Ellisland Digital Engagement 28 February – 12 March 2023

Summary

A digital engagement survey found overwhelming support for Ellisland's FutureVision proposals. Out of 230 respondents, predominantly located in south west Scotland, 89% stated they supported the proposals, with 87% agreeing that the proposals would enhance Ellisland's importance as a Burns heritage site.

The opposing point of view, that respondents did not support the proposals, was selected by only 3.5% of respondents, while 4.4% believed the proposals would damage Ellisland's heritage.

However, while community support for the proposals is very high, support is partly conditional on development at Ellisland being done sensitively and with respect to the authenticity of the site.

The dominant theme within the comments was a strong ask from respondents that care be taken to ensure that the special atmosphere and nature of Ellisland is protected and conserved in future development plans.

Four secondary themes emerged from analysis of the comments.

1. Respondents believed the proposals outlined would have a positive impact on the local economy, particularly with respect to the local tourism economy.

2. Respondents wanted the development of active travel to be prioritised within future plans, in particular the creation of safe active travel routes between Dumfries and Ellisland.

3. There was a clear wish for inclusive, affordable access to be prioritised, particularly with respect to the local community.

4. Respondents wanted Ellisland to be a living space with a contemporary purpose; a place that can inspire and nurture creativity.

Methodology & Response

A digital engagement exercise was undertaken to complement the on-site event held at Ellisland on 27th February 2023. The digital engagement took the form of an online survey, which ran from 28th February to 12th March, which was promoted via social media, e-newsletter to Ellisland contacts, and local media. The promotion of the survey on social media focused on Dumfries & Galloway, Ayrshire and South Lanarkshire as 'local' regions to Ellisland, with strong cultural connections to Burns. The survey was anonymous, but respondents had the option to include their name for quote attribution.

Respondents were encouraged to watch a short video summarising the FutureVision plans for Ellisland. This merged FutureVision visuals into video footage of the current site to aid visualisation

of the proposals. Respondents were invited to indicate whether or not they supported key elements of the plans, and to explain why they responded as they did. The survey also asked whether they agreed with a selection of statements, presented in a randomised order, and it invited respondents to leave a comment, with the option of having that comment attributed to them.

The survey asked questions to enable analysis through segmentation, including membership of Ellisland or other Burns organisation, home postcode and an indication of familiarity with the site, expressed through a statement of most recent visit. 230 responses were received over a 12 day period.

No questions were compulsory, which meant respondents could answer all or some of the questions, as they preferred. Most answered all questions, and the answers were generally of a high quality, with a large proportion of respondents (approx. 45% per question) also providing thoughtful comments, which added insight and nuance to the quantitative data.

Overall the respondents were knowledgeable about Ellisland and Burns heritage. 42% of respondents had visited Ellisland within the last two years, with a further 22% having visited in the last 10 years. 25% of respondents had not visited Ellisland before, but noted an intention to do so. 29% of respondents were members of the Robert Burns Ellisland Trust, and just under 20% were a member of another Burns club or organisation.

The pattern of responses was consistent regardless of sample segmentation. This suggests that the responses and opinions on the proposals were not swayed by geography, by membership of the Trust, or by familiarity with the site as it currently is. This report therefore presents the findings of the full sample, with analysis of subsections of the sample considered not necessary.

Profile of Respondents

Q1 How recently have you visited Ellisland?

Within the last two years	42.36%
Within the last ten years	22.27%
More than ten years ago	9.61%
I haven't visited yet, but I plan to	24.89%
I haven't visited, and I don't plan to	0.87%

Q9 & Q10 Are you a member of the Robert Burns Ellisland Trust? Other Burns organisation?

Ellisland: Yes	29.39%	Other Burns org: Yes	19.56%
Ellisland: No	70.61%	Other Burns org: No	80.44%

People in south west Scotland were the primary target of this digital engagement. Postcode data indicated respondents were in based in Dumfries & Galloway (59%), Ayrshire (15%) and Lanarkshire & Glasgow (9%).

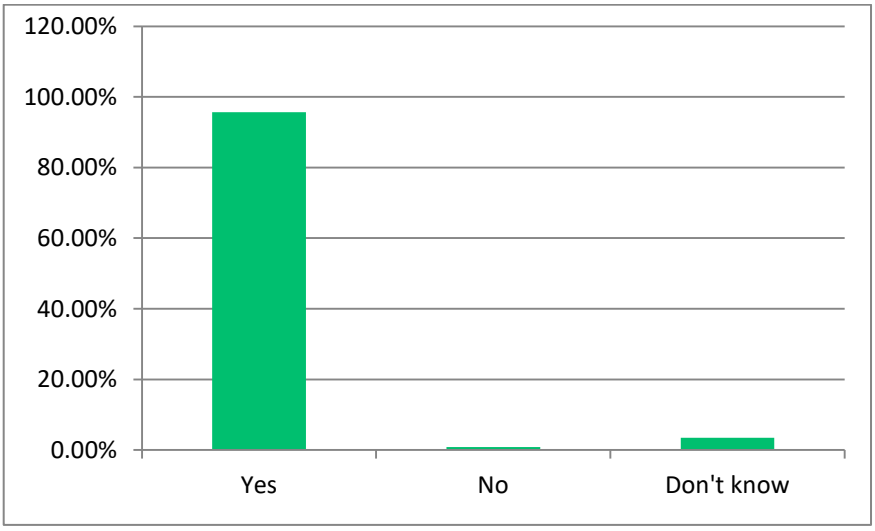
Findings

Five questions (Q2-Q6) invited respondents to reflect upon key elements of Ellisland's FutureVision proposal, and to indicate whether they agreed with the proposal, or not. Each question then provided an opportunity for the respondent to explain why they answered as they did.

In total, 549 individual comments were received across these five questions. To analyse this feedback, comments were reviewed to identify recurring themes for each question. These themes are noted beneath the quantitative data for the relevant question, along with a selection of quotes considered representative. Any spelling errors within the comments have been corrected for ease of readability, but are otherwise presented as given.

It is worth noting that comments that oppose or express concerns about the proposals have been given extra prominence within this report in order to ensure visibility of all views to the Trust. Across all comments, less than 10% of comments included negativity, opposition or concern.

Q2 The Robert Burns Ellisland Trust think the best way to protect Ellisland is by using it. This means that conservation and education work will be subsidised by other activities, like tourism and events. Do you agree with this 'Conservation through Use' approach?



Yes	95.65%
No	0.87%
Don't know	3.48%

Respondents are overwhelmingly supportive of the 'conservation through use' approach proposed. 114 comments were received. Analysis of the comments suggests four emerging themes, a selection of representative comments are noted below.

Purpose & Inspiration

- *"Ellisland should be a living and active space as well as a conserved museum."*
- *"Ellisland fired and inspired Robert Burns' imagination. Any and all conservation must continue that way, to inspire those who visit to understand its history, and ensure it has a future."*
- *"No point in conserving just to be there - it must be used."*

Entrepreneurship & Viability

- *"Tourism and events should definitely be a source of income to help with conservation and education; and tourism and events will themselves be a means of education."*
- *"For any building to survive it needs a sustainable income and a purpose, your proposal provides both of these things."*
- *"Underfunded conservation is usually poor conservation. I don't feel proper funding will be attainable without being subsidised by other activities."*

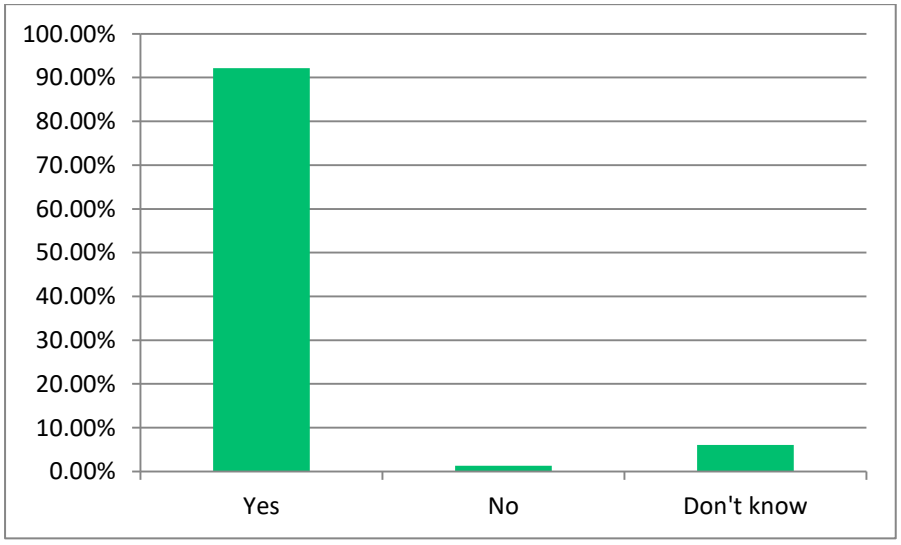
Inclusion & Education

- *"Agree, however cost of other activities, tourism and events should not be a barrier to access. Concessional prices within cost of activities please."*
- *"We need to have as many people as possible visit Ellisland and see for themselves what an untouched and unspoilt heritage site it is."*
- *"Preserving Ellisland is vital but so is developing its education and cultural potential."*

Concerns & Sensitivity

- *"On the one hand I appreciate that something must be done to raise funds to protect the buildings, but when I visited I liked that that it wasn't modernised with a visitor centre etc. I think even if done sympathetically, it will change the surrounding environment which is very peaceful and undisturbed."*
- *"As long as the commercial development doesn't destroy what visitors are actually seeking to experience."*
- *"Whilst I am in agreement with the case for "conservation through use". I have concerns that the rurality and character of the site should not be spoilt by over- ambitious development. A balance may need to be struck."*

Q3 The Trust plans to turn back the clock in Robert and Jean's cottage to create an immersive experience with a 'homely' feel. This means that people will be able to experience the cottage as it was in Burns' day. Do you agree with plans to create an immersive experience in the cottage?



Yes	92.17%
No	1.30%
Don't know	6.09%

Respondents are overwhelmingly supportive of creating an immersive experience in the historic cottage. 107 comments were received. Analysis of the comments suggests that some of that support is qualified, however the majority of comments are fully supportive and many refer to other heritage attractions that have successfully adopted a similar approach.

Clear Support

- *"Being able to 'step into history' is a tremendously effective way of engaging visitors with Burns' life."*
- *"It will be lovely to experience it with the feeling that they have just stepped outside."*
- *"Creating this opportunity to "live" the experience will absolutely bring Burns' existence to a new audience."*

Qualified Support

- *"This is a very difficult thing to achieve without it being a bit contrived."*
- *"Definitely - as long as it's authentic, but I'm sure the Trust would not allow any mere romanticised reconstruction."*
- *"Partly agree. Burns cottage in Alloway has been sympathetically restored inside to as if Burns was still there, without going over the top."*

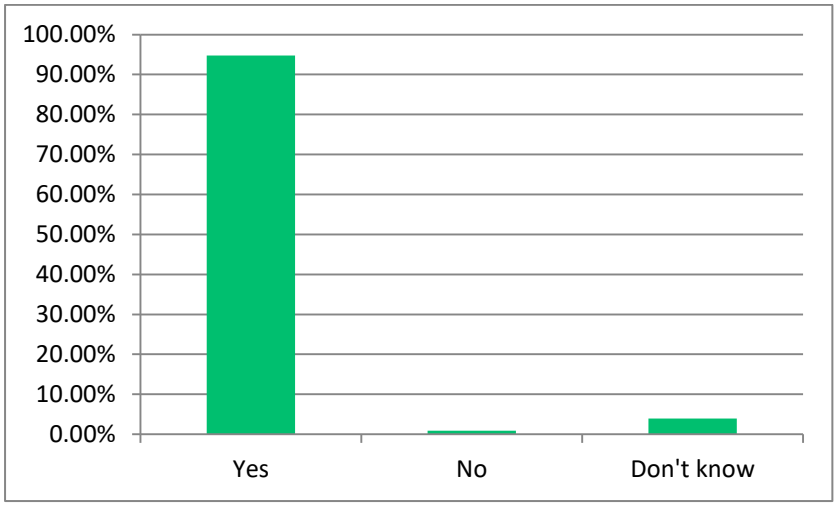
Reference to other locations

- *"Irvine and Alloway have successful immersive experiences."*
- *"I think this is the best way to create an authentic experience for the visitor and it is proving to be very successful in other museums, e.g. Dove Cottage at Grasmere."*
- *"A good idea, a perfect example being Beamish Museum in County Durham."*

Concern

- *"I'm not keen on immersive, bit twee unless it's brilliantly done."*
- *"Hesitant it may be kitschy."*
- *"Sounds like turning an important piece of heritage into a 'Disney' attraction type novelty."*

Q4 The Trust plans to use the barn as a hub for events and workshops, to celebrate the spirit of Burns, music, writing and culture. Do you agree with the proposal to use the barn for cultural events?



Yes	94.78%
No	0.87%
Don't know	3.91%

106 comments were received. Again, there is overwhelming support for the use of the barn as an event space, with respondents who are familiar with the site noting that it is already being used successfully for some events. Several respondents acknowledge the need to address issues relating to the condition of this building. There are a small number of comments opposed, but the majority of respondents are unreservedly supportive of this proposal, with many citing the proposal as enabling improved community access. Of note were comments from creative practitioners and event organisers who expressed particular interest.

Clear Support

- *"Burns himself was a firm supporter of the preservation of oral history through cultural mediums so the proposal would be more than fitting."*
- *"The barn has been in use for many years as a music venue and should continue as such."*
- *"The region needs more community/cultural events and so am happy with this suggestion, will help build stronger communities."*

Building Condition / Facility Improvement

- *"The barn has regularly been used for events and creates its own atmosphere - work is needed to combat condensation issues."*
- *"It is not huge, and in the winter it is cold and damp. If the cold and damp can be sorted it will be fine for small events."*
- *"I think the farm needs some TLC and modernisation. The atmosphere which inspired is the draw for me, the peace, the tranquillity to allow your imagination to flow."*

Concern

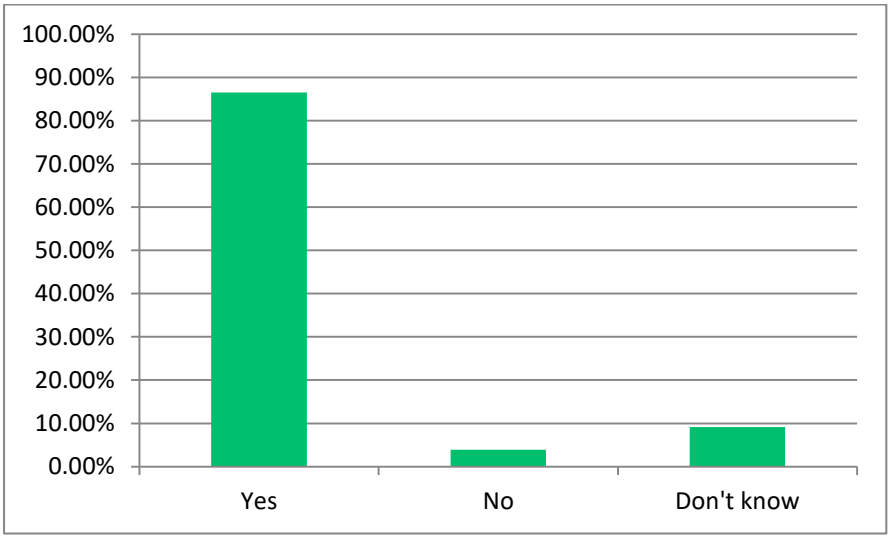
- *"No, sorry I see this as only a moneymaking idea, I thought the plan was to restore the whole farm , including buildings ,to as it was in Burns' time."*

- *"Do we mean educational events or bigger events like weddings? Larger public events may be detrimental to the delicate buildings and surroundings."*

Creative Practitioners / Event Organisers

- *"As a local musician , I would welcome bringing young and old that I teach traditional music to such an inspiring venue."*
- *"It was always used for cultural events. I have been involved in several St Andrew's Night dinners (Saltire Society) held there and it would be great to open it up to other people to use."*
- *"Music, writing and culture are inherent in Burns' prolific writings and songs, the magic he created must be heard again, and new magic created."*

Q5 To protect Ellisland's collection - including Burns' manuscripts and personal possessions - a new visitor centre is proposed. This would be located on the site of the current car park, separate from the historical buildings. The visitor centre would also host exhibition and education space, a cafe and visitor facilities. Do you agree with this approach to protect the collection and improve visitor facilities at Ellisland?



Yes	86.52%
No	3.91%
Don't know	9.13%

Of all the questions in the survey, this question attracted the largest number of comments – 117 - and the most opposition or concern – 12 comments. Many respondents highlighted the need for improved visitor facilities at Ellisland, and acknowledged that this is an approach that has worked well at other heritage sites. Support being conditional on a sympathetic approach was an obvious theme, in particular minimising visual impact / encroachment on the historic site.

Clear Support

- *"I think this is an excellent suggestion and more interpretation and context could be included in the visitor centre which would not be appropriate in the actual Ellisland Farm. It will provide an opportunity to excite visitors about what they are going to see, i.e. the actual farm where Robert Burns and Jean Armour really started their married life. This is what happens in the best managed visitor experiences such as the Bayeux Tapestry or Culloden*

where the visitor centre gives the opportunity to give context, background, information etc and prepare the visitor for the actual experience of visiting the authentic Ellisland Farm."

- *"These facilities are much needed and would not sit happily in the historical buildings."*
- *"Get facilities ASAP - the only available loo when we went was horrible. NB Facilities should include disabled access - person plus carer plus wheelchair."*

Conditional Support

- *"I do agree but I do not agree with a structure that is not in keeping with the environment and would undermine any attempts at an immersive experience."*
- *"On the one hand it is progress and modernisation....on the other, it is not Ellisland in its natural state which is a big part of what makes it special."*
- *"Would like it to be sited a distance away from the steading otherwise it will change the look of the farm completely and won't look like it was in Burns' day which is the attraction in my humble opinion."*

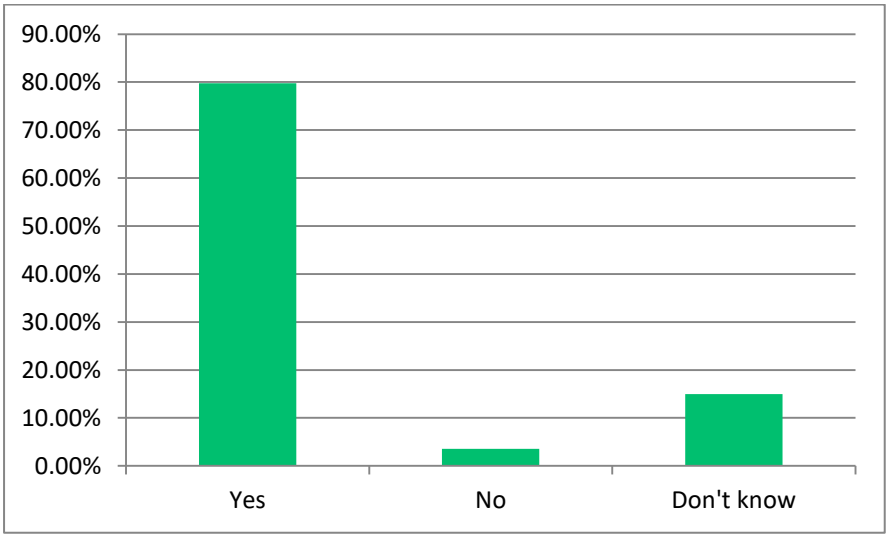
Reference to other locations

- *"Important to cater for those interested in manuscripts etc. If you want people to stay on the site and spend money you need a cafe and a high quality gift shop with range of prices - Wentworth Woodhouse in Rotherham good example of type of gift shop."*
- *"Indeed, the Burns Centre and Museum at Alloway being a perfect example of what is required."*
- *"A similar project at Scott's Abbotsford works well."*

Opposition

- *"I do not like the design for the visitor centre. It is not 'in keeping' with the farm."*
- *"Original artefacts are already contained within 3-4 display cases. There is no need to create another space for this purpose, but improve what is there already."*
- *"Is a new building really needed? What about car parking and conservation of the farm yard?"*

Q6 The Trust is inviting a new generation of artists, musicians and writers to be inspired by Ellisland. New on-site accommodation is proposed to enable creative residencies. This woud be modelled on the nearby Hermitage - a small bothy where Burns would escape to write. Do you agree with the proposal to develop new hermitage-style creative residencies?



Yes	79.74%
No	3.52%
Don't know	14.98%

This question elicited the highest 'don't know' response, which is not unexpected given the lack of visualisations for this element. Nevertheless, respondents still indicated strong agreement with this aspect of the FutureVision, with some very enthusiastic supporting comments. 105 comments were received.

Clear Support

- *"I think this is the most wonderful aspect of the plan, made possible by the generous amount of land belonging to Ellisland. It would make this a unique heritage, literary and musical centre in the UK, and perhaps elsewhere too. It is important to use the example of writers such as Burns to encourage new creativity in younger generations."*
- *"What could be more appropriate than this, making the farm a vibrant centre for creativity."*
- *"Brilliant idea which should attract creative talent to such inspired and inspiring accommodation - the proposal should create a real sense of creative community among participants."*

Affordability

- *"It sounds like an excellent idea. My only question would be about affordability as I know this has been an issue with some similar artist residency type projects but hopefully through working in partnership with institutions like the Burns Birthplace Museum and other Burns attractions or with business sponsorship this could be achieved."*
- *"We need to provide creative spaces but they must be accessible to all members of the public and not overpriced and elitist. All creativity needs to be nurtured."*
- *"Yes, I hope it will be affordable and rentable for young people and can be rented on a short term basis not just long term to give a variety of people a chance to visit."*

Support conditional on appropriate setting

- *"It really depends where the residencies are and the impact to the natural landscape and current environment."*
- *"As long as the residences are 'away' from the historic buildings."*
- *"As long as the buildings fit in with the surroundings and the original farm."*

Opposition

- *"Feel this would be too commercial, spoiling the tranquillity."*
- *"Again, this is going to RUIN the appearance of Ellisland, which has remained unchanged for all these years."*
- *"Might spoil the atmosphere."*

Q7 Respondents were then asked to indicate which of the following statements they agreed with. The order the statements were presented was randomised.

I support the proposal outlined above to safeguard Ellisland	89.13%
The proposals will enhance Ellisland's importance as a Burns heritage site	86.96%
Ellisland should be better known	81.74%
I want Ellisland to inspire future generations	80.43%
It's a good idea to develop Ellisland's creative and cultural potential	79.13%
It's a good idea to create new education and exhibition spaces at Ellisland	76.09%
The proposals will benefit the local economy	66.52%
The proposals seem sympathetic and appropriate	63.04%
Other (please specify)	18.26%
The proposals will damage Ellisland's heritage	4.35%
I do not support the proposal outlined above	3.48%

An 'other' option was an opportunity for respondents to comment on the proposal as a whole, and to express their view on it. 40 comments were received. The dominant theme within these comments was that support is strong but conditional on development being done sensitively and appropriately. Additional themes arising in this section were statements relating to the importance of Burns and Ellisland in general, and the importance of including safe active travel infrastructure.

Conditionality of support

- *"I'm broadly in agreement with the aims of the development. I am concerned about overdevelopment detracting from the character of the site."*
- *"This could be excellent or it could totally ruin the ambience of the setting and become too modern."*
- *"I want Ellisland to inspire and develop its creative and cultural potential but not at the cost of its originality. It will lose the feel of the area which inspired Burns if modern buildings are sited close by."*

Importance of Burns, Jean and Ellisland

- *"Other countries would think us crazy not to invest in such an iconic place. Perhaps, as Scots have grown up so much with Burns, we don`t see him for the symbol he is to others."*
- *"I like the new emphasis on the influence of women on Burns' soul and mind, especially the focus on Jean Armour. Her tale is just as important as Burns'; without her support he would likely not have reached the heights of creativity that he did."*
- *"Burns and his works are worth every one of these constructive, inspired and inspiring ideas and proposals. Long live Robert Burns!"*

Active travel

- *"Active and sustainable travel options to the site needed."*
- *"Please also consider travel to Ellisland via sustainable means, including supporting a better bus service and creating a safe cycle route away from the A76."*
- *"The new building is going in the car park. Not only will this development need a car park but the road from the A76 requires to be wider without the need for passing places!"*

Q11 Respondents were invited to provide general comments or testimonials. 85 respondents chose to do so, and their comments reinforce earlier themes from the survey. The full set of comments is noted in Appendix 1.

Most comments expressed strong and clear support for the FutureVision proposals, with many of those supportive comments reflecting upon Ellisland's potential, and acknowledging the work and investment required to unlock the potential of the site. Travel and transport was another noticeable theme, as was the tourism opportunity.

A major theme in the comments was the importance of Robert Burns and Ellisland, with many people articulating a view that the site is intrinsically precious and of international significance.

Conclusion

There is overwhelming support and clear enthusiasm for the FutureVision proposals for Ellisland within the communities of south west Scotland. The individuals who participated in the digital engagement provided high quality answers, which reflected thoughtfully and respectfully upon the proposals. Many of the concerns expressed are constructive and questioning in nature, rather than indicating opposition, which is entirely appropriate given the high level nature of the information provided in the video and survey.

The Robert Burns Ellisland Trust can therefore be confident that the proposed approach is well supported by the local community, and by the Robert Burns community of interest within south west Scotland.

Report prepared by independent economic development consultant Lorna Young (MIED) for Robert Burns Ellisland Trust, March 2023.