



UIST REPOPULATION ZONE UPDATE

Report by Deputy Chief Executive

PURPOSE

- 1.1 The purpose of the Report is to provide an update on the progress of the Uist Repopulation Zone Action Plan and partnership.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 2.1 The Uist Repopulation Zone (URZ) Working Group continues to support the delivery of an Action Plan which aims to implement change in existing and identified challenges which are impacting the decisions of people to stay in or move to Uist. The Partnership – consisting of local public and private sectors members – collaboratively support the delivery of a URZ Action Plan throughout their work, organisations and decision-making.
- 2.2 Community consultations identified the needs and the short and long term activities and objectives of the URZ Working Group. Outputs to date include the development and launch of the Uist Beo platform, supporting childcare provision in Uist and addressing any skills shortages.
- 2.3 Housing, Childcare, Infrastructure, Connectivity, Jobs and Skills all feature on the Plan and have warranted innovative actions and activities to be undertaken and implemented to tackle the issues that are known to impact on peoples decisions on living in the islands. These include supporting people to learn new skills, Gaelic culture promotion, supporting young people to build houses, supporting community hot-desking, promoting the appropriate messaging, and producing films to showcase the area.
- 2.4 As part of the Scottish Governments Addressing Depopulation Action Plan (ADAP - see related SD Committee Agenda Item) they are continuing to part-fund the Settlement Officer post for 2024-25 and this ensures further alignment and input to influence and inform future rural policy needs and changes. The support of the community is essential to the success of the URZ Action Plan and consequently both the Working Group and Settlement Officer continue to ensure that their needs are taken into account.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 **It is recommended that the Comhairle:**

- (a) **note the Report; and**
- (b) **agree to discuss future funding options for tackling housing issues in Uist.**

Contact Officer: Kathlene Morrison, Economic Development Officer - Innovation
Christina Morrison, Uist Settlement Officer

Appendix: 1. Uist Repopulation Action Plan

Background Papers: [SD Committee Mins -19-September-2023](#)

IMPLICATIONS

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

Resource Implications	Implications/None
Financial	The Settlement Officer and any Project activity is being funded through the COVID Recoveries Fund – Population Project. Additionally the Scottish Government’s Directorate for Agriculture and Rural Economy providing the match-funding (50%) the costs towards the Settlement Officer post.
Legal	None
Staffing	The Settlement Officer (1xFTE) is in post. Comhairle Economic Development Officers, and other various departmental colleagues, are also supporting the delivery of the Action Plan.
Assets and Property	None
	Implications/None
Strategic Implications	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.
Risk	All taken into account throughout the process.
Equalities/Child Rights	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.
Corporate Strategy	None
Environmental Impact	These are taken into consideration within the Action Plan with flooding and environmental issues being a highlighted.
Consultation	Communities Consultations took place in 2022/23, which influenced the Action Plan. Views are also constantly taken into account through partners work.

BACKGROUND

- 5.1 In March 2021 Members of the Convention of the Highlands and Islands (CoHI) decided to undertake targeted action on population decline in the Outer Hebrides, Argyll and Bute, Caithness and Sutherland, and islands within the North Ayrshire Council area. This resulted in the formation of the ‘CoHI Working Group on Population’ to focus on these ‘Repopulation Zones’ consisting of officers from the four local authorities, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and Skills Development Scotland, together with input from Scottish Government civil servants. Locally, due to its acute population decline, Uist was selected as the Comhairle’s initial Repopulation Zone. As of March 2024, the CoHI Population Working Group now comes under the auspices of the Highlands and Islands Regional Economic Partnership (HI REP) to follow current local and regional collaborative priorities and decisions.
- 5.2 To allow for reporting, learning and transfer of knowledge to occur in each Repopulation Zone their interventions follow the same five critical areas of activity (with the initial focus on the first three) and, with the help of local Settlement Officers and the communities, they are then locally tailored as appropriate to cater for local needs and captured in Zonal Action Plans:
1. Housing
 2. Jobs
 3. Critical Infrastructure – especially Digital and Transport
 4. Access to Services – health, education, childcare etc.
 5. Talent Attraction and Retention

- 5.3 These five high level actions have involved liaising with Scottish Government (SG) officers and officials to pass on the communities and zonal needs, researching innovative solutions to attract new economically active people to the areas, inform future policy amendments including changes to housing and crofting policy, and targeting specific sectors including childcare and other training needs.

UIST REPOPULATION WORKING GROUP ACTION PLAN

- 6.1 Classifying Uist as a Repopulation Zone recognises the islands acute depopulation challenges and allows actions that need to be addressed to attract, and retain, economically active people on the islands to live and work to be identified and remedied. Therefore to ensure local needs were tackled a Uist Repopulation Zone (URZ) Working Group comprising of public, private and the communities sector have been collaborating to support both short-and long-term actions to reverse the decline.
- 6.2 Appendix 1 shows the URZ Action Plan that the Working Group continue to aim to deliver to make short and long term changes in Uist, and indeed in the Outer Hebrides as a whole, as the outcomes will be used as a benchmark to implement similar solutions elsewhere in the islands. Housing has been consistently identified as the key issue which impacts on all aspects of the plan through the types and sizes of housing available, their location in respect to jobs, and the cost of purchasing or building. Therefore work is underway to take forward innovative solutions to bring 4 houses within Balivanich back into domestic use.
- 6.3 This will also include the introduction of the Trial the Isles initiative to allow an economically-active family to move to the islands and live in an allocated house for a set period of time, to see if they would like to move long-term, with the caveat that they must have a job offer in place or are running their own business. The details of this initiative are still to be finalised.
- 6.4 Partners are also focussing on connectivity issues, developing visioning plans with communities to develop areas with their needs and wants in mind, developing infrastructure plans, and opportunities to develop skills. This is all executed with sustainability and environmental issues in mind, whilst also ensuring that the essence of the vibrant local Gaelic culture is retained.
- 6.5 Partners, including the Comhairle, have also agreed to align their island messaging to ensure that we are all promoting a vibrant place to live and work rather than portraying empty – nevertheless beautiful – landscapes. As mentioned in the ADAP, the use of the word ‘remote’ to describe the islands is also being discouraged as it conjures ideas of the islands as being inaccessible, unconnected and empty.

ADDRESSING DEPOPULATION ACTION PLAN (ADAP)

- 7.1 Following consultation, the [Addressing Depopulation Action Plan \(ADAP\)](#) – “Supporting and Enabling Communities: An Action Plan to Address Depopulation’ was published by the Scottish Government on the 16th of February. The aim of the ADAP is to explain how the Scottish Government is tackling depopulation issues at a community, regional and national level and is seen as phase 1 of the approach to population challenges. The plan also provides details of partner organisations/groups current activities, and the role of research in the current and future policy development.
- 7.2 An ADAP delivery group will be set up as part of Phase 2 of the population programme of work from the Scottish Government to evaluate the delivery of the plans actions and set future actions. The plan states that the partners list will include the ‘*local authorities involved in the delivery of Community Settlement Officer roles*’ and consequently the Comhairle will automatically be involved in the Group, however no information is provided on its remit.

UIST SETTLEMENT OFFICER

- 8.1 To address population retention and growth challenges in each of the Highlands and Islands Repopulation Zones Settlement Officers have been employed to be available on-the-ground within the regions to support the delivery of the Action Plans and they are located and cover the following areas:
- Comhairle Nan Eilean Siar (Uist)
 - Argyll and Bute Council (Tiree, Coll, the Kintyre and Roseneath Peninsulas)
 - Highland Council (North West Sutherland & Coigach)
- 8.2 The network of settlement officers has been vital to the success of role. Sharing ideas, knowledge, and inspiration from the 3 areas, as well as providing a sense of team support, has been an advantage to reaching achievements.
- 8.3 The Settlement Officer is critical to achieving the aims of the URZ by consulting with the communities and also supporting Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and its partners to alleviate barriers faced by people seeking to relocate and accept employment in Uist. The post aims to increase the likelihood that people will make the move and settle longer-term in the Repopulation Zone pilot areas.
- 8.4 The overarching aim of the Settlement Officers is to support people to stay within these regions and attract new people to move to these communities. The Settlement Officers are also expected to gather information to inform projects to address issues relating to population decline. While there are local nuances to each role, all activities focus on the overarching objective of supporting the ability to respond to the problems of depopulation across the Highlands and Islands.
- 8.5 Whilst Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) part-funded the first year of the post along with the Comhairle, the SG have now provided the match-funding since 2023/4 and will also support it in 2024-25 as it forms part of their Addressing.

SETTLEMENT OFFICER PROGRESS TO DATE

Year 1 Achievement

- 9.1 The postholder in place between May 2022-Oct 23 had been involved in the following:
- Development and delivery of the initial Uist Repopulation Zone Action Plan.
 - Actively supported development and delivery of the '[Uist Beo](#)' platform.
 - Supported the development of childcare provision.
 - Advising enquirers on relocating to Uist and activity promoting the service.
 - Created meaningful networks and connections and supported and advised on community consultations.
 - Meeting with the third sector partners and raising the profile of the project in the media.
 - They also gathered quantitative and qualitative data on relocation, presenting their findings to the CoHI meeting in March 2023.

Year 2 Interim Achievement (April 2023 – Feb 2024)

- 9.2 New appointment made for the post in October 23. Achievement since then include:
- Growing relationships with the 3rd sector and key community organisations to assist in developing the skills sector and grow engagement with young people within the community.

- Engaged directly with high school children to explore their views on the opportunities and barriers they face when wanting to remain on island and their driving factors for wanting to leave.
- Attended the Rural & Islands parliament, contributing to engaging discussions and identifying future partnership working.
- Curated and facilitated a workshop on Population Renewal at the Rural Housing Scotland Conference.
- Continuous contribution to the Uist Beo platform and support marketing.
- Supported Storas Uibhist in pushing Enercon for job development and creation in Uist. Continuous support will be given directly to both Enercon and their prospective employees.
- Ongoing support for those looking to relocate to Uist.
 - Up to March 2024 the Settlement Officers have received and advised on 319 enquiries and supported 26 relocations since the zonal work commenced in May 2022.

Planned Objective Year 3

9.3 Targeting the barriers still faced by Retention and Repopulation, future objectives include:

- **Housing** – Whilst we have had a positive number of relocations supported by the Settlement officer, there is an increasing concern for the shortage of affordable and suitable housing. There are an increasing number of enquires whom find themselves unable to relocate due to unavailable housing, even when employment has been offered.
 - The Settlement officer will be investigating potential alternative schemes to encourage a growth in the local rental market, to alleviate some of the pressure on the current housing market.
 - They will also continue to support the housing department, local housing partnership and local landlords in future housing developments.
- **Gaelic** – Marketing to promote the active Gaelic culture in Uist, and the relevant employment available to encourage further repopulation and retention.
- **Youth retention** – With the largest demographic contributing to depopulation being those leaving school, the settlement officer will conduct research on 16-20 year olds to collect quantitative data on driving factors, barriers, and potential interventions that can be carried out to retain the young work force.
 - Initially this will involve creating a Uist Youth Retention partnership with various public, 3rd sector and community groups to maximise access to this demographic.
- **Skills** – Promote support services for training and job access, as well as market the 5 key sectors highlighted in the Uist Skills Development Plan to encourage both growth in populations and growth in skills in these key sectors.
- **Relocation Support** – The Settlement officer will continue to provide high quality support to those looking to relocate to Uist and track driving factors and barriers.

CONCLUSION

10.1 Given that the Outer Hebrides has been identified as one of the highest levels of forecasted negative net-migration then the URZ Working Group and Settlement Officer will collaboratively continue to support the implementation of the Action Plan whilst also ensuring that any lessons can be passed on to other local communities and wards.

UIST REPOPULATION ACTION PLAN

Housing
Deliver 36 housing units via the Affordable Housing Programme (AHP)
Deliver the Smart Clachan project
Identify developer-led housing opportunities
Develop and implement an Empty Homes project
Support for Young People to Access Housing
Convert vacant premises in Winfield Way back to housing when possible.

JOBS
Deliver the suite of identified capital investment projects
Develop support mechanisms for start-ups and relocating businesses
Develop a Strategic Communications Programme, including promoting Gaelic to those returning / moving to the area
Explore potential for the creation of a Creative and Media Hub Scope and a “Digital Nomads” Initiative
Scope out opportunity for a “Trial the Isles” initiative

INFRASTRUCTURE
Identify recent technology digital pilots
Identify opportunities to accelerate R100 roll-out and tackle connectivity issues
Engage with industry stakeholders to accelerate grid reinforcement
Support the case for small offshore wind deployments within INTOG
Lobby to reinstate an Area of Search into the Sectoral Marine Plan
Support delivery of the emerging Uist Energy Plan
Identify the flexible workspaces (Digital Hubs) available in Uist and progress projects to deliver these spaces
Undertake flood risk management and Climate Change Actions to benefit Uist communities
Support the Lochboisdale Place-Based Initiative
Progress Balivanich Vision Project
Lochmaddy Visioning Project

Gaelic
Support the development and implementation of a Uist Community Gaelic Language Plan in addition to continuing with Gaelic Arts and Media developments and increasing the use of Gaelic in daily Uist life
Empower Third Sector organisations and the network of Gaelic officers to deliver the Gaelic language plan and support existing residents and new arrivals, including working with service providers to increase the use of Gaelic in health, social care, education, and childcare service

SKILLS
Skills and training opportunities considered within every new public sector job, investment, or initiative
Introduction of careers pathway linked to local skills shortage promoted through employability hub and DYW
Develop local sector specific training opportunities to address the skills gap
Integrate business support and employer skills engagement activity
Create a targeted Promotional feature/video highlighting the 5 key sectors aimed at promoting inward migration
Identify opportunities to create and deliver Gaelic-medium apprenticeships and build on the opportunities
Identify routes to increase Gaelic language fluency, skills and confidence for existing speakers and learners
Conduct a deep skills analysis to accurately map the requirements of the local community