

OBAN: A UNIVERSITY TOWN UPDATE

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, SAMS, UHI and Oban BIDs. The four activities include:
- 1) Academic offer;
 - 2) Infrastructure;
 - 3) Business needs and opportunities; and
 - 4) Communications.
- 1.3 Progress since the last update to committee in September 2019 has been limited due to the impacts of the pandemic. That said, work continues in certain areas principally developing the academic offer and progressing with essential infrastructure needs including the further development of the European Marine Science Park and affordable housing at Dunbeg.
- 1.4 It is recommended that the OLI Committee consider the contents of this report.

OBAN: A UNIVERSITY TOWN UPDATE

2.0 INTRODUCTION

2.1 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.”

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

- 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.

2.3 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.

2.4 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.

3.0 RECOMMENDATION

3.1 It is recommended that the OLI Committee consider the contents of this report.

4.0 DETAILS

4.1 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), 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.

4.2 In order for the number of students to continue to expand work has been ongoing through the four work streams identified in paragraph 2.3.

4.3 Academic Offer

4.4 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.

4.5 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 students 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.

- 4.6 The second main strength is in the performing arts including a School of Traditional Music, recording facilities and number of live music venues.
- 4.7 There are also further opportunities in wider creative industries, education training, health sector training and the historic environment.
- 4.8 Despite the impact of the pandemic, work has continued with developing the academic offer funded by Argyll and Bute Council, Argyll College UHI and HIE. The key areas of progress are listed below and relate to the development of the proposed Marine Training Centre and its business case.
 - Procurement of Architects now with Advanced Procurement for Universities and Colleges and Public Contracts Scotland.
 - Stakeholder group in place with Skills Development Scotland, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, European Marine Science Park.
 - Aquaculture Industry engagement taking place regarding specialised training requirements to feed into final facility design.
 - Marine / boatbuilding – engagement with industry across Argyll and Bute ongoing regarding future potential requirements.
 - Detailed design specification for the building requirements well developed, awaiting discussion with architects before a final draft being prepared.
 - Ongoing discussions with HIE re: Innovation and R&D.
 - Discussion with National Workboat Association re Scottish provision of qualification, and what impact on facility design may be necessary.
 - Discussions with British Marine Scotland re: future training provision, all feeding into the final facility design.
- 4.9 In addition HIE has secured detailed planning consent for the European Marine Science Park phase 2 and procurement will shortly commence for works to build necessary car parking and infrastructure including road improvements.
- 4.10 Construction of the Training Centre will be dependent on securing capital funding for the building which has been identified as a key project of the Rural Growth Deal. Council officers have identified to both Governments that the creation of this facility has the potential to support the recovery of the local

economy if its implementation was accelerated. We are currently awaiting a response to this request.

4.11 Infrastructure

4.12 Argyll and Bute Council is taking the lead here. Unfortunately, there has been limited progress made on the Oban Strategic Development Framework due to staff being redeployed to assist with the pandemic including food delivery for vulnerable people and business support. Work has recently recommenced on the framework and a further update will be given to members in due course. Work has also recommenced at Dunbeg to deliver 300 affordable houses with a completion date in 2021 and the accommodation needs of students will require to be reassessed as part of the recovery phase of the pandemic.

4.13 Discussions are taking place with relevant Housing Associations and the private sector over the implementation of the secondary Dunbeg access that would enable a further phase of the Dunbeg housing development and further commercial units. The main issue concerns the ground conditions and further studies are underway on what can be done to mitigate any negative impacts. It may be possible that additional student housing could form part of this development but this will be dependent on demand from students including their preference on where to stay in the town.

4.14 Business Needs and Opportunities

4.15 The last update recorded good progress here. The town is ready to welcome new students to Oban with information available and local businesses fully engaged. Again the pandemic has required the council working with its partners such as Oban Bids to focus on business survival, public health and wellbeing and re-starting the economy. It is anticipated that as part of the recovery process for Oban, attracting and welcoming back students will be a key area going forward.

4.16 Communications

4.17 There is the intention to restart the communications plan for new students and engaging with partners to take forward the aims of the University Town project. Currently, in common with the whole of the UK there is a significant unknown on the numbers of foreign students that will be able to restart higher education courses in Oban due to the pandemic. There should be more clarity here in the coming weeks and months and this will be subject to a further update to members in due course.

5.0 CONCLUSION

5.1 The positive benefits of expanding Oban's student population has been well documented in previous reports. 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 has been delayed in some areas due to the pandemic. That said the critical areas of improving the academic offer has continued to make good progress with the development of the proposed Marine Training Centre located at the expanding European Marine Science Park considered a key priority at this time. As we continue to recover from the impacts of the pandemic continuing the work of Oban as a University Town will be a key area of work linked to the delivery of both the Oban Strategic Development Framework and the Rural Growth Deal. Further progress will be made possible through the winning of additional external funding.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS

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

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

6.3 **Legal** – no legal issues.

6.4 **HR** – none.

6.5 **Fairer Scotland Duty:**

6.5.1 **Equalities** – there are no implications.

6.5.2 **Socio-economic Duty** – none.

6.5.3 **Islands** – none.

6.6 **Risk** – none arising from this report.

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

Executive Director with the responsibility for Development and Economic Growth: Kirsty Flanagan

Policy Lead: Cllr Alastair Redman

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For further information contact:

Fergus Murray, Head of Development and Economic Growth, tel: 01546 604293