

**OBAN: A UNIVERSITY TOWN UPDATE**

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**1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1.1 This report provides an update on the progress made with Oban: A University Town. The expansion of Oban's Further and Higher education offer brings with it a number of potential benefits to the town provided the delivery of the project addresses the key issues that have been identified through public consultation and previous research.
- 1.2 A project steering group and four project groups have been established to undertake key activities in relation to the delivery of the project. Members of the Steering group and project groups have been drawn from a number of partners including the council, HIE, Argyll College – UHI, UHI, SAMS and Oban BIDs. The four activities include:-
- 1) Academic Offer
  - 2) Infrastructure;
  - 3) Business Needs and opportunities; and
  - 4) Communications
- 1.3 Progress has been made in all four areas and this has been detailed in the report. A key aspect in terms of expanding student numbers will be the development of the academic offer. Work is currently ongoing to achieve this and provide the necessary evidence to enable delivery through future external funding opportunities such as the Rural Growth Deal. Another key piece of work to facilitate progress is the development of the Oban Strategic Development Framework that aims to provide spatial planning guidance and help coordinate future investment activity in the Oban area to enable sustainable growth to take place.

**2.0 RECOMMENDATION**

- 2.1 That the OLI Committee consider the contents of this report.

## OBAN: A UNIVERSITY TOWN UPDATE

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### 3.0 INTRODUCTION

3.1 This report provides an update on the progress made to date in the delivery of Oban: A University Town. The Oban University Town project was established in August 2017 and formally launched in January 2018 with the following aspirational vision:

*“We will develop Oban as a University Town that will focus on the distinctive assets and employment opportunities of the area and provide an outstanding experience for students and staff in terms of teaching, practical work, enterprise, leisure and cultural activities and community engagement.*

*This will contribute to the economic and population growth of the area by attracting and retaining young people and qualified staff and enhance creativity, innovation, and the formation and growth of local business.”*

3.2 The development of the project has involved a number of partners to deliver the key overlapping objectives of the project including HIE, Argyll College – UHI, SAMS, UHI and Oban Bids:

- Giving school leavers and young people more choice about their futures, with Oban as attractive an option as other towns and cities;
- Attracting students to come to Oban, gradually increasing the demand for local services and contributing to the town’s economy;
- Reviewing infrastructure requirements including transport, accommodation and the social/cultural scene, particularly the seasonality of tourism;
- Matching educational opportunities to the economic priorities for Argyll and Bute, ensuring that the offer includes degree courses, vocational training and modern apprenticeships to help local employers recruit the skilled workforce they need; and
- Making sure that students and residents have a fantastic experience in Oban and that growth is delivered in a planned and sustainable way.

3.3 The project is overseen by a Steering Committee with responsibility for the strategic oversight, the delivery of the project plan and management of the project. Four project Teams have been formed to help deliver the:

- 1) Academic Offer
- 2) Infrastructure;
- 3) Business Needs and opportunities; and
- 4) Communications

3.4 These groups have been working to help identify strategic priorities and key tasks that need to be delivered to deliver the vision for Oban as a University Town.

#### **4.0 RECOMMENDATION**

4.1 That the OLI Committee consider the contents of this report.

#### **5.0 DETAILS**

5.1 Oban already exists as a University Town with approximately 800 students involved in further and higher education located in a number of Higher Education campuses, including the Scottish Association for Marine Science (SAMS), Ballet West, Taynuilt and Argyll College UHI, which along with SAMS is a partner of the University of the Highlands and Islands. In addition, there is considerable work training delivered locally including through the Lorn and District General Hospital or distance learning through the Open University and others. The town however has considerable potential for this number of students to be expanded.

5.2 In order for the number of students to continue to expand work has been ongoing through the four work streams identified in paragraph 3.3.

#### **5.3 Academic Offer**

5.4 Critical to the success of any University is the academic offer and how it can attract students to undertake the courses. Considerable research has been undertaken to understand what students require and where there may be funding available to develop the curriculum and expand course choice.

5.5 Oban currently has two main areas of strength. Firstly, **marine education** with SAMS international reputation as a centre of marine excellence and over 100 marine businesses operating within a 20 mile radius of Oban, and many more throughout Argyll. These businesses have specific skill requirements if they are to continue to prosper which has demonstrated a need for the development of new facilities and courses. A funding bid to develop the curriculum offer of Argyll College over the next two years, delivered through the creation of a new Scottish Marine Industry Training Centre (SMITC), has been submitted to the

council's Inward Investment Fund. A key outcome of this bid is to add circa 80 full-time and 440 part-time student within six years. These students will be primarily hosted in a new purpose built Scottish Marine Industry Training Centre (SMITC) located in the European Marine Science Park. Funding for the capital works associated with the SMITC is subject to a successful Rural Growth Deal bid and is critical to making a step change in the number of students undertaking courses in Oban many of whom will come from other parts of Argyll and Bute and beyond. The Rural Growth Deal also has a major skills ask associated with it including STEM education, rural entrepreneurship and improving academic accommodation for Argyll College. All relevant to Oban as a University Town.

5.6 The second main strength is in the performing arts including a School of Traditional Music, recording facilities and number of live music venues. Add to this the incredible standards being achieved by Ballet West through full time students and community classes, and we have a wealth of opportunities in performing arts in Oban.

5.7 There are also further opportunities in wider creative industries, education training, health sector training and the historic environment.

#### 5.8 **Infrastructure Needs**

5.9 Argyll and Bute Council is taking the lead here through the development of the Oban Strategic Development Framework that aims to provide spatial planning guidance and help coordinate future investment activity in the Oban area to enable sustainable growth to take place. The key focus here is meeting the accommodation needs of the students and academic visitors. A lot of survey work has been undertaken including speaking to students on their preferences for accommodation with 22 new units already been provided by the private sector. As the University student numbers expand there will be a need for additional units but this will be subject to a relevant business case being established and is likely to be delivered through a private sector funding model. It should also be noted that the recent completion of Kirk Road improvements has also enabled an addition 300 affordable houses to be built at Dunbeg that will add to the area's available housing stock with a completion date in 2021.

#### 5.10 **Maximising Business Opportunities/Commercial Engagement**

5.11 Significant activity in 2019 has led to development of a student information leaflet for Oban that will be launched at the first joint freshers' event on 2nd Sept at The View in Oban. A well-attended student forum provided fantastic information about student needs in Oban and a lot of activity is planned over coming months. Importantly, this is very much owned by project partners and third parties, ensuring it will continue after the project management phase of Oban as a University Town ends.

#### 5.12 **Communications/Engagement**

5.13 There have been a number of Oban Times articles published together with a number of positive case studies of students undertaking their education at

SAMS and their experience of Oban as a place to study. A key aspect of the communication work stream already is reinforcing the message that Oban is already a University Town that is attracting a broad range of students including international students to the area. Following a recent meeting there is the intention to step up on communications over coming 6 months and have an active plan to ensure continuity of messaging once project funding ends.

## **6.0 CONCLUSION**

6.1 There is a need to expand further and higher education possibilities in Argyll and Bute to allow for greater choice for local students and people considering studying in our region. The Oban University Town project was established in August 2017 and formally launched in January 2018. Following early public engagement a steering group has been formed with four project groups established with members of these groups drawn from different organisations. Progress is continuing to be made in a number of different areas as described in paragraphs 5.3 through to 5.13. Members of the Steering Group and project groups are drawn from a range of partners including the council, HIE, Argyll College – UHI, UHI and Oban Bids. Further progress on meeting project objectives will however be subject to securing significant amounts of external funding including through the likes of the Rural Growth Deal. This will only be achieved by continuing to provide the necessary evidence for potential funders.

## **7.0 IMPLICATIONS**

7.1 **Policy** – the Development of ‘Oban: A University Town’ through the development of the SMITC is a key element of the Argyll and Bute RGD.

7.2 **Financial** – none arising from this report.

7.3 **Legal** – no legal issues.

7.4 **HR** – none.

7.5 **Equal Opportunities** – there are no equal opportunities implications.

7.6 **Risk** – none arising from this report

7.7 **Customer Service** – there are no customer service implications.

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