

Bid to screen islanders for 'Viking gene'

◆ Project aims to help Shetlanders take preventative action against potentially deadly conditions, writes Martyn McLaughlin



A major fundraising drive for a pioneering large-scale genetic screening programme has been launched in an attempt to help thousands of Scots discover whether they are at risk of developing a series of life-threatening conditions.

In what has been hailed as a significant step forward towards Scotland's first-ever community-focused preventative healthcare screening campaign The Viking Genes Shetland initiative aims to provide 5,000 Shetlanders with the opportunity to take part in a free generic screening developed specifically for the islands.

They will be tested for disease-causing variants that could cut their lives short.

Those living on parts of the archipelago have a seven-times higher risk of developing breast, ovarian and prostate cancer caused by so-called BRCA2 gene variants than the population on the Scottish mainland. It is hoped the screening programme will enable early preventative health interventions to either reduce the chances of disease occurring, or stop its progression. Those volunteering will be advised of actionable genetic findings and, in time, the project will also identify those individuals who may not be affected themselves, but who carry an elevated risk of passing on certain genetic conditions to their children. They include the likes of cardiomyopathy, haemochromatosis, Batten disease and island-specific multiple sclerosis.

Health Secretary Neil Gray has asked to be kept informed about the progress of the project and its implications for shaping

future genomic medicine policy across Scotland.

Jim Flett Wilson, a professor of human genetics who leads the Viking Genes programme at the University of Edinburgh's Usher Institute, said: "Preventative genetic healthcare like the Viking Genes Shetland community screening project will directly impact the health of Shetlanders.

"It's likely to save lives and keep many more people healthy and contributing to the community rather than not realising they were at risk and suffering from advanced stages of disease later in life. Shetlanders have a much higher risk of certain genetic diseases, so there's a clear need. Most people we screen will find they have no elevated health risks and have that peace of mind. But we've already demonstrated that for the expected 100 individuals we find with elevated risks, it can be life-changing and life extending."

Community leaders in Shetland have formed a committee in an effort to raise £1 million towards the costs of the programme, which will test for 50 genetic variants found to be prevalent in the local population. Research shows one in 40 Shetlanders carry one of these variants.

Sandra Laurensen, chair of Viking Genes Shetland, said: "The voluntary group was formed following a presentation Prof Wilson gave in Lerwick last autumn. It was an eye-opener for many of us learning of the number of conditions that stem from a genetic variant.

"The project builds on previous Viking Genes work where over 3,000 Shetlanders participated. There is a growing impetus for more screening and the volunteer stories are testament to the life-changing benefits for them and their families."



Main and left: Dr Shona Kerr and Professor Jim Flett Wilson extracting plasma as part of their research for the Viking project, which will benefit those living in Shetland, right



“Shetlanders have a much higher risk of certain genetic diseases



MSP Fergus Ewing said Highland Council's plans are 'outrageous and poorly designed'

Tourist tax will be 'death knell' for businesses, former minister warns

Craig Meighan
scotsman.com

Plans to introduce a tourist tax in the Highlands will be the "death knell" for many businesses, a former minister has warned.

Fergus Ewing said the Highland Council's plans for a visitor levy were "outrageous and poorly designed".

The SNP MSP for Inverness and Nairn said the tax was "uncollectable" and would lead to a "fiasco".

Highland Council has been consulting on proposals for a 5 per cent visitor levy that it says could generate at least £10 million for the region.

It says the cash could be used to help pay for improvements to infrastructure, including on its roads.

The Visitor Levy (Scotland) Act was passed last year and allows councils to apply a tax on overnight stays.

But it has been opposed by chambers of commerce in the area, as well as trade bodies representing hotels.

Appearing before Parliament yesterday, Mr Ewing called for a U-turn.

He told public finance minister Ivan McKee: "All four ministers know I have opposed this tax from the outset and voted against it.

"It is a percentage tax upon which there will be additional VAT payable – two sets of tax.

"The minister knows that I have argued that this is uncollectable, is going to lead to a fiasco, that nobody has worked out how to collect it, that the IT systems that will be necessary to administer it do not exist.

"Does the minister agree with me that this may cause the death

knell, the death knell, of many hard-working, excellent bed and breakfast establishments in the Highlands and throughout the whole country, and he has been told this again and again," added Mr Ewing.

"So will he call a halt to this outrageous and poorly designed tax?"

Mr McKee said it was up to local authorities whether they implemented a tourist tax but added that he would meet with Highland Council to discuss its plans.

He went on: "The tax is obviously in legislation, as the member is aware, and Edinburgh City Council will be the first council intending to take the tax forward next year, and as I say, we will continue to engage with other councils as we learn from that implementation, to understand what their plans are in their own local areas."

Douglas Ross, the former Scottish Tory leader, said the policy would impact Highland residents who would have to pay for overnight stays in different parts of the region.

He called for residents to be exempt from the policy from the outset.

Mr McKee said he was "well aware" of the concerns raised by trade bodies but reiterated that it is up to the Highland Councils whether to implement the policy.

He said the Visitor Levy (Scotland) Act gave local government "the most significant new powers" since devolution.

"Many businesses and business organisations absolutely recognise the value that the levy can bring," he added.

"The levy will help, therefore, sustain and enhance the visitor experience, making destinations more attractive and competitive."

