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COMMISSION STAFF WORKING DOCUMENT
STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION - SYNOPSIS REPORT

**Synopsis report on the results of the Communication on the EU strategy for islands
consultation activities**

Accompanying the document

**COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN
PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL
COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

EU strategy for islands

{COM(2026) 520 final}

Table of Contents

Introduction	2
Stakeholder consultation process.....	2
1.1 Call for evidence.....	2
1.2 Other consultations.....	5
1.2.1 Position papers.....	5
1.2.2 Meetings and Events.....	5
1.3 Methodology and tools used for data processing	5
2 Input analysis.....	6
2.1 Call for Evidence.....	6
2.1.1. Overview of contributions from all categories of respondents.....	6
2.1.2. Highlights on the contributions from public authorities.....	9
Conclusions	10

Introduction

This staff working document outlines the consultation strategy and activities supporting the development of the EU strategy for islands. It provides an overview of the call for evidence as well as complementary consultation activities, including contributions submitted directly to the Commission services.

From 4 March to 1 April 2026, the European Commission's Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy launched a call for evidence for the EU strategy for islands on the '*Have Your Say*' portal. This was to feed into the preparation of the strategy by gathering feedback and contributions from the general public, relevant stakeholders and public administrations to support its development.

In line with an evidence-gathering approach, the strategy builds on a number of inputs received outside the call for evidence timeframe. Inputs include position papers and reports submitted by insular stakeholders, national and regional bodies from several Member States and international cooperation bodies. These documents collected stakeholders' views on challenges to be addressed, expectations for the EU's role, potential solutions at EU and national level, and practical examples and good practices to shape the development of the strategy.

Further material transmitted to the Commission services in previous years was also taken into account, ensuring continuity with existing knowledge and policy reflections.

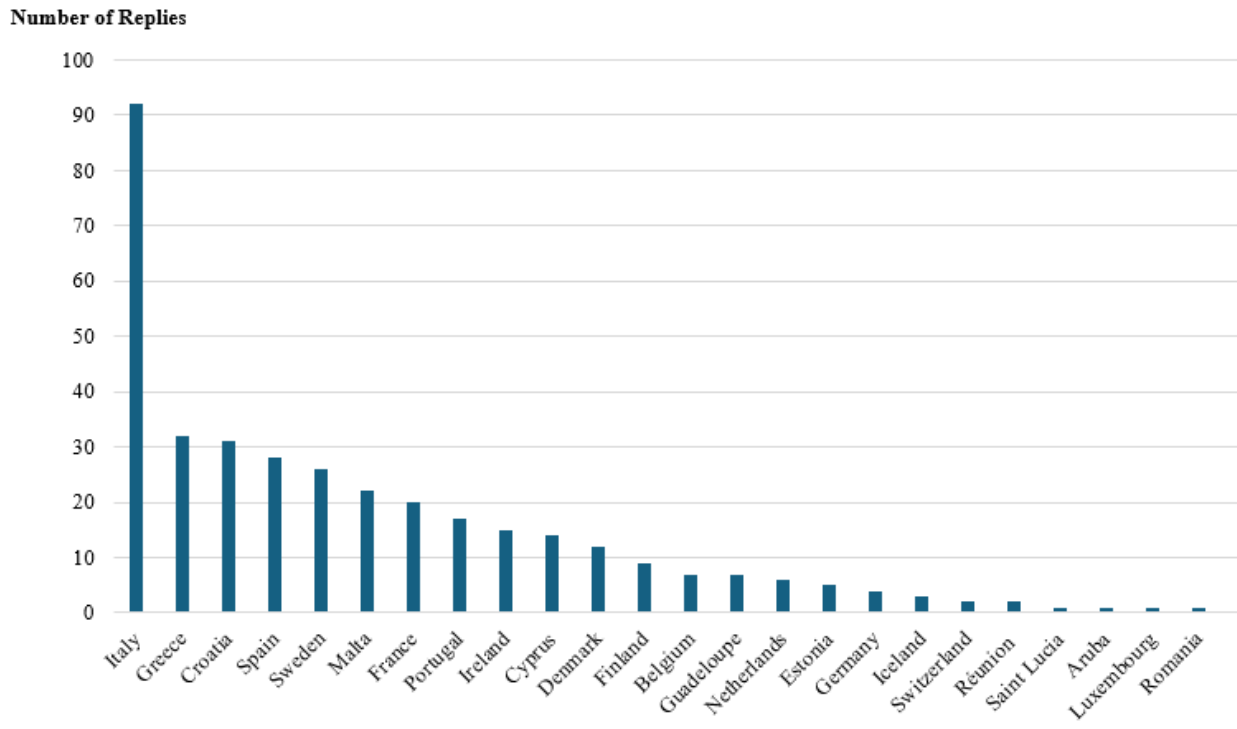
The development of the strategy was further informed by input from EU institutions and advisory bodies (for more details, consult paragraph 1.2.1).

Stakeholder consultation process

1.1 Call for evidence

The call for evidence for the EU strategy for islands received a total of 358 responses, offering broad geographic representation. 18 EU Member States contributed, with the highest number of submissions coming from Italy (92), followed by Greece (32), Croatia (31), Spain (28), and Sweden (26). Other notable contributions included Malta (22), France (20), Portugal (17), Ireland (15) and Cyprus (14), alongside responses from Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands, Finland, Estonia, Germany, Romania and Luxembourg. In addition, two EU outermost regions - Guadeloupe and Réunion, as well as 4 non-EU or overseas territories – Iceland, Switzerland, Aruba and Saint Lucia – participated. Data were reviewed and processed in line with the Better Regulation Toolbox.

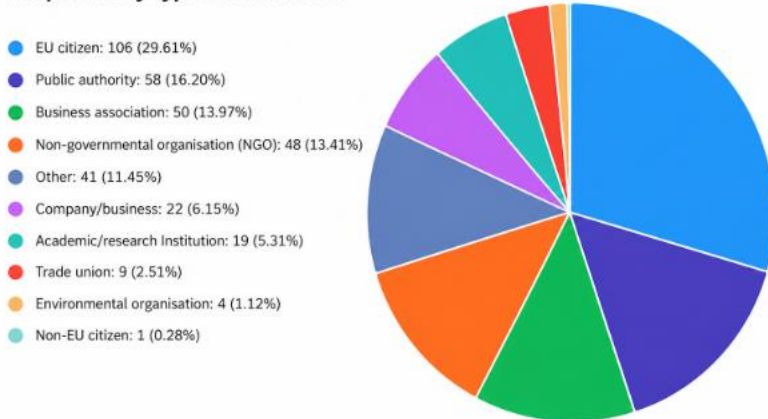
Figure 1. Number of responses to the call for evidence by territorial entity (EU Member States, outermost regions, non-EU countries)



EU citizens represented the largest single group of respondents, accounting for 30% of all contributions (106 responses), reflecting broad participation from individuals across the EU, including those with an interest in island communities. Institutional stakeholders collectively accounted for the remaining 70% of responses. The second main category of respondents is that of public authorities, which provided 16% of replies (58 responses); business associations submitted 14% of responses (50), followed closely by NGOs at 13% (48). The ‘Other’ category – comprising island networks, maritime organisations, interregional bodies and cooperative associations – represented 11% (41 responses). Businesses accounted for 6% (22), academic and research institutions for 5% (19), trade unions for 3% (9), environmental organisations for 1% (4), and one contribution was received from a non-EU citizen (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Percentage of responses to the call for evidence by type of stakeholder

Responses by type of stakeholder

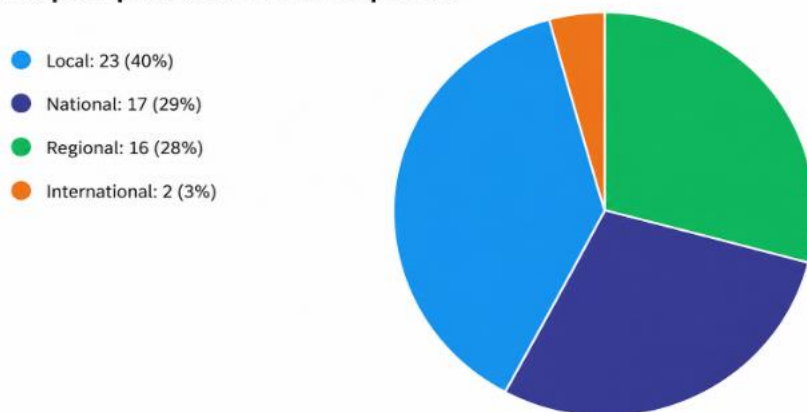


For public authority respondents, the majority operates at local level (40%), followed by national (30%) and regional (28%) levels, with a small number operating at international level (2%) (Figure 3).

A total of 170 documents (e.g.: position papers, studies) were submitted as part of the call for evidence to the European Commission. Position papers were analysed in alignment with the content of the Call for Evidence.

Figure 3. Scope of the public authorities' responses to the call for evidence

Scope of public authorities' responses



Contributions submitted to the call for evidence are published on the ‘Have your say’ portal¹. They address the structural challenges arising from insularity – including transport connectivity, demographic challenges, housing, access to public services, tourism pressure, energy dependency and cohesion policy adaptation – as well as opportunities related to the blue economy, renewable energy transition, digital innovation and the strategic role of EU islands in European territorial cohesion and maritime security.

Out of the total number of contributions received, 48 were excluded from the analysis, due to geographical and/or thematic irrelevance to the topic described in the call for evidence. The final number of contributions considered for this analysis is explained in the paragraph dedicated to methodology below.

1.2 Other consultations

1.2.1 Position papers

The European Commission received several further contributions outside the framework of the call for evidence. Contributions were received from a wide range of actors, including Member States and public authorities, and stakeholders representing islands such as CPMR, INSULEUR, ESIN, and SMILO. These examples are indicative and do not constitute an exhaustive list of contributors.

The strategy also builds on input provided by EU institutions and advisory bodies. This includes European Parliament reports such as the resolution on EU islands and cohesion policy: current situation and future challenges (2021/2079(INI)), as well as opinions from consultative committees. Illustrative examples include the 2023 opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the main challenges faced by EU islands, mountainous and sparsely populated areas (C/2024/1572), the 2022 opinion of the European Committee of the Regions on enhancing cohesion policy, and subsequent work of the European Economic and Social Committee, including the 2026 opinion on the island dimension in European cohesion, competitiveness and sustainable development policies. These references are provided as examples and are not exhaustive.

All position papers, reports and opinions received were considered during the development of the strategy, reflecting the importance of integrating the perspectives of insular stakeholders alongside those of EU institutions and advisory bodies.

1.2.2 Meetings and Events

During the consultation process, the European Commission – notably Executive Vice President Fitto and the Directorate-General for Regional and Urban Policy – participated in relevant meetings and events to inform stakeholders about the development of the strategy, present its objectives and outline its scope. These events provided significant opportunities to engage directly with stakeholders and collect their views, including on challenges to be addressed, potential solutions at EU and national level, and practical examples and good practices helping to shape the development of the strategy.

1.3 Methodology and tools used for data processing

The call for evidence for the EU strategy for islands received 358 responses. 48 were excluded, due to either falling outside the geographic scope, such as submissions focusing on EU outermost regions, overseas countries or territories, or non-EU countries, being duplicate entries, or lacking thematic relevance to the objectives of the Call. The same approach was applied to supporting documents attached to the replies to the Call.

In addition to the formal call for evidence submissions, supplementary contributions received via email from relevant insular stakeholders were integrated into the analysis, as were other inputs shared

throughout the consultation process. This ensured that the final assessment was both comprehensive and representative of the broad range of views expressed.

2 Input analysis

The results of all consultation activities listed above, including events and meetings, made it possible to identify the most recurrent and pressing challenges faced by EU islands, along with the solutions proposed by insular stakeholders to address them. The results show consistency across contributions from citizens, public authorities and other stakeholders, stressing the need for a tailored EU response to face islands' structural constraints and foster their sustainable development.

2.1 Call for Evidence

2.1.1. Overview of contributions from all categories of respondents

The analysis identified the 10 most frequently mentioned challenges and needs for island territories, particularly related to connectivity, economic structure, demographic trends and access to services. Contributions consistently show that these issues are interconnected and linked to the structural characteristics of insularity, requiring integrated responses tailored to islands. This chapter summarises the main issues identified and the solutions proposed by respondents.

1. Transport connectivity and costs

Connectivity was the most frequently mentioned issue across the replies, with respondents referring to limited connectivity, including dependence on maritime and air transport; insufficient frequency and reliability of services; high transport costs for passengers and goods and structural disadvantages in supply chains. References were also made to limited accessibility, dependence on external transport links, and disproportionate costs linked to decarbonisation measures affecting transport, including maritime transport.

Contributors called for ensuring affordable, reliable and sustainable connectivity, including support for maritime and air transport, and the development of transport infrastructure. Several contributions highlighted the need for measures addressing transport accessibility and continuity. References were also made to regulatory flexibility and compensatory measures in relation to decarbonisation policies affecting transport.

2. Insufficient consideration of insularity in EU policies and governance

Insufficient reflection of insularity in EU legislation and funding frameworks emerged as a recurrent challenge across the contributions. Respondents referred to the lack of systematic consideration of island-specific challenges in EU policymaking, the absence of a binding definition of islands, the application of uniform policies not adapted to island realities, and fragmentation or lack of coordination of EU policies. References were also made to the limited integration of island-specific conditions across policy areas.

Contributors proposed introducing mechanisms such as an 'insularity clause', integrating island considerations into EU policymaking and establishing governance frameworks. References were made to coordination platforms, consultation mechanisms and approaches to address island-specific challenges within EU policy frameworks.

3. Structural economic constraints

Concerning structural economic constraints linked to insularity, respondents referred to additional operating costs, small markets and limited economies of scale. Reduced competitiveness, dependence on external inputs and limited market access were also repeatedly highlighted. Several contributions further referred to constraints affecting economic development and the functioning of local economies, including difficulties linked to geographic isolation and structural conditions affecting island territories.

Proposals included measures to address operating costs and market constraints in island territories. Contributors called for improved access to funding, including simplified procedures, adapted funding conditions and higher co-financing rates. Several contributions also referred to support for SMEs and micro-enterprises, as well as the adaptation of State aid frameworks to reflect structural costs linked to insularity.

4. Dependence on limited economic sectors and seasonality

Dependence on a limited number of economic sectors, particularly tourism, emerged as a recurrent topic across the contributions. Respondents referred to overdependence on tourism and seasonal economic activity. Vulnerability to external shocks and the concentration of economic activity in a small number of sectors were also highlighted. References were further made to limited diversification and the structure of local economies in island territories.

Contributors proposed support for economic diversification and for economic activities through measures supporting SMEs and micro-enterprises, including improved access to funding and simplified procedures. Several contributions also referred to support for innovation and digitalisation.

5. Demographic challenges

The most common demographic challenges mentioned included ageing population, youth outmigration, population decline and labour shortages. In some cases, population increase was also mentioned. References were also made to changes in demographic structure and its impacts on local communities. Several contributions linked demographic trends to employment opportunities, housing conditions and access to services.

Contributors called for measures to support population retention, including employment opportunities and improved access to services. References were made to incentives for young people and professionals, as well as measures supporting employment and living conditions in island territories.

6. Housing availability and costs

Housing crises resulting from limited availability, high costs and pressures linked to tourism and short-term rentals were another recurrent topic. References were made to difficulties for residents, including young people and workers, to access housing.

Stakeholders called for support for affordable housing, the development of housing-related funding instruments and regulatory measures affecting housing availability in island territories.

7. Limited access to services

Contributors referred to limited access to healthcare, education and other public services, service shortages, accessibility constraints and higher provision costs compared to the mainland. Several responses noted that these difficulties are particularly pronounced in remote and small island territories.

Contributors proposed ensuring investments in healthcare, education and public services. References were made to measures (unspecified) aimed at improving the accessibility and availability of services in island territories.

8. Infrastructure gaps

Infrastructure gaps were identified across transport, energy, digital networks and water systems, namely insufficient coverage, outdated or inadequate facilities, and uneven availability across island territories. Several responses also highlighted constraints affecting infrastructure provision and performance, particularly linked to geographic isolation, scale and island-specific conditions.

Investment was recommended to develop and upgrade infrastructure, especially in transport (including ports and connectivity), as well as in digital infrastructure such as broadband, energy systems, and water management in island territories.

9. Energy dependency and costs

EU islands suffer from energy dependence, including reliance on imported fossil fuels and non-interconnected energy systems, high energy costs and energy poverty, while facing energy supply issues. Several contributions also referred to the structure of island energy systems and its implications for energy availability and affordability.

Contributors proposed to support renewable energy, decentralised systems, energy storage and energy communities, with measures addressing energy supply and costs in island territories, to strengthen resilience and reduce fossil fuel dependence.

10. Climate and environmental challenges

Contributions stressed islands' exposure to climate change, including extreme weather events, pressures on the environment and impacts on natural resources, and the higher costs linked to climate adaptation and decarbonisation.

Insular stakeholders called for actions addressing climate impacts and environmental conditions affecting island territories, including investments in coastal protection and erosion control and water management systems to address scarcity and salinisation.

2.1.2. Highlights on the contributions from public authorities

Public authorities from 14 EU Member States (Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Malta, the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden) contributed to this consultation process, outlining their main concerns and expectations for the strategy. Their main concerns and suggestions are summarised below:

1. EU policy and regulatory frameworks for islands

The most widely shared concern related to the appropriateness of EU policy and regulatory frameworks for islands. Public authorities expressed concern that existing EU policies are primarily designed for mainland, interconnected economies and do not sufficiently reflect the structural specificities of insular territories. Respondents highlighted the absence of a binding EU definition of islands and of a systematic island-proofing mechanism.

A significant number of the respondents therefore advocated making such a mechanism mandatory for all EU legislative and policy proposals. This would include a binding insularity clause requiring systematic *ex ante* assessment of territorial impacts on islands, as well as mandatory adaptations or derogations where standard provisions create disproportionate burdens. Public authorities also called for a dedicated EU governance framework for islands, potentially through a specific programme or directive integrating relevant sectoral policies under a coherent territorial approach. This, in turn, would support structured dialogue between island authorities and EU institutions and help prevent excessive centralisation of EU funds through national intermediaries. Proposals included setting up a permanent EU Island Forum, creating an Island Task Force within the Commission, and strengthening monitoring mechanisms. A dedicated funding approach was also requested, such as a specific island envelope or ring-fenced allocation within cohesion policy under the Multiannual Financial Framework. In addition, respondents called for simplified administrative procedures, proportionality mechanisms, targeted technical assistance, higher co-financing rates reflecting structural costs, and eligibility criteria better adapted to island realities.

2. Connectivity and transport costs

The second major concern was high transport costs and lack of connectivity, which were reported to increase the cost of living and production, limit market access and restrict access to essential services. The extension of the EU emissions trading system to maritime transport was highlighted as a particular concern in several Member States, as it is expected to increase costs on essential island routes without viable alternatives and create competitive distortions with non-EU ports.

Respondents proposed introducing a European public service obligation framework for maritime connections to ensure minimum service standards, affordability and reliability on essential routes. They also called for full integration of island maritime infrastructure into the TEN-T network, EU criteria for resident fare compensation, and targeted investment in port modernisation and fleet renewal. Derogations or compensation mechanisms related to the emissions trading system (ETS) and FuelEU Maritime were requested to ensure territorial equity.

3. Energy systems and transition

Energy dependence, reliance on imported fossil fuels and physical disconnection from EU energy networks were identified as key structural challenges. Respondents called for a dedicated regulatory framework for non-interconnected island energy systems, including adapted grid codes, tailored State aid rules and renewable energy support schemes reflecting island conditions. Increased co-financing rates (up to 85-95%) for energy infrastructure were also proposed.

4. Demographic decline and housing pressures

Public authorities insisted that the ‘right to stay on one’s island’ guides the strategy’s objective to face demographic decline, depopulation, limited employment opportunities, inadequate services, and housing

shortages. Especially for Greece, Croatia, Italy, France, Spain and the Netherlands, tourism pressure, speculative real estate markets, and the growth of short-term rentals are seen as key drivers reducing housing availability and increasing prices, making it difficult for young people and essential workers to remain or settle on islands.

Respondents proposed a dedicated EU ‘Youth on Islands’ package, including affordable housing measures, stable year-round employment, access to quality education and digital infrastructure, youth entrepreneurship support and return programmes for emigrants. Additional measures included regulation of short-term rentals, financing for social housing and controls on non-resident property investment.

5. Administrative capacity and access to EU funds

Public authorities also highlighted limited administrative capacity in small island administrations. They reported insufficient staff, expertise, and financial resources to manage complex EU funding procedures and multi-level governance requirements, resulting in under-absorption of EU funds. Co-financing requirements were considered disproportionate and difficult to meet for small island municipalities. Administrative complexity was identified as a structural barrier to effective policy implementation.

6. Climate vulnerability and transition costs

On exposure to climate risks, including sea level rise, coastal erosion, water scarcity, wildfires and extreme weather events, respondents stressed that adaptation needs exceed local fiscal capacity. The costs of climate transition and energy decarbonisation are seen as exacerbating existing structural disadvantages, particularly in relation to maritime transport dependence. The application of ETS and FuelEU Maritime is viewed as particularly challenging for island economies with limited alternative transport options.

Conclusions

The consultation activities summarised in this synopsis report provide a non-exhaustive overview of the outcomes of the call for evidence and other consultation activities carried out in the context of preparing the EU strategy for islands. Across contributions, stakeholders consistently highlight that island territories face a combination of persistent, interrelated challenges, stemming from the structural conditions of insularity, requiring forward-looking, integrated and place-based responses.

Many contributions came from individuals whose concerns centred on the everyday realities of living on an island. The main concerns included the high cost and limited availability of transport, which restricts mobility and access to essential services; the pressing crisis of housing affordability and availability, exacerbated by speculation and seasonal demand; and the economic fragility stemming from overreliance on tourism, which leaves communities vulnerable to seasonal fluctuations. Demographic decline, particularly the outmigration of young people and key workers, was another recurring concern, alongside calls for greater economic diversification and investment in renewable energy to reduce dependence on imported fuels. Additionally, they highlighted the absence of a dedicated EU legal framework for islands, which undermines efforts to tackle these challenges effectively.

Public authorities, while sharing many of these concerns, placed greater emphasis on regulatory solutions. Their contributions focused on securing formal recognition of insularity within EU policy

frameworks, establishing a binding mechanism for island-proofing legislation, and creating a dedicated governance structure to facilitate direct dialogue between islands and EU institutions.

They prioritised measures to reduce transport and energy costs, such as exemptions under the ETS, strengthened public service obligations, and targeted investments in connectivity and non-interconnected energy systems, as well as simplified access to EU funds, higher co-financing rates, and support to overcome administrative capacity constraints. Like the individuals, they also stressed the need to combat depopulation through youth retention initiatives, affordable housing policies, and recognition of the right to stay and to return, while advocating for greater climate resilience and compensation for the structural economic disadvantages islands face. While individuals focused on the practical impacts of insularity, public authorities and other organised stakeholders such as NGOs and business associations delved more deeply into regulatory and financial instruments, proposing specific adjustments to frameworks like the ETS and State aid rules to better accommodate island needs. Crisis preparedness, particularly in civil protection, emergency response and maintaining essential services, along with migration pressures, were also noted, underscoring the need for strengthened, adaptive management frameworks to alleviate operational burdens.

To conclude, this consultation stressed the need for an EU policy response that accounts for structural insular features, embeds insularity as a core consideration in EU policymaking through systematic island-proofing, improved governance, and greater involvement of island authorities in decision-making. The challenges islands face, whether economic, social or environmental, are deeply interconnected, reinforcing the need for a cohesive strategy that aligns EU objectives with local realities while ensuring effective implementation.

All input received from stakeholders was analysed and considered in the preparation of the EU strategy for islands.