participants felt that crofting is "*absolutely part of the [island's] heritage*" (CS6_INT_010), alongside some concern that a decline in the number of people actively working the land impacts negatively on **place-based knowledge and connections**.

Place knowledge supports social values associated with belonging and identity, distinguishing those with such knowledge from others with shorter-term or alternative understandings of place. Drawing on inter-generational authority or personal experiences and regular interactions, participants used their place knowledge to demonstrate both **a depth of connection to place and sensitivity to changes**. For example, a long-term resident shared that, "*the level of the sand can vary by six feet from one week to the next. It's only if you go to a beach all the time that you would observe that*", going on to add, "*I know about the different levels of the sand, because I go regularly*" (CS5_INT_001). The authority and sense of moral ownership that comes with intimate knowledge of place is evident in **discussions on management** when local knowledge is mobilised, sometimes in direct contrast to external forms of expertise and processes.

Knowledge of how Iona has changed serves to situate the present-day within longer historical narratives that create a sense of **time-depth**. The evidence of past human activity (both religious and secular) in the island's environment, placenames, and archaeology, contributes to what one resident referred to as a "*deep sense of lives lived*" (CS5_INT_012). The presence of a pre-Columba population is part of the island's identity and Iona's unique geology is also identified as contributing to how the place feels, valued both for the connection to deep time and how the diverse rocks shape the landscape. A regular visitor noted how the ancient stones, tossed in the sea until they form smooth and colourful pebbles and "*taken from Iona to be with them, mean so much to people*" (CS6_INT_006), both as a keepsake and imbued with spiritual value as part of the holy island.

Participants described how the interplay between the land/seascape and weather contributes to the **atmosphere or affective qualities** of Iona. The coast and water are prominent in many people's memories and, combined with the weather, create a dynamic environment that one regular visitor described as "*thought provoking all the time*" (CS5_INT_005). The colours and qualities of light associated with Iona's have drawn artists of all kinds (Christian and Stiller 2000) and continue to

inspire as a rich source of social and particularly aesthetic values. Participants also reflected on the multi-sensory aspects of place and distinct seasonality of the island, which brings changes to the environment and social balance.

Being an island off an island that takes effort to reach and where life is occasionally disrupted by bad weather adds to how Iona is experienced and valued: one regular visitor said, even after returning multiple times, *“it still feels like an adventure to get here”* (CS5_INT_006). Literary traditions depict islands as places to be **discovered** (Foster and Jones 2020: 48-49), as well as to experience **personal discovery**. Participants described how Iona provides the **space and peace** for reflection, personal discovery, and solitude; one seasonal worker observing that the *“peacefulness and seclusion of island life”* enabled them to *“learn how to be with myself and other people and be present in the moment”* (CS5_INT_009). The peace and opportunities for solitude are also valued by islanders and regular visitors. One resident commenting that, *“my definition of a good beach is only me on it”* (CS5_INT_001). This was something people felt was changing, with the increase in visitor numbers seen as threatening both wildlife habitats and people’s individual experiences.

In contrast to narratives of remoteness, Iona is valued in part through its **connections to other people and places**. There are well-established connections across the water to other islands, with a history of grazing sheep and cattle on offshore islands and islanders taking tourists to the Isle of Staffa which, along with the Treshnish Isles, forms part of the wider seascape. People who have travelled to or from Iona form an international network of diasporic/family connections and communities of interest. Faith-based communities are part of these networks, one resident observing that the island, *“gets lots of visitors with connections to the recent past – the Iona Community projects”* (CS5_INT_003). These connections provide validation/leverage that Iona is a place of importance and shape the feel of the island through the presence of visitors and those who come from elsewhere to live, work, and worship. Several people described Iona as having a **cosmopolitan** feel, reflecting this unique history of visitation and migration. While it was noted that external interest and ideas about the island can cause tensions and create pressures for residents, such connections also help sustain island life and are valued as part of what makes Iona special and distinct from other Scottish islands (which are seen as more insular and isolated by comparison).

While the formally consecrated spaces and religious monuments on Iona are mostly outwith the Trust’s care, for many people **the whole island is part of the religious experience**. Strong links are made between the landscape and the religious experience, with aesthetic, natural and spiritual aspects often combined. Environmental or secular features can assume a religious symbolism and be valued for their spiritual significance, for example through being stops on pilgrimage walks (see Bentley and Paynter 2013).

While members of the religious communities are often seen by islanders as temporary, participating in spiritual activities and the religious life of the island can result in **a deep connection and sense of identity linked to Iona**. A regular visitor who had chosen to affiliate with the Iona Community, described how, *“Iona gets embedded into you quite strongly”* (CS5_INT_010). For these people, Iona is valued not only as a spiritual destination but as part of their identity and they express strong connections to it as a place. These connections inspire some people to return repeatedly or to move more permanently to the island and may be sustained in the interim through participation in community groups based elsewhere.

A recurring theme that cuts across multiple types of connection and value is that Iona is somewhere **unique and special**. What is valued as special or unique may be Iona’s history, its spiritual and

religious associations, the environment/landscape, people's social relationships, or the **intersection** of these. Exactly what makes Iona special can be hard to define but what many of the comments share, as with the values associated with the island's identity, is that Iona is **a distinctive place**. For example, one resident said that what makes Iona special for them, *"is a lot to do with the community and beauty and it not being like any other island"* (CS5_INT_004). The environment was frequently mentioned as part of what makes Iona special, or *"uplifting"* (CS5_INT_001). The richness and variety of landscapes, including aspects described as 'wild', 'untarnished' or 'raw', as well as the fertility, and the interplay between different aspects of the environment (land and sea) all contributing to the beauty and experience of Iona. One resident said, *"It never fails, every time I go out, I look around and think 'my god this is so beautiful', and I still feel like that even after a whole lifetime"* (CS6_INT_004).

Implications

This assessment found a range of communities of identity, interest, and location who value Iona in a variety of ways. Participants expressed feelings of ownership and custodianship, belonging and connection, and a unique sense of place. These understandings of Iona are underpinned by different values and views of the island, based for example on knowledge and experience of crofting and farming, religious history and practice, social relationships, and Iona's geography and environment. **Many of the social values associated with Iona are informed by the intersection of the island's history, religious/spiritual associations, and environment/landscape** - any one of which may include places or objects in the care (officially or unofficially) of multiple communities/individuals.

The diversity of meanings and activity on the island, concentrated within a quite small geographic area, plus the relatively small number of permanent residents (many of which are Trust tenants), suggests that what might be considered minor changes institutionally or if occurring elsewhere, can quickly impact quite widely on Iona – including on people's social values. For example, inter-generational relationships and place knowledge, embodied in houses and crofts, generate strong connections and claims to authority. This has implications for not only how changes might be received but also who might consider themselves to be affected. As such, **planning and management processes might be most productive if they adopt a collaborative approach** (for example, as mandated by the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2025).

Many of the multiple values, attachments and priorities communities expressed regarding Iona will be mutually supportive, but that is not always the case. As Foster and Jones note in their book concerning Iona, *"such intensity of feeling and density of activity inevitably comes with some competing attachments and sometimes contestation"* (2020: 33). While relations between communities are mostly good, with efforts made to accommodate other people's values and practices (Foster and Jones 2019: 1174), **past tensions persist and can re-emerge in the context of new developments or perceived threats**. In particular, past tensions between islanders and the Iona (Abbey) Community (see Muir 2011) remain in the social memory. As Iona continues to be a focus for religious communities, the establishment of new groups or expansion of activities is interpreted with reference to that earlier experience, activating values around place identity and concerns about future sustainability (of the island's community and its resources).

The **concern expressed by participants from across communities about finding a 'balance' between the range of activities on the island and future sustainability** suggests that some people consider what they value and find special about Iona to be at risk, due to external pressures as well as local changes. For example, the availability of housing and being able to make a home

on Iona were concerns for many, linked with reflections on how the building of new houses and establishment of retreat houses might change the look and social mix of the island. However, Iona is not a museum and there was a feeling among islanders that maintaining what is valued (whether physical or more intangible) needs to be considered alongside meeting the present needs and ensuring the future sustainability of the resident community. **Concerns about sustainability are both exacerbated by and in tension with the long-established significance of the island for pilgrims/visitors** and Iona's network of connections, which are used to challenge present-day narratives of remoteness and the fragility of a small island community (Foster and Jones 2020: 42).

This assessment focuses on the values of people with an established connection to or interest in Iona, but it is estimated that over 100,000 people visit Iona every year (SWMID 2021: 21), mostly during the summer season, often on one-off trips as day-visitors or as part of tours. Research on the **values and expectation of visitors** has been carried out by Kritika Bhattacharjee (2018), who spent five months living on Iona and conducting ethnographic research as part of her doctoral studies. She argues that visitors' experience of Iona as a 'special' place depends on both a feeling that Iona is a place and time outside or beyond the normal day-to-day and connecting with island life in the present (see Annex IV: Previous Research). Similar, seemingly contradictory, values were expressed by regular visitors in this study, presenting **a complex context to be considered when designing visitor activities and materials**.

Bhattacharjee's findings identify one of **several apparent paradoxes or asymmetries in how Iona is valued**, others of which were identified through this research. Iona is both a worked landscape that is home to a resident community with practical needs and a spiritual retreat. It is valued for the individual experiences and unique connections with people and place that it offers but is also facing the impacts of mass tourism. Visitors are economically important and external attention validates the wider significance of Iona, but tourist and religious narratives of place leave residents feeling that their distinct identity and heritage is being 'overlooked'.

These contrasting realities and expectations associated with Iona are not new, but they have and will continue to generate **a range of potentially differing priorities among those caring for the island today and for the future**. Understanding the social values that underpin different communities' values and attachments can help in anticipating and addressing tensions around these competing visions of Iona. How the Trust engages with the complexity and plurality of social values and communities associated with Iona is likely to affect how activities, such as interpretation and community engagement, are received.

Gaps/Future Assessments

In terms of addressing recognised limitations in representation and scope, complementary research could be conducted with:

- **Young people** – due to limitations of time, this assessment did not include research with children but, based on the material gathered from adult participants, it would be interesting to consider the connections and experiences of younger residents (pupils at the primary school on Iona or older students who attend high school in Oban as weekly boarders), children participating in youth camps, and those returning as repeat visitors.
- **Special interest groups** – the research visits to Iona did not coincide with bird surveys, geology walks, or wildlife group visits (all of which were taking place during the summer). Given the findings in the linked Staffa and Treshnish Isles assessment, engagement with

these special interest groups would be an interesting addition to the perspectives of other repeat visitors and residents on the island's geology, flora and fauna (terrestrial and marine).

- ***People with family or genealogical ties*** – this study identified some of Iona's international network but more could be done to understand the values of those currently resident elsewhere who trace a connection to Iona through recent or more distant family ties. They may not have visited the island themselves but are part of a community of interest for whom Iona exists as both a knowable and imagined place.

This assessment has touched on the historic and contemporary connections between Iona, Staffa and the Treshnish Isles, with overlaps in the communities involved in both assessments. For the assessment report for Staffa and the Treshnish Isles see: <https://doi.org/10.34722/hdpw-9j65>.

Annex I: Property Description

Location:

The island of Iona is reached by ferry from Fionnphort, on the Southwest corner of the island of Mull, which is in turn connected by ferry to the Scottish mainland. The inhabited islands of Tiree, Coll, and Gometra and Ulva are also in the vicinity, as are the uninhabited islands of Staffa and the Treshnish Isles. Many of these islands are visible from Iona, forming part of the wider seascape and have interconnected histories.

Socio-economic profile of area:

In the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, Iona is included in a data zone that also covers the tip of the Ross of Mull.³ That data zone (S01007287) is placed overall in decile 6, with a low ranking for geographic access (1) and housing (2), offset by a very high ranking for health (9) and crime (9, indicating a low incidence of crime). Education, employment and income are all ranked 6 or 7.

At the time of Scotland's 2022 Census,⁴ there were 181 people living on Iona, 25 of those were children under the age of 16. Of those aged over 16, the highest proportion (35% or 52 individuals), were aged 35 to 54 years. There were 46 people aged over 65 years, none of whom were aged over 80. Of the 181 residents, 153 had been born in the UK, 108 of those in Scotland. Of those who were born elsewhere, the majority had been born in the EU (20 people) and had been living in the UK more than 10 years (13 people). Around half the residents identify as Scottish only, with most other people identifying as British, Scottish and British, or Scottish and another identity. With the exception of 16 people, English is the main language used in the home. There are small numbers of people with skills in Gaelic, Scots, and British Sign Language.

Tourism is an important economic sector for the island, with activity concentrated in the busy summer season. Commercial companies run tours from Iona to the uninhabited islands of Staffa and the Treshnish Isles to the North (also properties in the care of the Trust). Of the 115 people who reported being economically active the week before the 2022 Census, the highest proportion were working in Accommodation and Food Service Activities (42 people, 36.5%). Although the farms and crofts on the island are worked, only 7 people reported their primary employment as in Agriculture; Forestry; Fishing.

Property (including formal heritage designations):

The Trust assumed the title to much of Iona and its off-lying islands in March 1980. The island is 5.5 km in length and 2.5 km at its widest point. It encompasses a diversity of landscapes and has an extensive coastline. The central belt across the island from East to West and the North end is an agricultural landscape of crofts and fields, transitioning into machair grassland and sand dunes at the coast, with white sand bays that are popular with swimmers. Most human settlement and activity is concentrated in these areas, with the village (Baile Mór) on the East side, and a golf course on the West. The Northwest and South are more rugged, with heather moorland and rocky shorelines. The property also includes offshore islands, stacks, and skerries, including Eilean Annraidh, or Island of

³ The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (<https://simd.scot/>) is a relative measure across 6,976 small areas (called Data Zones). It ranks all the Data Zones and divides them into ten equally sized segments: the first decile (ranked 1) are the 10% most deprived areas, and the tenth decile (ranked 10) are the 10% least deprived areas.

⁴ Data for Iona by indicator in Scotland 2022 Census (<https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/>) can be viewed via the Island Groups 2022 area and selecting Iona on the map.

Storms, off the North End, Rèidh Eilean out to the West, and Soa Island to the South (see Annex II: Maps).

Iona's physical diversity is in part due to its geology. It is recognised as one of the most geodiverse locations in Britain, with the rocks in the West (Lewisian gneiss) being significantly harder and more ancient than the sedimentary rocks in the East. The seams of different rocks are clearly visible at the shoreline and in the coloured pebbles found on Iona's beaches. Up until 1918, Iona marble was quarried commercially. Small pieces of the yellow-green serpentine (referred to as 'Columba's tears') are still collected from the beaches and kept as souvenirs or made into jewellery.

There are five Scheduled Monuments wholly or partially on Trust land: Cladh an Diseirt burial ground; MacLean's Cross; Dun Cul Bhuirg, an Iron Age fortification; the Marble Quarry; and elements of the early-Christian monastic site, including the Vallum, the Bishop's House and St Mary's Chapel. The area encompassing the village and the Abbey is a Conservation Area. There are no statutory natural heritage designations on the island, but Iona is situated within the Sea of the Hebrides Marine Protected Area.

The Church of Scotland Parish Church (built in 1828) and the Abbey, along with associated ecclesiastical buildings and historic monuments, are excluded from the Trust's property. The Abbey is owned by the Iona Cathedral Trust (est 1899). The Iona Cathedral Trust oversaw the restoration of the Abbey in the early 1900s (first service held in 1905, completed in 1913). Today the Abbey is leased to Historic Environment Scotland (HES), which is responsible for upkeep, conservation, and visitor-facing matters. The Abbey is used principally but not exclusively by the Iona Community (through a sub-lease from HES), an ecumenical group founded by Rev. George Macleod in Glasgow and Iona in 1938. The Community run a residential centre in the buildings linked to the Abbey and the separate Macleod Centre (closed at the time of the assessment). There are a number of privately-owned houses, crofts and other buildings on the island, some of which are owned by other religious groups and operate as retreat houses, including the Episcopalian Bishop's House (est 1894), the Catholic House of Prayer (est 1997), and the Romanian Orthodox Monastery (est 2022).

Management arrangements:

There is a small staff team responsible for Iona, Staffa, the Treshnish Isles and the Burg on Mull (at the time of this assessment this was a property manager, ranger, and two seasonal rangers). Maol Farm (formerly leased) had been taken back into direct management by the Trust shortly before the start of this assessment and the Property Manager was in residence in the farmhouse, giving the Trust a stronger presence on the island. Other team members are based on Mull.

The island itself is free to access. The Trust has a visitor information centre (the Shelter) in the village by the jetty, which is open daily. During the summer season, rangers are at the Shelter several days a week and run a programme of walks and talks. The rangers are also involved in monitoring the island's important habitats/species and maintaining the footpaths (work supported by volunteers).

In managing the property, the Trust collaborates with other island landowners, as well as crofters and tenants (of agricultural and residential properties), and community organisations, to ensure co-ordinated approach to land management and to support community sustainability.

Religion/popular culture/interest groups:

The island is well known for its links to St Columba and the early Christian mission he founded in 563 AD, which led to Iona becoming the focus of considerable religious and political power. It

remained a prominent religious centre and was the burial ground for Scottish and Norse royalty through successive centuries until the disruption of the 16th-century Reformation. This ecclesiastical history and the island's present day religious communities, mean that the island is a popular destination for Christian pilgrimage and spiritual retreats. Religious communities with a physical base on the island include: The Iona Community, an international ecumenical Christian movement (Iona Abbey); Scottish Episcopalians (the Bishop's House); Roman Catholics (the House of Prayer); Church of Scotland (the Parish Church); and, most recently, Romanian Orthodox monks (no public place of worship).

Another group with a presence on Iona is the Findhorn Foundation, a collective focused on sustainable living, with a retreat house on Iona and a community base on the nearby Isle of Erraid.

Iona's landscapes, monuments and views (to the Burg on Mull and the islands of Staffa and the Treshnish Isles) have inspired painters, photographers, writers, and poets. The Scottish Colourist painters, F.C.B. Cadell and Samuel Peploe are two of the best-known artists who visited and painted Iona in the early 20th century. Samuel Johnson and William Wordsworth are among those who wrote about Iona in prose and verse. There is also a tradition of decorative arts and jewellery inspired by the work of Alexander and Euphemia Ritchie who opened their workshop, Iona Celtic Art, in 1899.

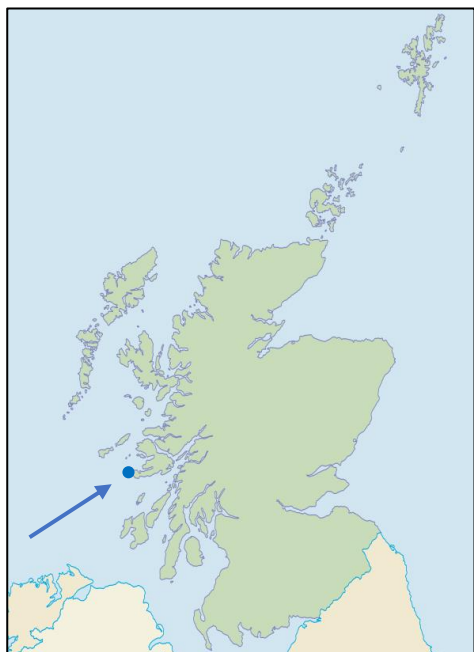
The island's varied and ancient geology is of interest to geologists and geology students, with annual field schools to Iona. The spectacular rock formations of the nearby Isle of Staffa, accessed from Iona, are also a destination for study but also attract visitors more widely.

Each year, corncrakes migrate from Africa to Iona to breed, making the island a destination for bird watchers keen to see this rare and elusive bird.

Annex II: Maps

Maps 1 and 2 are based on Ordnance Survey OpenData. Use and reuse is subject to the terms specified at os.uk/opendata/licence. © Crown copyright and database right 2025 OS.

Map 1: Location map – Iona marked by blue dot and indicated by arrow



Map 2: Area map



Map 3: The Isle of Iona. Not to be reproduced without permission.



Annex III: Participants

All participants directly involved in this assessment participated in semi-structured interviews.

Date	Primary affiliation/reason contacted	Initial focus for interview**
06/05/2025	NTS staff member	Staffa & Treshnish Isles
06/05/2025	Iona resident	Staffa & Treshnish Isles
08/05/2025	Iona resident (croft/farm)	Iona
08/05/2025	Iona resident	Staffa & Treshnish Isles
08/05/2025	Iona resident (croft/farm)	Iona
10/05/2025	Mull resident (regular visitor)	Staffa & Treshnish Isles
10/05/2025	Mull resident (regular visitor)	Staffa & Treshnish Isles
15/06/2025	Iona resident	Iona
16/06/2025	Iona resident*	Iona
16/06/2025	Iona resident	Staffa & Treshnish Isles
17/06/2025	NTS staff member	Staffa & Treshnish Isles
17/06/2025	Repeat visitor*	Iona
17/06/2025	Repeat visitor*	Iona
17/06/2025	Iona resident	Iona
18/06/2025	Iona resident	Staffa & Treshnish Isles
18/06/2025	Iona resident	Staffa & Treshnish Isles
18/06/2025	Iona resident*	Iona
18/06/2025	Iona resident (seasonal)	Iona
18/06/2025	Repeat visitor*	Iona
19/06/2025	Mull resident* (regular visitor)	Iona
19/06/2025	Iona resident (croft/farm)	Iona
20/06/2025	Iona resident	Staffa & Treshnish Isles
20/06/2025	Iona resident	Staffa & Treshnish Isles

*These participants have either worked for or participated in the activities of one of the island's religious communities.

**As noted in the Assessment Process section, people initially approached as part of the Staffa and Treshnish Isles assessment were routinely asked about Iona during an interview and vice versa.

Annex IV: Previous Research

In situating the findings from this rapid study, consideration was given to existing research on Iona. Key projects and publications are summarised below and are referred to elsewhere in this report (see Findings sections, Implications, and Annex V) to help contextualise participant responses and illustrate wider narratives regarding Iona. A full list of references is given in Annex VI.

Prior research has sought to understand the **social histories** of different communities on Iona and to consider aspects of memory and identity in the past and present. Key among these studies are the two books by Mairi MacArthur (2007a and 2007b), herself a descendent of an Iona family. MacArthur draws on her own family connections, genealogy and oral history, documentary sources, and reading of the landscape, to explore the social history of Iona's secular population (an explicit counterpoint to the more well-documented religious history). In her first book, focused on crofting on Iona during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (2007a), MacArthur highlights the islander's self-reliance, knowledge and insight, and social cohesion. Her second book considers Iona's Christian heritage and status as a 'sacred isle' within the specific history of settlement and life on the island from prehistoric times to the present day (2007b). Considering developments in the twentieth century, she describes how regular visitors became an established feature, making *"significant contributions to the social as well as economic life of the island"* (2007b: 124), and the feelings of *"appropriation"* that accompanied the establishment of the Iona Community at the Abbey (2007b: 161). MacArthur describes the sale of Iona as causing it to be seen as *"a piece of public property"* (2007b: 192), further complicating which aspects of the island's history and heritage are remembered and celebrated. Her work stresses that the islanders, *"these people, mostly working the crofts and farms and thus responsible for changes over time in the landscape itself, are an integral – rather than an accidental – part of Iona's story"* (2007a: 266). It is the history of the village, school, crofts, and people of Iona that are the focus of the information presented in the Iona Heritage Centre, which also holds a local archive with collections of postcards, photographs and family histories, supporting genealogical research.

Placenames are also a form of collective memory. At the time of this assessment, the University of Glasgow's *Iona's Namescape* project was researching the Gaelic placenames associated with Iona's topography and monuments and their dynamism over time and between different communities. A recent project publication (Clancy et al. 2025) includes reflections by Sofia Evemalm-Graham on colour-names (2025: 20-27), which she notes feature prominently on Iona, and the multiple narrative strands associated with the modern naming of Sìthean Mòr, usually known in English as Angel Hill (2025: 46-52, 123-124, 130). She observes that *"the wealth of place-lore associated with Sìthean Mòr demonstrates an important point relating to place-names: their transmission is rarely static and often represents centuries of changing perceptions, both by locals and visitors"* (2025: 51). The continued use of Gaelic placenames denotes forms of place-based knowledge, connection, and meaning that are an important source of social values in the present (as observed in this study, see Annex V).

Sally Foster and Siân Jones's research (2019 and 2020) focusing on the **social values** of the St John's Cross replica in the Abbey precinct extended to include wider attachments, meanings and forms of belonging in the island landscape. Their in-depth qualitative study included residents, staff members and guests of the Iona Community, heritage professionals and longer-term visitors to the island. They made use of rapid ethnographic approaches, including interviews, participant observation, a digital modelling workshop, and a creative workshop with school pupils. Although the modern St John's Cross replica project was the main focus of their research, Foster and Jones

identify multiple forms of meaning, caring, and ownership of places on Iona, among Iona's multiple communities, in particular the islanders and various religious communities. They discuss the (largely unspoken) processes of contestation and negotiation between communities, as competing identities and secular and spiritual forms of meaning are expressed (2020: 46), noting that where places become associated with a single community it can lead to perceived and real (locked gates) boundaries within the landscape (2020: 42). They also observe how activities, such as pilgrimages, which build connections between places, landscape features and natural processes, including the weather and the aging of materials, impact on people's multisensory experiences of places and monuments (2020: 162, 168). They describe Iona as, *"A place of meeting and greeting, it is lovingly regarded as safe, peaceful, beautiful and welcoming, often holding special personal associations"* (2020: 44). They argue that forming such associations (through connecting with people, place, and objects), *"is a dynamic process in which authenticity and value are generated"* (2020: 181).

Krittika Bhattacharjee's doctoral research (2018), at the intersection of tourism and religious studies, made extensive use of walking interviews and participant observation to explore **visitor values**. Her approach to visitorship encompasses day-trippers, those on short stays, and 'regular' returning visitors, complemented by interviews with island residents and seasonal staff. Bhattacharjee's work is framed around the construction of 'specialness', three aspects of which are identified by visitors – *"safety, connectedness and a sense of being 'out-of-time'"* (2018: 183). She argues that, rather than being a passive onlooker or consumers, visitors actively generate their own experiences of Iona through actions and telling stories that create a sense of relationality and possession (2018: 271). Key among Bhattacharjee's findings is that *"the ascription of 'specialness' to Iona is a visitor narrative of belonging, a form of visitor 'work', and a way for Iona's transient subjects to participate in the ongoing, everyday life on the island"* (2018: 5). Critically, she argues that the construction and experience of specialness arises through relationships and experiences, rendering Iona as somewhere familiar and distinctive, hidden yet discoverable (2018: 246-247). Specialness depends on both connecting with island life in the present, a form of dwelling or home making - noting that this is a contested area (2018: 284-287) - and a feeling that Iona is a place and time outside or beyond the normal day-to-day. These seemingly contradictory impulses are entwined processes that help construct specialness while also being a response to it (2018: 283).

Both of the above works identify a complexity in how values are generated and expressed – a polyvocality or layering of multiple meanings derived from the stories, feelings and uses of places by different communities. Bhattacharjee describes how the West end machair *"is shared by different groups and is the site of a diverse range of events and relationships [...] The machair is beach, home, farm, golf course all at one time and all in one place"* (2018: 149).

The interpretation, uses and values associated with a place are informed in part by the historic and archaeological evidence for past human activities. Although there were no **archaeological investigations** on-going at the time of this study, there has been extensive archaeological research on the island. One of the largest programmes of investigation was carried out from 1956-63 by Prof. Charles Thomas around the Abbey complex, which revealed information on the monastic layout and evidence for activities at the site (Campbell and Maldonado 2020). In more recent decades, the Trust has completed or commissioned archaeological surveys and smaller-scale excavations that have revealed multiple phases of activity from the Mesolithic and Neolithic onwards, recording features (such as boat noosts at Port na Fraing) and artefacts (from pottery and coins to burnt bone and flint tools) that indicate the lifestyles and connections of the island's earlier populations. Watching briefs on construction and infrastructure projects have raised awareness among residents of the island's archaeology, as have public archaeology initiatives.

Annex V: Statement of Social Values

Iona's relatively small size belies the degree of complexity it encompasses, arising in part from its varied geography, as well as the different organisations, communities and meanings associated with the island. The range of values expressed by residents and regular visitors are sometimes contrasting and at others aligned or mutually reinforcing. Communities and values are also dynamic, evolving in response to external factors and internal changes. This means that any assessment is reflective of its context and participation. The following should therefore be considered as indicative of the diversity of values for communities of locality, attachment and interest at the time of the research, rather than a definitive appraisal.

1. Community identities and relationships

- 1.1 Life on Iona is valued for being **distinct and discrete** from other places. As one resident explained, *"unlike Mull, [people here have] a shared experience"* (CS5_INT_003). MacArthur describes a history of islander independence and self-sufficiency, underpinned by strong social bonds (2007a: 264-265), characteristics that are traced into the present, with references to the island's co-operative spirit, many small businesses, and agricultural productivity. Another resident reflected, *"you're more connected to people [here], you're co-dependent, which is good I think"* (CS6_INT_004).
- 1.2 It is apparent from this and other research (see Annex IV) that, while being resident on Iona can result in profound feelings of connection to the people and place, it does not necessarily equate with someone **being 'from Iona'** or being considered by others to be so. Complex distinctions are made among residents, those people with multigenerational connections to Iona identified as being from 'island families'. At the same time, boundaries are also drawn between those who have moved to live on the island, depending on duration and nature of connection. One long term resident said, *"I'm an old blow in. It's the aging process as well, so many people have come in after me, so I'm established now as far as most people are concerned"* (CS5_INT_012). They went on to point out that those who see them as being from Iona *"don't know the nuances of the generational thing of real indigenous families"* (CS5_INT_012). As this comment suggests, such distinctions are not absolute. Other claims to belonging and islander status may be rooted in depth of experience or family and community relationships (as described in later sections).
- 1.3 Another distinction is between the **religious communities** and *"ordinary islanders"* (CS5_INT_001). Notwithstanding their internal diversity, the religious communities, and the Iona (Abbey) Community in particular, are seen by islanders as a distinct group, separate from the permanent residents. Those living in the religious communities may be resident for several years, but their stay is nonetheless intended to be temporary and based on their spiritual mission/role. One resident reflected, *"people in religious communities are not here long term. Some connect with locals but [it's] easy to remain separate"* (CS5_INT_003). Nevertheless, members of the religious communities also develop social and spiritual values, creating diverse attachments (also see section 8).
- 1.4 This **separateness** has also been written about in other studies. MacArthur describes the Iona Community in the post-World War II years as having *"become an island within an island"* (2007b: 179). Foster and Jones, describe how *"the 'islanders' (non-IC [Iona Community] residents) actively distinguish themselves from the IC: they work to be good*

neighbours, but there are fences" (2019: 1174). They go on to describe how this distinction translates into spatial relationships, as *"certain places are identified as 'belonging' to different communities"* (2019: 1175). Where uses of space overlap, as they do in the Abbey Church, *"different identities are defined, albeit with a knowing deftness"* (2019: 1175).

- 1.5 Anne Muir's oral history, *Outside the Safe Place*, discusses the **challenging relationships and conflicts** that characterised the early years following the establishment of the Iona Community (2011: 91-123), with the tensions attributed at least in part to a lack of acknowledgement from the incoming Community of the integral role the islanders play in the stewardship of Iona (2011: 116). These conflicts are still remembered, one long term resident saying,

"I think in early years there was quite a lot of resistance to George Macloed, people found him very assertive, because the culture here is quite oblique, people are unwilling to put it all out there and take time to judge. There are ways of negotiating, people did feel a bit trampled on, it has taken 70 plus years to just re-establish relationships on a level with mutual respect" (CS5_INT_011).

- 1.6 Participants commented that the naming and public profile of the Iona Community continues to cause misconceptions about the nature of the island community: *"people think it is just monks and nuns across the centuries"* (CS5_INT_003) and creates an *"expectation that everyone is here for religious purposes"* (CS5_INT_009). In contrast, a **distinct island identity and heritage** is presented in the Iona Heritage Centre, which focuses on the village, crofting, geology and other aspects of island life. This focus reflects the importance of recognising *"a positive, non-Columban, non-Abbey identity that is their own"* (Foster and Jones 2020: 41); something which islanders often feel is 'overlooked'.
- 1.7 The degree of separation or integration between the different religious groups with a presence on the island and the rest of the population varies, but the **boundaries** between religious and other island communities are often more fluid than they first appear (see also Bhattacharjee 2018: 23, 143). There is a history of residents working for, hosting, and/or worshiping with members of the religious groups. Furthermore, people who initially come to Iona for religious reasons may become regular visitors or choose to move to the island more permanently. Similarly, religious practices on Iona are reflected in secular island rhythms – from Tuesday being 'pilgrimage day' to the networks of relationships connecting Iona to the wider world (see also section 7).
- 1.8 Both people identifying as members of the religious communities and islanders spoke about a need for **'balance'** between the various religious institutions and island communities, a recognition that how Iona is valued and sustained depends on the activities of both. It was apparent that tensions remain and these were heightened at the time of the assessment by the recent arrival of a community of Romanian Orthodox monks. One resident felt: *"[More] retreat houses are being established when we can't afford to lose our workforce [due to lack of affordable accommodation], pushing things out of balance"* (CS5_INT_004).
- 1.9 A concern over **exploitation** and people making money at the expense of the island community was raised several times during the study. As one resident said: *"[you] can only build on land once and then it is gone, productive land. Difficult one, because people need to live in the area, but don't want it exploited for tourism"* (CS5_INT_002). Another resident felt that changes to the island's economy and population were impacting on the community's

co-operative spirit, as *“the pressure to create income is getting quite competitive, and people start initiatives that almost by definition are treading on the toes and limiting the income of someone else”* (CS5_INT_012).

- 1.10 As one resident described, *“crofting, fishing, tourism, all have a part in Iona”* (CS5_INT_004). It is widely recognised that, *“tourism is the main source of income. When I was first coming, it was quite an impoverished island and it’s quite prosperous now and that is thanks to tourism”* (CS5_INT_008). However, the growth in **tourism** also brings pressures and concerns that the island could become *“a tourist Disneyland”* (CS5_INT_011). These pressures are countered by asserting the other aspects of islander identity and community life (as discussed above, see also section 3).

2. Belonging and sense of home

- 2.1 For those **people who have grown up on Iona or lived there for a long time**, there is an everyday familiarity to the **island as home** which supports social values of belonging. People expressed feelings of belonging to the island overall and also to parts of the island, such as the West or the North end. One resident, who was born on Iona, reflected, *“[Iona has] always been home and never doubted it would be home. Living away made me appreciate that more”* (CS6_INT_010); and a long-term resident commented that, *“it seems to be the place I belong. [...] Difficult to encapsulate that. Sense of belonging and that this is home and I knew that from going back to my old place”* (CS5_INT_008).
- 2.2 People working together and caring for the island was mentioned as contributing to the feeling of homeliness. The island was described as a **nurturing and cared for** place, where people had or were raising children, and a refuge to some extent from the problems of the wider world. This feeling arises from a combination of the environment, *“how the place looks and is looked after. People care and feels like home”* (CS5_INT_004); people’s relationships, *“Something about the island, [creates an] ‘I’m home’ feeling. Combination of the people here – surrounded by love and friendships – and the energy of the island”* (CS5_INT_009); and a sense that *“in a way here you can withdraw or are protected from things”* (CS5_INT_001), such as crime, that you find on the mainland (see also section 9).
- 2.3 For **repeat visitors and seasonal workers** too, a sense of **familiarity** and home-making (whether in a particular house or in Iona as a place) generates values associated with feelings of belonging and, in some cases, their sense of identity. One repeat visitor said, *“you get to know the local community and shop owners, it’s nice when you come back because they know who you are and speak to you, so you’re coming on holiday, but it is a bit like coming home”* (CS5_INT_010). Important in generating these values are the relationships between repeat visitors and residents. A long-term resident reflected: *“you have this interesting mix of visiting people, some of whom you might only meet for a short periods and don’t have much time to chat or know about them, but there are others who come back time after time who you can develop a close connection too and they can become friends”* (CS6_INT_004).
- 2.4 **Multi-generational connections** are a source of social values for people who can trace their family’s presence on Iona back over generations, as well as those who have arrived more recently. As one resident explained: *“my sons will already be second generation and now I’ve got grandchildren here too. It’s funny how quickly I can now say well, my family*

has been in this area for quite a long time" (CS6_INT_004). Also, for many regular visitors, there is a multi-generational aspect to their experience and connection. For example, as one regular visitor explained: *"[we] had holidays here when our children were young and they also developed a love for Iona, as have our grandchildren, but you tend to find this with people who have been coming a long time, we're not different from many"* (CS5_INT_010).

- 2.5 Identification with **houses and crofts** is key in situating people in wider social networks and the spatial history and organisation of the island. A long-term resident and crofter reflected that, *"people are interested in their crofts and their names, and the history of them, and the history of the various houses, how they came to be here"* (CS5_INT_001). This interest reflects values of belonging to a place, as well as in place. Another long-term resident reflected, *"although I don't belong here [in terms of having a multi-generational connection], I know where I'll be buried. Can go around the graveyard and know the names, know the houses, that's how you identify people. What an extraordinary thing that is, to be a part of a place"* (CS5_INT_012). The houses are the physical manifestations of people's long association with place and provide a sense of continuity beyond the current generation of tenants: *"people are far less permanent than the housing"* (CS5_INT_001). A repeat visitor also demonstrated their sense of belonging by explaining that they knew *"who used to live in what house and who has taken it over"* (CS5_INT_010). MacArthur also describes *"the local habit of naming people after their croft"* (2007b: 76) and, writing about the 'regulars', families that returned year on year over generations, says: *"people identified with the place where they most commonly stayed"* (2007b: 122).
- 2.6 **Boats** of various kinds – rowing boats, fishing boats, ferry boats, Staffa tour boats, puffers and steamships (e.g. King George V) – are a rich source of social values, embedded in stories and memories that connect people and places in networks of relationships. One resident reflected that, *"People will always have a connection to the boats they worked on and the people you worked with or meet. The social networks between families [and] individuals – teaching younger ones, summer jobs etc."* (CS6_INT_013). The tradition of fishing and connections between Iona and other islands including Staffa means that boats have been and remain important in the lives of islanders (also see section 7). Boats carry rich social values even once they cease to be used, or are sold on to others beyond Iona, carrying their networks of relationships between people and places with them as part of their biographies.
- 2.7 As the above implies, **inter-generational relationships** are important within families and the wider community when it comes to maintaining the social values associated with belonging. Stories and skills are shared across generations and with incomers, the knowledge and experiences of older residents being referenced by islanders and regular visitors to validate their understandings of the place (also see section 4). For example, a previous resident explained, *"the island is full of stories from its own history, every stone, [...] heroic local stories – like the wreck of the Guy Mannering and astonishing rescue effort by local people forming human chain, I was told that story by [a resident and member of an island family], whose grandfather was part of the chain"* (CS5_INT_011). Several residents expressed concern that the number of people with such local knowledge is reducing, ascribing this to changes in population, relationships of transmission, and working practices (see also section 3).
- 2.8 This study reflects the findings from previous research, that people's sense of belonging is both personal and dependant on connections to the wider community. The **continuity of**

relationships, often spanning generations, is important to both residents and repeat visitors in establishing a sense of belonging and homeliness (Foster and Jones 2020: 43-44). As studies elsewhere in the Highlands have shown, belonging is a fluid concept, negotiated through relationships to people and place (see e.g. Cohen 1982, Macdonald 1997, Jones 2004). Establishing such connections is part of defining who belongs and maintaining community boundaries, notwithstanding their fluidity.

3. Values associated with crofting/farming

- 3.1 Several people reflected on the impact human activity has had on the landscape, in particular crofting and farming. The **agricultural character** of Iona is highlighted as part of the island's distinct identity, in contrast to the religious and tourist narratives of place, and is used to situate the island within longer historical timeframes (as seen in the Heritage Centre, also MacArthur 2007a and 2007b). As one resident explained: *"[when asked] what happens on Iona, no one says here is a tourism provider, people say 'Iona is a crofting island', so it is there in the memory. And in the dignity, we're not just slaves to tourism"* (CS5_INT_012).
- 3.2 The practice of crofting is generative of social values associated with belonging, identity, and **connection to the land**. One resident explained, *"[my husband's] family had been here for hundreds of years and were of this place"* (CS5_INT_001). People also spoke of feeling *"hefted"* to their land and having *"a profound connection"* to their home or croft (CS5_INT_012). This reflects findings in other research on crofting, emotional connections and localised identity (see e.g. Robertson and Webster 2017).
- 3.3 For those involved in crofting, these connections to place create feelings of moral ownership and custodianship (also see Annex VI – Balmacara Estate). People spoke about crofting and crofters **caring for the land**, for example, one resident explaining, *"I'm a steward here, been trying to accept it's not profitable but keeps land in good shape for future time when there might be a market for local produce and livestock"* (CS5_INT_012). Other people agreed that it was important to work the land to *"look after"* it (CS5_INT_001). These views were shared by people not directly involved in crofting, one such resident observing that *"Maol croft [farm] was vacant and the land suffered"* (CS5_INT_003).
- 3.4 Some people suggested that reducing crofting activity could allow the land to *"regenerate"* (CS5_INT_007), but others argued that crofting practices created the landscape and supported **biodiversity**. *"They [conservationists] have these ideas about the machair and the wild flowers but if you stock it right you get the flowers and if you shut it off it gets rank and within 2-3 years and the flowers aren't there"* (CS5_INT_002).
- 3.5 Familiarity with the nature of the land and **crofting/farming practices** is a way that people not actively involved in those practices demonstrated their connections to and understanding of Iona. One regular visitor observing that, *"the place is like it is because the people living here have made it that way"* (CS6_INT_006) and another explaining that *"farming and how things are farmed, keeping protected areas, is all part of it [Iona]"* (CS5_INT_005).
- 3.6 While participants felt that crofting is *"absolutely part of the [island's] heritage"* (CS6_INT_010), there was some concern that a decline in the number of people actively

working the land is impacting on place-based **knowledge and connections**. One resident reflected that, *“when I was in school, everyone fished or lived on a croft and knew what happened on the land. Now not got that”* (CS5_INT_002). The same participant went on to add, *“When you’re working the ground and are out on the land you know the Gaelic names [...], those are passed on and if you are curious find out what they mean – normally someone who died or something. That’s gone, people here in 30 years may not know where it is”* (CS5_INT_002).

4. Place knowledge and experience

- 4.1 Place knowledge depends on skilled vision that is rooted in an understanding of the specific context. It supports social values associated with belonging and identity, distinguishing those with such knowledge from others with shorter-term or alternative understandings of place. Participants used their place knowledge to demonstrate both **a depth of connection to place and sensitivity to changes**. For example, one long-term resident observed, *“People are excited to see one or two skylarks, 40 years ago there used to be clouds of them”* (CS5_INT_012).

- 4.2 Place knowledge is often shared by or retold with reference to previous generations or older residents, reaffirming **inter-generational authority and connections** with place. For example, one long-term resident related:

“I was asking people about changes and [an older resident] said the colours. Time was you would be on the Mull shore and you would see all the different colours of the fields, one would have potatoes, and one oats, and one grazing, not wildly different but now when you look across it is all the same as all out to grazing now” (CS5_INT_011).

This participant went on to add, *“it wasn’t something that would have struck me, because I didn’t have that length of memory”* (CS5_INT_011), qualifying their own understanding and emphasising the authority of the person they were learning from.

- 4.3 Knowledge passed down through generations is complemented by **knowledge gained through experience**, the process of learning being valued as part of connecting with and coming to understand the place. One resident observed that, *“In the early days, I tried to put more sheep on one of the crofts, and I think dad was saying that he had tried the same thing, and it didn’t work, but you have to find it out for yourself, it’s just the way”* (CS5_INT_002).

- 4.4 The importance of **regular interaction** (whether while working the land or through other activities) in establishing authoritative place knowledge was emphasised by several participants. For example, one long-term resident described how at one beach, *“the level of the sand can vary by six feet from one week to the next. It’s only if you go to a beach all the time that you would observe that”*, going on to add, *“I know about the different levels of the sand, because I go regularly”* (CS5_INT_001). The depth of knowledge and experience of islanders is recognised by members of Trust staff, who observed that, *“[local people] know a huge amount about the local wildlife”* (CS5_INT_011) and are normally the first to notice when *“such-and-such is out [...or] when the corncrake first came back”* (CS6_INT_001).

4.5 The authority and sense of moral ownership that comes with intimate knowledge of place is evident in **discussions on management**, when local knowledge is mobilised, sometimes in direct contrast with external forms of expertise and processes, e.g. conservation plans (as described in section 3.4). One resident, describing crofting schemes for cropping and grazing, said: *“[The Trust] have these ‘Great Theories’ but the farmers I know, on Mull and here, they all were saying [...] this is actually nonsense, it’s not right actually”* (CS5_INT_012).

4.6 The geology of the island to the South, West, and North gives rise to a range of landscapes and locations that are not necessarily easy to get to. Some of these places are **‘hidden’** or **require specific knowledge and time to access**, distinguishing those who know about them from the casual day tripper and valued for the varied experiences that they offer. This was made explicit by a seasonal worker, who observed that:

“tourists just go for the white beaches that they see when going to and from Staffa, but there is so much more to the island. West side so rocky and at end of August gets covered in heather and is so beautiful, the whole Southwest side of the island is so gorgeous and no one goes there. It’s not the most easily accessible, but so beautiful. Each one gives you a different experience” (CS5_INT_009).

4.7 The sense that **understanding takes time and knowledge is gained through experience** is also reflected in comments by visitors, one regular visitor describing how, *“in order to know these islands you need to spend time there, [it’s] very different to just dropping in”* (CS6_INT_006). It is also mentioned in wider literature, for example, in *Iona: A Spiritual Landscape*, a personal account of the landscape and his spiritual journey, Mike Pratt writes *“you need to visit each revered spot several times to properly know it”* (2012: 18).

5. Being in time/time-depth

5.1 Iona’s **geology and archaeology** generate an awareness of the temporality of present human experience and connect people with narratives of place and time on a far larger scale than an individual lifespan.

5.2 The evidence of **past human activity** (both religious and secular) contributes to what one resident referred to as a *“deep sense of lives lived”* (CS5_INT_012). This situates present day activities within a longer history of human settlement, including people caring for the land over hundreds of years, shaping the landscape and creating productive soils. The same participant also noted that, *“you don’t dig deep in Iona because of what you’re going to find, you’re going to find bones, it’s stratified socially and culturally. If you dig, literally and metaphorically, you find a layered history”* (CS5_INT_012).

5.3 One regular visitor reflected that much of the archaeological and historical interest *“relates to the Columban stuff, and the prehistoric story is really under researched [...] There’s this long story of people in the landscape”* (CS6_INT_006). As mentioned in section 1, the presence of a **pre-Columba population** on Iona is drawn on as part of the island’s identity. During a BBC podcast, David Alloway of Iona Trails describes:

“when Columba arrived here it wasn’t an empty landscape, it was a populated landscape with people living here, and the more I walk across it and explore it I’m

realising one of the things that I think would draw people here thousands of years ago, 10000 years or so, would be the landscape and the climate here [...] For its size and scale, it is just another small island on the West coast of Scotland but it's got such more significance, because of Columba yes, but it think its positioning, its geography had a lot to bear on that" (BBC Sounds 2021: 08:24-09:22).

- 5.4 The above comment connects the history of human settlement with other long-term constants, the island's **location and climate**. In this study as well, participants spoke of these as part of the island's uniqueness, differentiating it from the mainland or Mull. A regular visitor commented on how the *"climate feels different"* (CS6_INT_007) on Iona as compared to the Ross of Mull. A resident, reflecting on the presence of Gaelic placenames related to cornfields at various locations, said *"[there] was a lot of corn and stuff grown years ago [...] You can see the land is good"* (CS5_INT_002), and another regular visitor observed that *"people have been making the soil good on Iona for 1500 years and that shows"* (CS6_INT_006).
- 5.5 More broadly, the **geology** of Iona is seen as the foundation on which all human activity depends, having shaped the landscape and providing a common touchpoint (figuratively, as well as through the sense of touch) through the ages. Iona attracts geologists and geology student fieldtrips each year, drawn by the diversity and antiquity of the rocks on the island - the Lewisian gneiss that forms the West side of Iona is some of the oldest rock on Earth. As one regular visitor described, *"Iona is a fantastic microcosm of things you don't see in such a small area anywhere else in the Lewisian, so it is really kind of special and spectacular and understudied, so there is really huge scope for understanding a lot more about Lewisian time by understanding these rocks"* (CS6_INT_006). Participants who were less aware of the specific geological formations nonetheless appreciated *"how unique this area is"* (CS6_INT_001), the age of the rocks, and their aesthetic values. One resident saying, *"when you look at the granite [possibly meaning the multicoloured gneiss] it's extraordinary, I'd love to be able to draw the granite really well, I love looking at it but it's too complicated"* (CS6_INT_004).
- 5.6 The ancient rocks are valued not only for how they have shaped the landscape but also for contributing to **how Iona feels**. One long-term resident reflected, *"I have been to other places with a similar feel, I went with my cousin to the Badlands of Dekota, and I said this feels like Iona, so it's not just the spiritual legacy, something to do with the ancient rocks. That's what a lot of people would say about Iona"* (CS5_INT_008). This sentiment is echoed by Iona-based artist Mairi Killin, when talking to Alasdair Satchell in his podcast. When asked what is special about Iona, Mairi says:

"it's different for everybody but it's the same for everybody in a strange way [...] it's to do with the age of the rocks [...] It's something geological, it comes from deep time, deep, deep time, and I actually think although there is lots grafted on top [...] it's a connection to deep time people experience without being conscious of that [...] it comes right up through your feet, comes right up from the ground" (2019: 43:25-45:10).

- 5.7 Iona's stones are also **mobilised and mobile** – extending the Iona connection beyond the island. As Bentley and Paynter note in their book, *"one wonders how much of Iona is scattered around the world in the form of souvenir pebbles! Larger blocks of this marble are also well travelled and have been used in monuments worldwide"* (2013: 53). The tradition

of selling pebbles to tourists was noted by William Wordsworth, who after visiting in 1833 records the practice in the opening lines of his poem *Iona (Upon Landing)* (Crawford: 2016: 37). The tradition of gathering smooth and colourful pebbles endures, with one regular visitor observing that these tactile souvenirs (as found or made into jewellery), *“taken from Iona to be with them, mean so much to people”* (CS6_INT_006), both as a keepsake and imbued with spiritual values as part of the holy island.

6. Atmosphere and affect

- 6.1 One Trust staff member reflected that, when people talk about what is special about Iona they often mention *“really **intangible things**, like the quality of the light, the colours and the atmosphere, how you feel when you get here”* (CS6_INT_009). Other participants described how the landscape, weather and seasons contribute to the atmosphere or affective qualities of Iona and experiences of ‘being’ in place.
- 6.2 The ***interplay between the sea and land*** was prominent in many people’s memories and experiences, from swimming to fishing/boating and the views across the water to other islands (see also section 7). One resident who first visited Iona as a child recalled that they *“loved it here partly because of the proximity to the water”* (CS6_INT_004). Barbara Sellars, an artist who has been visiting Iona for over 40 years, describes Iona as *“a place I love dearly; a place of light and colour and the ever changing dynamics of the seashore”* (<https://images-of-iona.com/>).
- 6.3 The ***colours and qualities of light*** associated with Iona are a rich source of social and particularly aesthetic values, which have drawn artists of all kinds. These are seen as *“special qualities”* of Iona linked to its geology, landscape, size, and *“the fact it is low lying, allowing the surrounding expanse of sea to reflect the light with considerable intensity”*, emphasising the colours of the land and sea (Christian and Stiller 2000: 51). The *Iona Namespace* project has documented how prominent colours are among recorded Gaelic places names on Iona, noting that the range of terms *“illustrate the richness of colours used to describe the landscape”* (Clancy et al. 2025: 21).
- 6.4 The ***weather***, changeable at any time of year, also has a direct impact on how the island is experienced and perceived (Foster and Jones 2020: 162). The rhythms of daily life – boating, gardening, church services, managing livestock, and community activities – are sometimes disrupted by the weather but, as one resident reflected, *“the fact that we can’t just do everything when we want isn’t necessarily a bad thing”* (CS6_INT_004). Such disruptions are valued in part because they cause people to stop and reflect on their place in the wider world. Mills (2019) describes how weather events can immerse people in heritage places, enhancing feelings of authenticity and connection to the landscape, past and present. On Iona, the weather creates a dynamic environment that one regular visitor described as *“thought provoking all the time”* (CS5_INT_005).
- 6.5 Several participants reflected on the rhythm of the ***seasons*** bringing different sounds and experiences: *“the corncrake is the sound of the summer, but also the wrens that are just everywhere”* (CS6_INT_001). The difference between the seasons was also valued by residents for the change it brings to the social balance and activity on the island: *“[you’re] mixing with visiting people in summer and you socialise more with friends and neighbours in the winter”* (CS6_INT_004). Another resident reflected that *“it’s really great that we have*

the contrast because I think you couldn't do either year round [... in winter] everything just contracts [...] and I think the island is a bit more sociable in winter as well, as a community" (CS5_INT_003).

- 6.6 The fact Iona is an island off an island and takes effort to reach is often significant to how it is valued by visitors – even after returning multiple times, one regular visitor said, *"it still feels like an adventure to get here"* (CS5_INT_006). This taps into longer literary traditions of islands as places to be **discovered**, as well as to experience personal discovery. In their research on Iona, Foster and Jones describe how, from the late seventeenth century onwards *"inhabited Highland landscapes were actively cultivated as terra incognita by the travel writers and antiquarians who 'discovered' these places"* (2020: 48-49, emphasis original). The notion of a remote, empty landscape continues to carry currency today. In *Iona: A Spiritual Landscape*, a personal account based on visiting Iona for over 20 years, Mike Pratt (2012) mirrors the sentiments of repeat visitors who participated in this study, with the themes of anticipation and arrival, peace and escape, searching and discovery, and isolation or solitude.
- 6.7 Participants often referred to the **space and peace** they feel on Iona, described by one long-term resident as *"the open, endless space, expansiveness of it"* (CS5_INT_012). More broadly, as a seasonal worker observed, the *"peacefulness and seclusion of island life"* enables people to *"just be present [...] learn how to be with myself and other people and be present in the moment"* (CS5_INT_009). Another participant, who has been visiting Iona regularly for 50 years, said:

"when I stepped onto the island there was definitely a very strong presence of calm and peace, I've come to think of it as almost like a spiritual thing [...] it's very difficult to articulate it without it sounding a religious thing, but I think it may be because the natural environment is almost like a natural cathedral itself and then you have the Abbey and the history of Celtic Christianity – the human element and the natural element in harmony and in balance – and it's just a beautiful place to come and reflect and step out of the modern day-to-day world and really reappraise and get your feet on the ground about what it's all about and you as a person" (CS5_INT_005).

- 6.8 Participants also valued the ability to experience places away from the crowds or in **solitude**. One resident commenting that, *"my definition of a good beach is only me on it"* (CS5_INT_001). A frequent observation by residents and people who stay longer on Iona is the contrast between the busyness of the village in the day and after the last ferry leaves. One regular visitor saying, *"after last ferry goes, it takes on a different atmosphere. Lovely, peace, sometimes you find yourself listening to the silence, how quiet it is"* (CS5_INT_010). Some participants expressed concerns that this was changing with an increase in footfall and numbers of cars that threatened both the environment/wildlife and experience of the island. One resident observing, *"because of social media, because everywhere is on TripAdvisor [...] people go places they never in the past would have gone, so the island is traversed infinitely more"* (CS5_INT_012).

7. Connections to other places/people

- 7.1 In their book, Foster and Jones describe Iona as a *"place of visitation and connection"* (2020: 44). These connections flow both ways – as islanders have travelled elsewhere and Iona is

visited by or receives attention from outsiders. People who have travelled to or from Iona form an **international network** of connections. These connections are variously valued as part of family and/or community networks, providing leverage for islanders by validating Iona as a place of importance, and shaping the feel of the island through the presence of visitors and those who come from elsewhere to live, work, and worship.

- 7.2 Although Iona is sometimes described as remote, there are well-established **connections across the water** to other islands, many of which form part of the wider seascape visible from Iona, and to destinations further afield. There is a history of fishing, grazing sheep and cattle on offshore islands and of boats from Iona taking tourists to Staffa and, more recently, the Treshnish Islands. Other transportation and social connections are maintained with the Ross of Mull, Tiree (which along with Iona was part of the Argyll Estate), and Glasgow (where the Mull and Iona Association was established 160 years ago). These connections have depended on boats - rowing boats (red boats), steamers, fishing boats, tour boats, and ferries – which have sustained and are embedded in these networks of people/place relationships (as described in section 2.6). One resident observed, *“we’re all so road focused now but by boat it’s no bother to reach the other islands”* (CS5_INT_003).
- 7.3 Maintaining a place-based identity and connections to Iona is valued by members of the island’s **diaspora**, those people born on Iona who have left (temporarily or more permanently) for work and other opportunities on the mainland and further afield. MacArthur writes about the relationships sustained over generations by the families who emigrated from Iona in the 1800s and early 1900s (2007b: 71), noting that the island’s World War One War Memorial records the names of *“sons and grandsons of Iona”* – thereby including members of families that had moved away but maintained a connection to Iona (2007b: 109). Residents spoke about the continued need to move for work and education throughout the twentieth century: *“if they didn’t have croft land or if they were a second son or third, there was nothing here for them, even my generation”* (CS6_INT_010), and their hopes that in future there will be more opportunities for young people to make a life on the island.
- 7.4 **Faith-based networks** also contribute to these connections, amplifying the social and spiritual values that members of these communities associate with the island. One resident observed that the island, *“gets lots of visitors with connections to the recent past – the Iona Community projects”* (CS5_INT_003). Another participant emphasised the continuity of this practice: *“[it’s a] long tradition that we’re part of, of people coming and experiencing the islands from another place”* (CS5_INT_011). Also reflecting on historic practices and the numbers of visitors today, a recently arrived resident said,

“now [Iona is] like a sleepy back water, but back in the day it was a very, if not the most, important place for Scottish Christianity, prestigious people were buried here. Sometimes you think ‘oh yes’, but it’s hard to visualise how important it was and the numbers of people who used to come on pilgrimage. People come presently but would have been a huge centre” (CS6_INT_014).

8. Religion and spirituality

- 8.1 While the formally consecrated spaces and religious monuments on Iona are mostly outwith the Trust’s care, for many people, **the whole island is part of the religious experience**. This is understood both in the sense that historically, religious communities would have

been active across the landscape: “no matter where you walk on Iona, [you’re] putting your feet where Columba or his monks did” (CS5_INT_008), and that present-day religious experiences are connected to Iona as a place. One member of the Iona Community described this experience as “feet on the ground spirituality, because it’s quite earthy and practical but also because it is practiced in a particular place” (CS5_INT_011) - meaning the island as a whole, rather than just the Abbey.

- 8.2 This interaction between the wider island and religious or spiritual experiences means that **environmental or secular features** can assume a religious symbolism and values associated with their spiritual meaning, for example through being stops on pilgrimage walks. In their *Iona Pilgrimage Guide* (2013), Jane Bentley and Neil Paynter identify stops that draw from Christian and social history – stone crosses, the bay where Columba landed, the crossroads where island news was shared – as well as naturally occurring phenomena – such as the erratic boulder on the East side shore.
- 8.3 There is a strong link between the landscape and how people describe their religious experience, with **aesthetic, natural and spiritual aspects** often combined. A long-term resident recalling their first visit said: “I immediately fell in love with the island, just the natural beauty more than anything [... it’s] also marvellous place just to think things through and [I] found the answer to questions didn’t know I was asking” (CS5_INT_008). As this comment indicates, connecting with Iona’s landscape can be central to personal reflection and exploring questions of faith, a process that some people felt required time: “unlike the [Iona] Communities’ guests, [day trippers] are not there for long enough for the island to impress anything of its uniqueness on them or for them to discover themselves in the presence of Iona” (CS5_INT_011).
- 8.4 Links are also made between the landscape and **Christian heritage**, including the ideas and art associated with Celtic Christianity, and more contemporary concerns about the environment and sustainable living (elements that are prominent in the Iona Community teachings). These links between Christian faith and the environment are highlighted in Mike Pratt’s book, *Iona: A Spiritual Landscape*, in which he describes how walking towards the Abbey, through the fields, flowers and birds, with views to the Sound can “help you assimilate the beauty of Creation” (2012: 25), while spending time at the Hermit’s Cell is an opportunity to “re-connect with Nature” (2012: 46).
- 8.5 The religious experience is therefore highly situated, in the places, heritage, and social context of Iona. However, it is also deeply **personal**, depending on social networks and individual expectations/experiences. A resident observed, “spiritually, [Iona] is a mixed-up interesting place, and some people don’t like it. You bring all your baggage with you” (CS5_INT_008). Although Iona’s religious houses offer a spiritual retreat, for most guests the island is “a turn around place, not a destination” (CS5_INT_011) - preparing them to move forward or go back to home better able to face what they will do next. The religious communities are therefore often seen as mostly comprised of temporary residents that are constantly changing.
- 8.6 For those who do stay for longer, spiritual activities (such as retreats and camps) and undertaking voluntary or paid roles (which may extend for months or years), can result in a **deep and on-going connection** to Iona. One resident, who had first come to Iona as a teenager on an Iona Community youth camp, reflected “Iona and its offshoots have probably

been the most formative place for me in my life" (CS5_INT_012). Another participant, a regular visitor who had chosen to affiliate with the Iona Community, said, *"Iona gets embedded into you quite strongly"* (CS5_INT_010). For these people, Iona is valued not only as a spiritual destination but as part of their identity and they express strong connections to it as a place. Such connections inspire some people to return repeatedly or to move more permanently to the island and may be sustained in the interim through participation in groups based elsewhere who share a faith and experience of Iona (forming part of Iona's international community of interest).

9. Unique and special

- 9.1 A recurring theme is that Iona is somewhere *"unique"* and *"special"*. As mentioned in previous sections, what is valued as special or unique may be Iona's history, its spiritual and religious associations, the environment/landscape, people's social relationships, or the **intersection** of these. As one repeat visitor expressed it, *"everything can come together in a sense, on this tiny little fragment of an island"* (CS5_INT_006).
- 9.2 The basis for Iona's specialness may be broad-based, but it can also be **hard to define**. One regular visitor said, *"Iona has something special that you can't put your finger on"* (CS5_INT_010) and another reflected simply *"it's Iona, isn't it?"* (CS6_INT_006).
- 9.3 What many of these comments share, along with the values associated with the island's identity, is that Iona is **a distinctive place**. One resident said that what makes Iona special for them *"is a lot to do with the community and beauty and it not being like any other island"* (CS5_INT_004).
- 9.4 The **environment** was frequently mentioned as part of what makes Iona special, or *"uplifting"* as one resident described it, going on to say, *"if I walk through Maol to the top of the hill and that view of Ben Mor is suddenly revealed, it lifts your heart"* (CS5_INT_001). Other places that participants mentioned as special to them included favourite beaches for swimming, where they live, or hilltops for views/watching the sunset.
- 9.5 Several people highlighted the **variety of landscapes** encompassed within Iona, what one resident described as there being *"loads of richnesses about it compressed into this little space"* (CS5_INT_012). Another long term, resident observed, *"Sometimes think North is my favourite bit, sometimes the West is, always like the wilder places, it's all a bit different and that adds to the charm of the island"* (CS5_INT_008). Other participants also spoke about the landscape in terms such as 'wild', 'untarnished' or 'raw', reflecting knowledge of more remote areas of the island, while other people valued the *"fertility and benign-ness"* (CS6_INT_006) of Iona, again highlighted in contrast to Mull.
- 9.6 The sense of Iona possessing an unusual richness extends to the local **plants and wildlife**, as a more recently arrived resident highlighted: *"for me is about the nature [...] seeing gannets plunging into the Sound and occasionally pod of dolphins going by. It is an unusual place to live"* (CS6_INT_013). The machair was also mentioned as a unique and rich grassland, one resident saying: *"[farmers from the mainland] can't believe how short and how bare it is, cause mainland fields you're used to seeing a lot more grass, but then the lambs live and do well, cause it's just short, sweet stuff"* (CS5_INT_002).

- 9.7 The diversity and interplay between different aspects of the environment (land and sea) contributes to aesthetic values and the **beauty** of Iona. One resident said, *"It never fails, every time I go out, I look around and think 'my god this is so beautiful', and I still feel like that even after a whole lifetime"* (CS6_INT_004). The scenic value of the island's environment was described by another participant as important to protect, being what *"gives the place life, the entire landscape"* (CS6_INT_006).
- 9.8 In addition to the values associated with religious experiences, participants who had not initially come to Iona for religious reasons and/or professed to have no faith themselves nonetheless felt that there was a **spiritual** quality to the island, an 'ambience' or an 'energy', as some people expressed it, that is part of what makes Iona special.
- 9.9 Several people described Iona as having a **cosmopolitan** feel, reflecting Iona's unique history of visitation and migration. While it was noted that external interest and ideas about the island can cause tensions and create pressures for residents, such connections also help sustain island life and are part of what makes Iona special. One resident felt:

"It's a pretty amazing place. Little island, people of all different ages and ethnicities coming, like a melting pot, don't get that on any other islands really. Because you get all these different people coming, staying different durations, stops it from being stagnant, people not turning in on themselves, massively important part of being here. Abbey's an important part of that, but also the hotels and other places that are here because of the Abbey, so that brings people in, it's a massive part of Iona I think" (CS6_INT_003).

Another resident echoed that sentiment, saying *"I think it keeps your outlook a bit broader as well and there's no harm in that, so ... and maybe it makes it easier as an 'incomer' to come and live here"* (CS6_INT_004).

Annex VI: References and Comparators

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Comparator Trust properties with social values assessments:

- **Balmacara Estate** (<https://doi.org/10.34722/cbt0-4z26>) – a landscape-scale Highland property with tenanted crofts and a residential population spread over eight crofting townships. There are some similarities in the values, complexities and implications related to crofting heritage, a living/worked landscape that encompasses diversity (including a coastline), the scope for individual exploration, as well as multiple forms of place-based knowledge. There are comparable considerations around the Trust's role as landlord/owner and how this is positioned *vis-à-vis* other place-based identities and forms of custodianship and care.
- **Ben Lomond** (<https://doi.org/10.34722/pgw0-w997>) – an upland mountain landscape with an active farming tenancy. This property is valued in part due to its iconic status and draws large numbers of visitors whose values and experiences differ, and at times potentially conflict, with place-based identities and knowledge.