

OBAN: A UNIVERSITY TOWN UPDATE

1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 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.”

- 1.2 The development of the project has involved a number of partners to deliver the key overlapping objectives of the project:
- 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.

1.3 The project is overseen by a Steering Committee with responsibility for the strategic oversight 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

1.4 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. Activity has been limited over the last year due to the pandemic but there has been progress in certain areas.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 Members of the OLI Committee are asked to:

- Consider the report regarding the update on Oban as a University Town.

3.0 DETAILS

3.1 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) 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.

3.2 In order for the number of students to continue to expand work has been ongoing through the four work streams identified in the following paragraphs.

3.3 Academic Offer

3.4 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.

3.5 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 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 SMITC is subject to a successful Rural Growth Deal Bid.

3.6 The council has provided grant funding to Argyll College – UHI to enable them to undertake key feasibility studies for the Marine Training School including concept designs of the actual building. This work is informing the outline business case for the Rural Growth Deal that has now reached Heads of Terms with the UK and Scottish Governments with the Marine Industry Training Centre a key aspect of the deal.

3.7 The second main strength is in the performing arts including a School of Traditional Music, recording facilities and number of live music venues.

3.8 **Infrastructure Needs**

3.9 The main 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.

3.10 That said there has been a number of new developments that will have a bearing on the future infrastructure of the town and the future development of the University.

3.11 HIE have also implemented phase 2 of the European Marine Science Park with road, carpark and ground infrastructure works now on site. These works complement the Council's Rural Growth Deal and the commitment to invest in the Marine Training School building. HIE's most recent investments here also include the fitting out of the ground floor of Malin House to house two expanding companies. The total investment by HIE is circa £4.77m. The cost of the new Marine Training School will be in the region of £7m.

3.12 Another major step forward is the development at Dunbeg for 300 additional social rented houses that will provide additional housing choice for local people. The first batch of houses is being let now and it is intended that this work will finish in 2022.

3.13 As part of the town centre regeneration works, new gateway signage for the town have been designed involving local school children. These signs will include the branding of the town as a University Town.

3.14 **Maximising Business Opportunities**

3.15 This primarily relates to how businesses interact with students. Oban BIDS continues to work in this area albeit there has not been significant progress

due to Covid 19. It is hoped as and when students return to campus learning and local businesses reopen additional opportunities can be explored for the mutual benefit of local business and students including being considered as customers and a valued potential workforce.

3.16 Communications/Engagement

3.17 Students are subject to frequent communication on the latest developments and as facilities develop further dialogue with the wider Oban community will restart to ensure that the integration of the University and the town continues to benefit everyone concerned.

4.0 CONCLUSION

4.1 Oban is a University Town but there is a need to allow this to grow in a way that integrates with the existing community of Oban. Expanding further and higher education opportunities in Oban allows people to stay in Argyll to study and also allows opportunities for young people to stay and learn in Argyll including people from all over the world. An expanding student base creates new customers for local businesses and a potential workforce. Students and further and higher education staff also make a wide ranging contribution to the local community. Progress has been limited due to the pandemic, that said good progress has been made on infrastructure, the development of the academic offer and affordable housing.

5.0 IMPLICATIONS

- | | | |
|-------|---|--|
| 5.1 | Policy : | The Development of 'Oban: A University Town' through the development of the SMITC is a key element of the Argyll and Bute RGD and the expansion of the EMSP is supported by the Local Development Plan as a Business Allocation. |
| 5.2 | Financial : | None arising from this report. |
| 5.3 | Legal : | No legal issues. |
| 5.4 | HR : | None. |
| 5.5 | Fairer Scotland Duty: | This initiative aims to offer wider further and higher education opportunities for local people |
| 5.5.1 | Equalities - protected characteristics: | People of all abilities will be able to access further and higher education opportunity locally |
| 5.5.2 | Socio-economic Duty: | Additional further and higher education opportunity helps creates employment opportunity across Argyll and Bute through the improvement of skills linked to local business demands. |

- 5.5.3 Islands: Having increased educational opportunity in Oban will have a positive impact for our island communities who can link to this digitally and travel.
- 5.6. Risk: None directly arising from this report.
- 5.7 Customer Service: There are no customer service implications.No implications.

Executive Director with responsibility for Development and Economic Growth,
Kirsty Flanagan.

Policy Lead: Cllr Robin Currie

May 2021

For further information contact:

Fergus Murray, Head of Development and Economic Growth, tel: 01546 6042935