



ADDRESSING DEPOPULATION ACTION PLAN

Report by Deputy Chief Executive

PURPOSE

- 1.1 The purpose of the Report is to brief members on the Scottish Governments recently launched 'Supporting and enabling sustainable communities: action plan to address depopulation', which is also known as the [Addressing Depopulation Action Plan \(ADAP\)](#).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 2.1 The Scottish Government (SG) published the ADAP in mid-February 2024 not only to identify a pathway to implement measures and actions to reduce population decline in Scotland through collaborating with local and regional partners, but also to establish the SG's strategic policy position on the issue. The focus of the ADAP is to achieve a balanced population across Scotland and highlights that the Outer Hebrides, is only one of two Scottish Local Authorities forecasted to have more people leave the region by the end of 2028 than move there.
- 2.2 The SG acknowledge that a place-based approach to applying national, regional, and local policies will be essential to address depopulation sustainably and effectively. Consequently the ADAP is being seen as Phase 1 to show their commitment to deliver on local needs. An ADAP Delivery Group will be set up as part of Phase 2 to evaluate the delivery of the actions set out within this plan, and further establish future work. The Comhairle is expected to be included in its membership due to the ADAP also supporting the continuation of the Settlement Officers – of which includes the Comhairle's Uist Settlement Officer.
- 2.3 The ADAP pledges to support actions under five themes – similar to the Uist Repopulation Zone Action Plan – and these include Infrastructure, Services, Land and Marine, Culture and Economy. The delivery of these will be supported locally by the Settlement Officers and ensures that networks can continue to learn from each other and develop innovative solutions to depopulation.
- 2.4 Whilst the ADAP is welcomed, there is an absence of sufficient resources to support and deliver these actions. Consequently, as the Comhairle is a member of the Highlands and Islands Regional Economic Partnership's Population Working Group – which until recently reported to the Convention of the Highlands and Islands – they can, together with regional partners, continue to collaboratively develop measures and actions to influence how both long and short term changes and policy decisions can positively impact peoples decisions to stay or move to the islands.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 It is recommended that the Comhairle:
- (a) welcome the ADAP as a first step to address the issues influencing depopulation and be involved in its Delivery Group; and
 - (b) continue to support the work of both the HIREP Population Working Group and the Uist Repopulation Zone Working Group.

Contact Officer: Kathlene Morrison, Economic Development Officer - Innovation
Background Papers: Uist Repopulation Zone Report to SD Committee on 23 April 2024

IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The following implications are applicable in terms of the Report.

Resource Implications	Implications/None
Financial	None
Legal	None
Staffing	Settlement Officer (1xFTE) is part-funded by the Scottish Government and the Comhairle from the COVID Recoveries Fund – Population strand.
Assets and Property	None
Strategic Implications	Implications/None
Risk	Population loss and demographic imbalance is one of the most challenging and protracted strategic issues facing the Outer Hebrides. The greatest medium to long-term risk will be the failure to deliver the policy innovations and investment requirements that are essential to impact on population dynamics.
Equalities/Child Rights	All taken into account throughout the process.
Corporate Strategy	Population decline and an aging demographic are highlighted as a key issue in the Comhairle's Corporate Strategy and in the Local Outcome Improvement Plan.
Environmental Impact	None
Consultation	The Scottish Government consulted with various stakeholders, including the Comhairle, whilst developing the ADAP.

BACKGROUND

- 5.1 In March 2021 the Scottish Government launched their '[A Scotland for the Future: The Opportunities and challenges of Scotland's changing population](#)' document which focussed their attention on the importance of addressing the challenges and issues which are negatively impacting upon the Scottish population demographic. The Convention of the Highlands and Islands (CoHI) welcomed this strategy and identified areas of population decline within the region to target focussed actions and activities to reverse the trend. This led to the establishment of the CoHI Working Group on Population' to focus on 'Repopulation Zones', with Uist being selected within the Outer Hebrides.
- 5.2 Following community consultation the Uist Repopulation Zone Action Plan was agreed and compiled which ensured it followed the needs and wants of the local communities, whilst identifying priority area's to focus actions and reverse population decline in the islands. The Uist Settlement Officer has been intrinsic in this work, to develop local priorities and projects, liaise with communities and stakeholders and provide support to those wishing to move to the islands.

ADDRESSING DEPOPULATION ACTION PLAN (ADAP)

- 6.1 Following consultation the Scottish Government (SG) recently published their Addressing Depopulation Action Plan (ADAP) in mid-February 2024 not only to identify a pathway to implement measures and actions to reduce population decline in Scotland but also to establish the SG's strategic policy position on the issue. The focus of the ADAP is to achieve a balanced population across Scotland and outlines the known data on population figures, highlighting that the Outer Hebrides, along with Inverclyde, are the only Scottish Local Authorities forecasted to have the more people leave the regions by the end of 2028 than move there. The data gathered represents overall figures for net migration which do not demonstrate the local nuances, and this is where the local and regional input is essential.

- 6.2 In the Outer Hebrides locally focussed activity is already underway through the Uist Repopulation Zone and the learnings from this is being applied elsewhere in the islands. In support of this, the SG acknowledge within the ADAP that Place-based approaches' to applying national, regional, and local policies are essential to address depopulation sustainably and effectively. Consequently the ADAP is being seen as Phase 1 to show the commitment to deliver on local needs, and an ADAP Delivery Group will be set up as the second phase to evaluate the delivery of the actions set out within this plan, and establish future activity. The Comhairle is expected to be included as a delivery group member due to the ADAP also supporting the continuation of the Community Settlement Officers – of which includes the Comhairle's Uist Settlement Officer.
- 6.3 The ADAP pledges to support actions under five themes – similar to the Repopulation Zone Action Plan – and these include Infrastructure, Services, Land and Marine, Culture and Economy. The delivery of these will be supported locally by the Settlement Officers and this ensures that they can continue to network and learn from each other to develop innovative solutions to depopulation.
- 6.4 To support the ADAP the SG is launching an 'Addressing Depopulation Fund' to tackle population issues. This is a £180k grant fund to be split between 3 LA's over the 2024/25 and 2025/26 financial years. Along with other invited Local Authorities', the Comhairle did submit an Expression of Interest in November 2023 and the grant award decisions are still pending.
- 6.5 The SG did consult with stakeholders when compiling the ADAP, including extensively with the CoHI Working Group on Population, and this can be seen in many actions within the Plan particularly housing, settlement officers, childcare, jobs dispersal, student accommodation and digital connectivity.
- 6.6 Whilst the ADAP is welcomed it essentially lists the SG's current achievements and ambitions to retain and attract people to areas in need, and there is a lack of innovative thinking and suitable resources identified to support these actions. Due to this the ADAP has been commonly interpreted as a status report rather than a plan with new initiatives. It also is not innovative enough with some of its actions, this can be seen in the section on housing as more local and regional actions and decisions could be devolved to LA's to assist in meeting local needs.
- 6.7 The SG have recognised that the language used to describe areas of depopulation has changed and therefore, with the exception of its use in statistical economic indices and specific circumstances, they will no longer use the word 'remote' when discussing island and rural communities as it *'portrays areas as lacking in people, culture and enterprise'*. This was discussed within the Population Working Group and during the consultation process as something which would support a more positive image of the region with a vast range of opportunities available within them.
- 6.8 As of March 2024 the CoHI Working Group on Population now reports to the Highlands and Islands Regional Economic Partnership (HI REP) to reflect current regional reporting and collaborative activity. Together with regional partners, the Comhairle can continue to collaboratively develop measures and actions to influence how both long and short term changes and policy decisions can positively impact peoples decisions to stay or move to the islands.

CONCLUSION

- 7.1 The ADAP provides a good basis for collaboratively developing activities in relation to population issues. Through its work the Comhairle can continue to support the plan and its development, whilst simultaneously actively supporting local collaboration across communities and agencies to deliver on actions and activities that reverse the depopulation trend in the Outer Hebrides.