

## SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT ADDRESSING DEPOPULATION ACTION PLAN

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### 1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Scottish Government has published an Addressing Depopulation Action Plan (referred to as the Plan in this report) to address the challenges of depopulation in Scotland at both a local and national level. Following a period of consultation with key stakeholders the plan identifies 88 actions that recognises depopulation as a priority area of focus for the Scottish Government. This is something in itself has to be welcomed by the council given this is something council representatives over a number of years have lobbied for consistently. This report however looks at the content of the Plan, provides a high level overview and makes a number of observations that Members are asked to note and consider.
- 1.2 Our population levels and demography is important to Argyll and Bute as this heavily influences the funding we receive from both Governments and impacts on investment decisions from the private sector. The importance of demography is explained further in **Appendix 1** and it also contains a Map (Map 1) of current population trends which is taken from the Plan. In particular, it reveals the areas where population levels are in decline and this includes Argyll and Bute Council. In total 14 council areas are in a position where their population is now in decline (rising from 8) and as can be seen from the Map this is predominately in the west coast and peripheral rural areas. In areas where the population is rising this is due to greater in migration than out migration and predominately focussed in the central belt, cities, and urban areas.

### 2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 It is recommended that Council:-
- a) Consider the publication of the Scottish Government's Depopulation Action Plan and its contents;
  - b) Approve that the Council continues to engage with the Scottish Government to focus on delivering further investment in our communities facing depopulation with an increased focus on the key issues of affordable housing, digital and transport connectivity together with employment opportunity.

### 3.0 DETAIL

- 3.1 The Addressing Depopulation Action Plan was developed by the Scottish Government's Ministerial Taskforce. It sets out the strategic approach to addressing the challenges of population attraction and retention in communities facing population decline. The Plan is considered to provide a starting point of a national commitment to address depopulation in Scotland and contains a high number of actions listed beside key policy areas of the Government.
- 3.2 The Plan which can be found via this embedded link [Tackling Scotland's population challenges - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/publications/tackling-scotland-population-challenges/pages/introduction.aspx) is structured around three key chapters.
1. The identification of factors relevant to depopulation at a community level, the evidence behind it and why it is an important matter to address.
  2. Identifying the current and future role of regional and local actors in addressing depopulation including highlighting work that is already ongoing and planned future interventions.
  3. The identification of the role of the Scottish Government will play in supporting local communities' local objectives. This includes a summary of current policies and a range of learning that was used to inform the content of the Plan.
- 3.3 High level insights from the report are listed as follows:
- There is **no quick fix** to population challenges, such as those found in parts of the Highlands and Islands. Housing, jobs, critical infrastructure, talent attraction, and migration are all central to the challenge.
  - **Long-term coherence across policy is critical**; between national, regional, and local actors to drive successful local attraction and retention.
  - **Local leadership matters**. Policies and initiatives to support local population levels need buy-in from communities.
  - **Ideas for targeted population policy interventions, such as 'Repopulation Zones', need to be carefully calibrated in order to have positive impact**; unintended consequences on neighbouring areas and lack of community buy-in are risks that have damaged targeted population interventions elsewhere, in the past.
  - **International learning** can inform how Scotland takes forward our approach on rural and island population sustainability (e.g. from Spain, France, Germany).
  - **Projections** show that Scotland's population is set to fall from 2033, with fourteen local authority areas projected to experience population decline over the next decade.
  - **The Plan** lists 88 different actions linked to current Scottish Government policy areas.

- **The Plan** promises additional resources in the future however only £180k of new funding is linked to the plan and this is a competitive fund.
- 3.4 The Scottish Government consider the Plan to be the first phase of the necessary work to address depopulation. A Depopulation Delivery Group will take forward a second phase to oversee delivery of this Plan and set out its future work to be overseen by the Ministerial Population Taskforce. A Place based approach will be taken to deliver future interventions.
- 3.5 The publication of the Plan is welcomed by Argyll and Bute Council as we have consistently called for action to be taken at a national level to counter our population trends that have been ongoing over a number of decades. Our population is continuing to fall and this is largely due to an ageing demographic coupled with a decline of in migration particularly from people of working age. This trend of decline has now been extended to 14 councils (a rising trend from 8) in Scotland largely confined to Scotland's west coast and peripheral rural areas (See Map1). This situation is not unique to Scotland as western societies become more urban and gravitate to urban centres often exacerbated by changes in the national and global economies.
- 3.6 It also has to be acknowledged the work the council is doing to counter our population trends is referenced in the action plan in numerous locations. For example, Argyll and Bute Council has already secured part funding for our Settlement Officer post and the work done to date was reported to the Council's EDI March Committee. The council has also made a bid for an additional £60k of revenue funding referenced in the Plan but this is highly competitive with only 3 councils being able to access this funding and at the time of writing this report we have not been notified of being successful or not. In addition, there are a number of our local communities who have managed to reverse these trends through taking a bottom up approach working in collaboration with public bodies, including the council, and also the private sector. For example, the island communities of Jura and Gigha.
- 3.7 That said, there remains significant concerns that the Plan contains no significant increase in resources to counter the acute issues we are dealing with. In particular, the need to build new affordable homes, create employment opportunity and improve our transport and digital connectivity. There is a further concern that the identified actions need further focus by the Government on the critical issues our communities have consistently fed back to us in relation to depopulation. The need for additional housing, better digital connectivity equal to city provision, better transport connectivity and additional investment in economic opportunities for our young people.
- 3.8 Members should also be aware the Plan has been produced within the context of other Local Authorities having to deal with population increases largely confined to City Authorities and the East Coast of the country. These Authorities are also consistently looking for additional funding from the Scottish Government to deal with these pressures in the same way we are

arguing for additional resources to counter our negative population trends. Consequently, it remains important that the council continues to lobby for additional meaningful actions and the necessary resources to help with our population challenges. For example, to enable us to accelerate the actions identified with our declared Housing Emergency, create employment opportunities, or invest in our transport and digital networks to make Argyll and Bute an attractive place to stay or move to.

#### **4.0 CONCLUSION**

- 4.1 The Scottish Government has published its Addressing Depopulation Action Plan. The Plan contains 88 Actions linked to Scottish Government Policy interventions with regard to population and demography. This provides a useful summary of Government action together with an acknowledgement that local leadership that takes a place based approach can make the biggest impact on attracting and retaining people in our communities. Argyll and Bute Council is one of 14 LAs with a falling population and this is predominately the experience of West Coast and rural LAs over a sustained period of time. **Appendix 1** of this report explains the importance of demography and includes **Map1** that reveals where Scotland's population is rising and falling.
- 4.2 Whilst the publication of this plan is welcome, given the council has lobbied for national action for a considerable period of time, there remains a concern that there is still a need for greater focus on more radical actions, coupled with greater resources, to reverse these negative population trends. These actions need to focus on the issues that matter to our local communities, more affordable housing, better digital and transport connectivity together with additional employment opportunities. It is further acknowledged that other council's experiencing population gains are also lobbying Government for additional resources and consequently the council needs to continue its efforts to lobby Government over the vital importance of attracting and retaining economically active people to our area.

#### **5.0 IMPLICATIONS**

- 5.1 Policy - A key council priority is to grow our population and support the sustainable growth of our economy. The publication of the Addressing Depopulation Action Plan sets out a range of Government policy interventions that address this important issue.
- 5.2 Financial - None directly arising from this report however our population levels influence and inform Government funding mechanisms together with private sector investment decisions.
- 5.3 Legal – None.
- 5.4 HR – None.

- 5.5 Equalities (Fairer Duty Scotland) – There is a need for the Scottish Government to recognise the need of rural communities and the implications of sustained population loss and an ageing population. It is welcome that the Plan recognises this and it forms a central argument for additional action and resources to be directed to this important matter.
- 5.5.1 Equalities – Protected Characteristics – rural communities need to be treated on an equal basis as our urban counterparts with fair funding that addresses the issues identified in the published Plan.
- 5.5.2 Social-Economic Characteristics – A rising population particularly focussed on people that are economically active helps support our rural economy and local services that people rely on.
- 5.5.3 Islands – Population levels are vital for the future sustainability of our island communities.
- 5.6 Risk – Not taking the radical actions that are required to address our population negative trends risks our economy reaching a tipping point that may accelerate negative impacts.
- 5.7 Climate Change – The council is lobbying to deliver sustainable population levels for our communities that will also assist with the management of our scarce natural resources.
- 5.8 Customer Service – None.
- 5.9 Rights of the Child (UNCRC) – Sustainable population levels will greatly assist with local service sustainability and the growth of our economy providing employment opportunities for our young people.

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**APPENDICES**

**APPENDIX 1 - WHY IS POPULATION AND DEMOGRAPHY IMPORTANT?**

## **APPENDIX 1 - WHY IS POPULATION AND DEMOGRAPHY IMPORTANT?**

- 1.1 Population levels and demography is important as it reveals the structure of our population through the number of births, deaths and migration in and out of Argyll and Bute. Through the collection data, we are able to see how our area's population has changed over time, and predict what might happen in the future. This enables the Scottish Government, the council and our CPP partners to anticipate and plan for our future needs whilst at the same time look to counter trends that create issues for our area.
- 1.2 Another major factor for us is many funding streams, Government and otherwise, are determined on population levels and this can also influence future investment decisions by potential investors. This is why the council has attached such a high priority to implementing different actions and lobbying Government for national action to reverse population loss trends through attracting economically active people to our area and employment opportunities.
- 1.3 This helps Governments develop economic and social policies which will affect its people. It also allows Governments to collect tax and revenue from its population, in order to deliver these policies. While some of Scotland's taxes are related to property and land, income tax is collected from all Scottish taxpayers and it is therefore important that we have a large number of taxpayers to allow us to deliver the inclusive policies we want to deliver. That includes helping to support our NHS and other vital public services which will be needed to support our elderly and more vulnerable members of our society.
- Economic and fiscal impact
  - Importance of the working age population for paying taxes
- 1.4 Not only that, but it is important to have a diverse range of people as they can bring a fresh perspective to our ways of live across the country as we need sustainable communities to allow for us to economically thrive.

### **2.0 Scotland's Population**

- 2.1 While our population is currently at a record high of 5.46 million all of our population growth is projected to come from inward migration. In contrast, natural change (the number of births minus the number of deaths) has been negative for at least the last five years (up to mid-2019) as the number of deaths has increased and the number of births has gradually fallen over the last decade.
- 2.2 There are projected to be more deaths than births in every year going forward. This means that without inward migration our total population will start to fall not rise by 2033. Map1 shows the current population trends in Scotland including Argyll and Bute. As you can see our population is in

decline largely through an excess of deaths over births and this is a common trend for predominately west coast and peripheral rural areas.

**MAP 1 (Taken from the Scottish Government Depopulation Action Plan)**

