

The Wight Way Forward

**An Island Vision for Prosperity
Opportunity and Renewal**

Isaac Farnbank's Plan for Isle of Wight East



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Foreword

The Isle of Wight has been an integral part of my life, having been born, raised and educated on the Island. Having since served as a company director and charity trustee, volunteered and campaigned here, it is perhaps inevitable that a keen passion for improving the Island is of paramount importance to me, not just as an aspiring representative, but as an Islander.

I am now pleased to be able to publish a coherent, strategic and, yes, highly ambitious vision for the for the newly-created Isle of Wight East parliamentary constituency.



This document is not just another political posture the like of which we have all seen and heard before. Indeed, one reason I have decided to publish this plan now, is to show it is a serious policy platform, not a series of random ideas formulated before a selection meeting. That said, those who expect thoroughly detailed proposals will not find them included in this document. I've set out concepts, from which detailed proposals can be developed. Ultimately, leaders should offer and own a clear vision. At the same time, leaders should lead by listening; I'm keen to hear and act upon the views, ideas and constructive criticism of Islanders, thus driving forward this vision.

At this juncture, consider what we seek from a second Island MP. Is it just to simply elect another representative, to complement the work already creditably done, duplicate the efforts already made? Or are we going to grasp it for what I see it to be: a unique opportunity to boldly, courageously and ambitiously transform expectations, our hopes and our desires for this Island, our economy, our connectivity, our schools and our public services?

We need to aim higher, not just in our discourse, but in our very way of thinking about how best to achieve a more prosperous, fairer and sustainable Island; not solely in what we seek to achieve, but how we go about leading the progress for which we all yearn.

Break the shackles of poor connectivity, restricted ambition and stagnant solutions to unleash prosperity, opportunities and renewal, and this Island can, with driven determination, a clear vision and the right leaders, become a more prosperous, fairer and thriving community and economy.

To do this, we need an energetic, capable, committed Conservative Island candidate with a fresh approach: **My offer to you.**

To you, for the Island I call home, I commend the Wight Way Forward.

Isaac Matthew Farnbank

January 2023

Our Island Economy

For all our potential, the Island economy remains shackled by a lack of investment, low ambition and restrictive thinking. Consequently, we are disproportionately poorer than the South East and the majority of England, denying equal chances and prosperity to Islanders. Such an evident injustice must be resolved.

We need to rise to a new level of ambition, to generate considerable, self-sustaining, genuinely local economic growth to increase our own resources. We are far more likely to win support for policies that will lead to a lower bill for HM Treasury than going to Westminster with a begging bowl alone.

I believe we should not just lobby government for more public expenditure. This will not solve the structural challenges that shackle our Island. We should, however, continue our efforts to win increased investment into public services which accrue higher costs by virtue of being on the Island. In the medium-term, we must consider how the costs associated with being an Island can be reduced, in order to present a compelling case.

Private investment is key to driving real, sustainable and viable progress. The Island is just one of many potential regions for investment, so we need to be the most attractive place in which to invest. Promoting ourselves as we are currently is not sufficient; **it isn't working for Islanders.**

The Wight Way Forward is to remove barriers to our growth and development, whilst protecting our precious Island.

Our distinct offshore location aids and facilitates the creation of a special taxation and regulatory environment. In the short-term, I would work for Enterprise Zones to be created for all our major towns, especially those with the highest levels of deprivation and low productivity. By granting local and national firms the freedom to operate, grow and thrive on our Island, we will create a multitude of opportunities for young Islanders and the un- and under-employed; additional, market-led demand will boost Island suppliers and we will generate the revenue to provide better, targeted and sustainable services for all.

More widely, the possibilities of having a lower tax regime across the constituency, or even for the whole Island, with reduced business rates, corporation tax and regulatory divergence for an investment period of five to ten years, would unleash unprecedented growth and enable us to transform to a sustainable powerhouse of **high wages and investment, offering a plethora of opportunities for Islanders.**

This is not about turning our Island into a tax haven for the rich, a free for all: it is about freeing the Island from backward thinking, restrictive practices and a lack of vision. In all this, we must protect our environment, and the highest standards should be upheld.

If we are to empower those seeking to improve the Island, we must not allow those who hold the Island back to stand in their way. We are all aware of countless unused, unsightly brownfield sites. Such shameful sights blight our Island and surely cannot be tolerated any longer. Compulsory purchase, increased rates of tax and greater enforcement of higher standards for these sites must form part of our regenerative strategy.

In short, **enable and reward those driving positive change and investment, and punish those failing in their duty to Islanders.**

This Island also hosts an incredible, eclectic mix of tourist attractions traversing rich history, the blessing of incredible natural beauty, outdoor pursuits, theme parks and a whole lot more.

As major Island employers, these attractions must be supported in plans for growth, as must Visit IW in its work to promote the Island as an attractive holiday destination. We must always seek to uprate our offering to potential visitors, and not shy away from new, exciting opportunities that arise. Ideally, we need to extend the season as far as possible, through diversification and bringing new attractions to the Island, to tap into so much latent potential.

Island agriculture is all-too-often overlooked, not solely as employers but as stewards, custodians of our countryside. With family connections to this often-challenged sector, I will strive to understand the needs of Island farmers and assist them to the best of my ability.

Whilst the majority of Island manufacturing is actually located in the Western Constituency, we need to create the conditions necessary for manufacturing businesses to grow and thrive, especially improving connectivity to increase the competitiveness of Island firms.

If I have the honour of serving in Parliament as your MP, I will be **a fiercely supportive and robust representative for Island business.**

A strong, resilient and sustainable economy is the bedrock on which all other ambition must be built.

The measures outlined in the *Wight Way Forward* will facilitate this growth, making the Island a more attractive place in which to live, work, invest and to visit, generating additional growth through a multiplier, delivering real improvements in living standards, social well-being and opportunities for Islanders.

If we want to have better services, reduce the wastage so sadly prevalent in unemployment, create opportunities for Islanders young and old, it is imperative we act boldly, with vision and ambition.

This is the Wight Way Forward for our Island economy.

- ✓ Choosing structural regenerative reform rather than decline management
- ✓ Creating Enterprise Zones for Ryde, Sandown, Shanklin and Ventnor, with priority on deprived areas and high streets
- ✓ In the medium-term, campaign to create a special Island tax regime for a 5-to-10-year investment period
- ✓ Deliver an Economic Plan based on removing barriers to free enterprise, creating opportunity and diversifying our Island's economy
- ✓ Higher paid, more diverse Island employment
- ✓ Market led stimulus
- ✓ Be an effective, informed, robust voice for Island business and workers
- ✓ Deliver ambitious connectivity improvements

Connectivity

Every issue faced by the Island is exacerbated by poor connectivity with the mainland and across the Island.

Tourism is suppressed by one of the most expensive stretches of water; work, education and leisure opportunities are effectively denied, and the cost of providing quality services inflated, all of which reduces our economic output and quality of life.

Connectivity with the Mainland

Cross-Solent

A lack of genuine competition and market forces plagues cross-Solent transport.

The present model is failing and holding our Island back.

This is, of course, well known to all Islanders, and has been for decades. There is an urgent need for new thinking. Finding and implementing a solution will not be quick, easy or painless.

A complex problem is complicated even further by various legal and financial constraints.

In the short-term, Minimum Service Agreements have a role to play in mitigating poor service levels.



Moving forward, however, the Island cannot rely upon such mechanisms, which are potentially unsustainable and ineffectual in dealing with the inherent structural issues.

Real, meaningful competition is key to driving better services and lower fares.

There is no hope of meaningful competition unless port infrastructure is owned, not by vested operators, but by parties who must treat all users fairly and maintain the highest standards of safety, efficiency and reliability. As such, all ports served by Wightlink and Red Funnel that are not currently Trust Ports should either become Trust Ports or municipal ports. This would allow the equitable levying of standard port access fees for all – existing and potential cross-Solent ferry operators alike.

Any new entrant to the business should be encouraged and backed as far as is legal and practical. The creation of a rival vehicle ferry operator, funded by the Isle of Wight Council and private partners, is integral to unleashing meaningful competition in the cross-Solent ferry

arena. Various models could be utilised, including a contracted, subsidised service or the creation of a consortium comprised of the IW and respective mainland councils, IW business, private partners, and a ferry operator.

The primary purpose of the Ryde Pier Head - Portsmouth Harbour catamaran service is to connect the Islands' railway services with those of the mainland, including those to London and along the south coast. It should therefore be returned and fully integrated into the South Western Rail franchise, with rail-boat connections guaranteed as far as is practicable and with a joined-up approach to marketing and ticketing.

Yes, these measures will potentially be challenging to implement; **We must be prepared to pay the costs of correcting persistent failure.**

Air Travel

Meaningful competition means empowering individuals and businesses to have real choice. In addition to the unleashing of true competition on the Solent, the development of Sandown Airport, or the building of a new airport in the Ryde area, would open a further transport artery.

A regional Island airport, with regular, scheduled, direct flights to London and elsewhere, would shatter the effective monopoly of the ferry companies, revolutionise employment and education opportunities for Islanders, and be the catalyst for further real renewal, extending choice and opportunity.

The 2020 Union Connectivity Report recommended the liberalising and extension of Public Service Obligation (PSO) arrangements, which would subsidise and otherwise support the operation of such a service. Airport upgrading and/or construction could be funded through national and local government expenditure, private finance, or a public-private partnership deal.

The perennial question: A Fixed Link?

Few debates have been so circular and stagnant as the fixed link dilemma.

Whilst I have serious doubts, specifically over how such a project would realistically be funded and the impact on the Island's environment, I would support an exploratory feasibility study into a rail tunnel to inform any future discourse. Equally, I'm clear that no fixed link should ever be built without local support, which can only be properly expressed through a local referendum.

Essentially, the 'Wight Way Forward', is – for now - to focus on developing and delivering the central measures described herein.

This is the Wight Way Forward for connectivity with the mainland.

- ✓ All Ports used by Island ferries to become Trust or Municipal Ports, breaking down barriers to new entrants
- ✓ Creation of a new Island ferry company, accountable to Islanders and users
- ✓ Return of the Ryde Pier Head- Portsmouth catamaran service to the South Western Rail franchise, ensuring joined up thinking and unlocking timetable innovation.
- ✓ Creating a new Island airport, with regular services to London and the rest of the UK, shattering the ferry duopoly and unleashing unprecedented employment, education and health and leisure opportunities, thus reinvigorating our Island.
- ✓ Be open to a feasibility study into a fixed railway link
- ✓ No Fixed Link without local support, expressed through a referendum.

Internal Connectivity

Island Railways

Railways offer the quickest, most environmentally friendly means of transport. Once boasting 55 route miles, the Island can again reap the benefits of railways to reduce congestion, unleash economic and social opportunities, power regenerative renewal and banish deprivation.

Whilst recent investment in Island Line has, of course, been welcome, Islanders actually now have a less frequent and resilient service than before the £26 million upgrade.



It is disappointing that a failure to act on stakeholder input is partially to blame for this. Lessons must be learned.

We can only realise Railway expansion by having a compelling case for government funding. Only a combination of a viable business case and demonstrable economic and social benefits will achieve any extension.

The latest scheme (rejected recently by central government) in a long history of plans, centres around using the largely still extant track bed between Sandown and Newport, to create a Ryde-Newport Railway service, via Sandown. Not only is this a circuitous route that would have difficulties properly serving Newport town centre, but there is also no development potential (necessary to justify such schemes) along the route, most of which is sparsely populated and through an area of outstanding natural beauty.

The Wight Way Forward is not to look to revive closed lines but to build, create and shape new railways for 21st century needs. We should be at the promethean frontier of development by utilising the latest methods of modular light-railway construction.

A Ryde-Fishbourne-Wootton-Newport light rail system or tramway would benefit far more Islanders, be better aligned for Newport riverside development, facilitate the redevelopment of both towns, and pave the way to an integrated transport network, connecting three cross-Solent routes with Island Line and the bus network. Indeed, incorporating a spur to East Cowes would add further to the scheme's viability.

It must be recognised, nonetheless, that however immense the benefits of such a project, the challenges to realising even a final, firm proposal are incredible. That is no reason, however, for not persevering with ambitious connectivity visions and I commit to do all I can, working with partners, to ensure every possible opportunity is seized.

This is the Wight Way Forward for Island Railways.

Island Road Network

The Island's road network, as an already existing asset, is primarily a matter for the local authority. Notwithstanding this, there are a number of areas where the infrastructure is no longer capable of supporting current traffic levels. Properly considered infrastructure changes would enable faster journey times, less pollution and safer roads. That the Island also hosts some of the most dangerous roads in the UK is also concerning. As such, I commit to supporting and promoting any sensible schemes that resolve and mitigate these issues.

Evidently, many of the plans outlined here will put additional pressure on the Island's road network, and I would anticipate the production of a comprehensive capacity improvement plan in response and readiness to this additional pressure, some of which would be absorbed (and generated) by the new railway scheme.

Island Buses

Island Buses are of incredible value to many Islanders, particularly younger and older residents without their own transport. In several rural areas, they are vital to residents. Yet many areas are poorly served and fares remain expensive, which often inhibits work, educational and leisure opportunities. This holds our Island back. Should any other operator show a commercial interest in operating a bus service on the Island, they should be encouraged as far is legal and reasonably practical. Naturally, the creation of the new railway scheme will inject competition along core routes, likely lowering fares, higher rates of innovation and better service levels.

- ✓ Aspire to a light rail system between Ryde-Fishbourne-Wootton-Newport with a spur to East Cowes, along a new alignment, creating a fully integrated Island transport corridor, unlocking regenerative renewal and unprecedented connectivity.
- ✓ Encouraging greater competition to enhance service levels and lower fares

Education

To misquote Franklin, an investment in education pays the highest interest.

The Isle of Wight has been failing its young people through woeful educational delivery and outcomes. If we permit this to continue, we will not only be depriving tomorrow's country and economy of talent, ideas and progress, but we will also be failing in a moral and ethical duty.

Again, it's not simply about money and taking another begging bowl to Whitehall. The Island faces many unique challenges. We struggle to attract the best teachers as a direct result of poor connectivity with the rest of the country, we have appalling low diversity of school choice, and our Island locale can restrain ambition and perspective. **Structural, meaningful reform is needed.**

In all reform, policymakers need to start listening to - not just hearing - parents, students, and teachers. If, to give a recent example, teachers and school leaders tell us that there are too many primary schools, politicians must pay heed, and have the courage to face up to the inevitable backlash.

Choice, selection and specialism are the key to moving Island education forward. Every child on this Island should be free to excel in their own chosen direction. There is no 'one size fits all' educational pathway. The well-intentioned but fundamentally flawed ideals of comprehensive education must now be reconciled to that reality.

Academically gifted children should have the opportunity to be challenged, taught to a high standard according to their ability and encouraged to aspire high. Selective schools are the most effective means of delivering this. Island children are deprived of this opportunity. It follows that the Island needs a grammar school.

There is a legitimate debate about whether examination for selection schools should be undertaken at 12 years of age. 14 would initially seem to be far more conducive age, and those who fail to enter should, if they wish, be given further regular opportunities to enter a selective stream throughout their educational career. Such discourse will contribute to the national debate over liberalising education law to allow for the creation of new grammar schools.

Until that is realised, however, every possible avenue of creating a grammar school for Island children, especially those from less-privileged backgrounds, must be pursued. There could be scope to invite and support a mainland grammar school to open a satellite campus on the Island. Alternatively, Island children could have access to a transport fund to access selective schools on the mainland.

Those who wish to specialise in learning technical skills, or a performing art, are of equal value to the academically gifted. They too, should be given the opportunity to be taught to a high standard according to their ability, challenged and encouraged to aim high.

An Island Assisted Places Scheme, payable to the most academically and vocationally gifted young Islanders from less well-off backgrounds, would open up educational opportunities previously

denied to children through no fault of their own and provide parents a real, meaningful choice: **Opening doors, not closing down ability and ambition.**

The perennial challenge to similar proposals is that those left in the middle are neglected, receive second-rate teaching, and are subsequently disadvantaged for the rest of their careers. It is a challenge that must be addressed. Today's education system is not the same as it was when the grammar schools were forcibly superseded. Where there were once ill-equipped secondary moderns, there are now academies with internal selection/setting, supplemented by free schools, as well as faith schools. It is far easier for parents and others to secure information on funding and results, and there is stronger inspection of schools. In this sense, there would no return to the secondary moderns.

There has, from time to time, been talk of creating an Island University. Whilst I remain open to persuasion and would always happily support a coherent, logical and viable proposal, my immediate priority would be to deliver the policies espoused above. In terms of Island based students, there is no shortage of university places across the country; at least three universities on the south coast are within easy travelling time and, taken together with the connectivity policies presented above, Islanders who wish to remain on the Island whilst studying will have a wide choice of options. As for attracting mainland-based students to the Island, I do not anticipate high volumes of interest, until substantial regeneration and modernisation has been achieved. Any Island institution that does, however, want to extend its offering should, of course, be encouraged and supported.

To extend choice and specialism further, I would be supportive of a shift to a voucher-funded scheme for education. Each child would be given a lump sum to be spent at any educational institution, independent, public, private or state, truly empowering parents to make informed choices and for funding to move with the student to an even greater extent, driving up standards and accountability.

This is the Wight Way Forward for Island Education

- ✓ Creation of at least one Island grammar school
- ✓ Support the extension of technical and vocational education, including degree apprenticeships
- ✓ Creation of an Island Assisted Places Scheme, opening doors for the Island's brightest from disadvantaged backgrounds
- ✓ Move toward a voucher funding scheme

Health

The provision of healthcare in this country has become, quite peculiarly within the global context, a politicised issue. It is also no secret that Conservatives talking about the NHS, and healthcare more widely, have tended to be treated with a greater degree of doubt and, at times, cynicism and even suspicion.

This is regrettable and, to my mind, shackles a constructive, progressive debate about healthcare provision. Rather than have a mature debate about how best to meet patient needs and most effectively deliver high-quality care, our discourse is reduced to point-scoring, claims and counterclaims about funding and charges of a privatisation drive, all whilst many burning issues are left to fester and worsen. When this translates to an NHS waiting list of over 6 million people, there can be no doubt this political approach is failing patients and taxpayers.

I'm keen to contribute to a national debate about how best world-class healthcare can be delivered sustainably and fairly into the future. Politicians don't have all the answers, but they do have access, should they choose, to a deep wealth of ideas, views and policy suggestions. It is by listening and debating reasoned policies and solutions that patient needs will be served most effectively by politicians.

Whether it be GP partnerships being effectively distracted by estates and legal issues or a severe, prolonged shortage of dentists on the Island, there are several challenges facing the health sector which must be resolved. **It's time to put patients first and drop the petty politics.**

Locally, I'll do all I can to ensure Islanders receive high-quality care, including by:

- ✓ Delivering on the regenerative policies espoused in the Wight Way Forward to reduce healthcare costs on the Island, make mainland provision (where required) more accessible and create the wealth that pays for our public services
- ✓ Working to gain a greater insight and an accurate understanding of the fundamental challenges and opportunities facing the NHS, especially that of the Isle of Wight.

- ✓ Support the Island's doctors, nurses and all staff involved in caring for Islanders
- ✓ Contribute to mature national debates to ensure that world-class healthcare provision for all is delivered sustainably and fairly into the future

This is the Wight Way Forward for Healthcare.



Environment and Housing

As one of the most scenic and beautiful places in this country, home to multiple Sites of Special Scientific Interest and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, all who live, work and invest in the Island are custodians of an invaluable environment. Any reasonable policy that encourages and ensures responsible stewardship, whilst allowing the Island to progress, should naturally be supported. As such, I support the commendable efforts to have the Island designated either as a National Park, or creating a new designation of Island Park, tailored to the specific needs of the Island. I also commit to being receptive to other suggestions and proposals that protect, nurture and further the Island's special environment.

Housing development has become a contentious issue, sometimes to the detriment of constructive debate.

Whilst I recognise that many Islanders would rather not countenance significant home building – and I have sympathy with this view – I am acutely conscious of the chronic house shortage across the South East. Over recent decades, the UK has failed to build enough homes for her people. There has been an abject failure to promote the benefits of home building and the consequences are being felt across all incomes and backgrounds: hard-working people trapped out of the right to own property. The average house price in the South East is now over 10 times greater than the average income, making home ownership a mere illusion for many people. This is not acceptable.

What talk of meritocracy, social mobility and “one nation” can there be without mass property ownership? What talk of mass property ownership without home building?

This doesn't translate to permitting each and every development, irrespective of its suitability, to go ahead. It does mean being prepared to stomach sympathetic change in a considerate manner.

Consider if every village were to accommodate 10-15 new affordable homes over 2-3 years, built in a sympathetic style, and every town 30 over the same period. Would that really blight our Island landscape, devastate our eco-system? I think not. Would it make a difference to Islanders desperate to be given the same chance as many Islanders have enjoyed already, and own their own home?

A quite legitimate opposition to most development is that there will be corresponding pressure on infrastructure that is already struggling to meet demand. In many cases, however, the presumed additional pressure is, in fact, already exists, either through Islanders waiting for property, living with their parents, renting or in temporary accommodation. The Wight Way Forward also presents several policies that will radically uprate Island infrastructure. Moreover, development only strengthens bids for better

provision of key services. Taken together with enforcement of high building standards, development can be made to work for Islanders.

This is the Wight Way Forward for our Island environment.

- ✓ Back creation of new Island Park status
- ✓ Support low-volume, sympathetic, affordable home-building to help young Islanders and others onto the housing ladder
- ✓ Develop adequate, lasting infrastructure
- ✓ Ensure residents' voices are always heard and respected



Vision to action:

Progressing the Wight Way Forward

Vision, ambition, dreams - call it what you will, these can be achieved only with determination, drive and public support.

I am under no illusion that what I am seeking to achieve will be met with a mixture of amazement, derision, cynicism, dismissal, and interest. As Disraeli noted, "Success is the child of audacity." My challenge to the Island is this - will we be audacious enough?

Many fine, laudable, perfectly workable blueprints have never left the drawing board. I sincerely hope the *Wight Way Forward* will not be consigned to that fate. I believe we can rise to a more mature, more forward-thinking and more ambitious approach to Island politics.

The most oft-heard refrain about politicians is that "they're all the same". That cannot be said of my candidature, audacious or not. A different, dynamic Island candidate, true to Conservative principles, committed to the Island will win and will win for the Island.

All elections are decisions, choices about who we want, what we want and how we want it. I'd urge you to consider the choices in selecting a prospective candidate, and thence electing an MP. We are as much electing a vision as a representative.

On the one hand, we could aspire to greater heights, exert our local prerogative, and proactively transform the Island's future. On the other, we could accept 'more of the same', continue to see our Island decline, discarding our very real potential and slip further and further behind.

We have one shot at making another Island constituency worthwhile: Let's not let this opportunity slip through our fingers.

All I ask is the opportunity to serve you and this Island.

**The Wight Way Forward is to support
Isaac Farnbank for Isle of Wight East.**

Contact Isaac

Isaac welcomes contact from Islanders and others interested in the Wight Way Forward. Get in touch and follow the vision:

www.IsaacFarnbank.com

