

Tackling Digital Exclusion in Argyll and Bute

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to present before members of the Environment Development and Infrastructure Committee, a set of options and criteria for the £250K Tackling Digital Exclusion Fund that the council approved at its budget meeting in February 2021.
- 1.2 Five Options are outlined in the report with an associated options appraisal conveying each options advantages and disadvantages.
- 1.3 At this moment in time officers are still waiting for the release of the full R100 intervention area, as of 21st July 2021 officers have been advised that this is still 4-6 weeks away. This is due to the R100 North lot intervention area being with Building Digital UK (BDUK) for assurance. BDUK are currently working with the Scottish Government and Openreach to close off questions from their technical reviewers after which it will be submitted to the board for approval.
- 1.4 The following options have been developed after detailed discussions with Government Officials from both the UK and Scottish Governments together with the private sector infrastructure providers.
- 1.5 It is recommended that Members:
 - a) Approve that £10k of the £250k fund is used to start a marketing campaign to target low take-up areas for Superfast Broadband.
 - b) Approve that the remaining £240k be distributed as outlined in Option 2.

ARGYLL AND BUTE COUNCIL

**ENVIRONMENT, DEVELOPMENT
AND INFRASTRUCTURE
COMMITTEE**

**DEVELOPMENT AND
ECONOMIC GROWTH**

2 SEPTEMBER 2021

Tackling Digital Exclusion in Argyll and Bute

2.0 INTRODUCTION

2.1 The purpose of this report is to present before members of the Environment Development and Infrastructure Committee, a set of options and criteria for the £250K Tackling Digital Exclusion Fund that the council approved at its budget meeting in February 2021. The options are described in detail below with the advantages and disadvantages for each option also identified.

3.0 RECOMMENDATION

3.1 It is recommended that Members:

- a) Approve that £10k of the £250k fund is used to start a marketing campaign to target low take-up areas for Superfast Broadband.
- b) Approve that the remaining £240k be distributed as outlined in Option 2.

4.0 DETAIL

4.1 Argyll and Bute Council's Tackling Digital Exclusion Fund

The purpose of the Tackling Digital Exclusion fund was outlined in the approved motion which stated the following:-

“Establishes the Tackling Digital Exclusion Top Up Fund to support communities and in some cases individuals that are missing out on national programmes due to logistics and economies of scale. While vouchers are available from the UK and Scottish Governments in some cases these do not cover the full cost of infrastructure builds. Instructs the Executive Director with

responsibility for Development and Economic Growth to bring a report outlining criteria for distribution to the EDI Committee in June.”

- 4.2 It is recommended that £10,000 of the Fund is used to start a marketing campaign to drive take-up of available Superfast Broadband. Working with the councils Community Planning Partnership (CPP). It is proposed that a targeted campaign in low take-up areas be established. This will also potentially identify reasons of take-up failings whether it be knowledge, desire or affordability.
- 4.3 For the remainder of the fund, there are 5 potential options and criteria for application of the fund and these are outlined below. This is then followed by a summary appraisal table with each of the options ranked accordingly, with Option 2 being the preferred option recommended by Officers. The options have been developed after detailed discussions with Government Officials from both the UK and Scottish Governments together with the private sector infrastructure providers.
- 4.4 **Option1: Work with Scottish Government Voucher Team to top-up SBVS where required, at individual premises level, to allow that premise Gigabit Speeds 100Mbps**

Scottish Government have identified that a £5k grant would be sufficient to provide a **Superfast Broadband** solution, capable of speeds of **30MBps** or above, (whether it be via a fixed, wireless, 4G or satellite solution) to *every* individual premise across Scotland.

Vouchers are used to subsidise any installation costs associated with delivery of a service, including any equipment that delivers a connection into an address, such as new fibre connections, satellite dishes, outdoor mobile antennas and broadband routers. Vouchers do not cover monthly broadband service charges. Successful applicants require to sign a contract with a broadband provider for a minimum of 12 months. If they terminate the agreement within the first year they may be subject to a termination fee, payable to the supplier, and repayment of the subsidy value of the voucher. Vouchers are provided, on application, to the broadband service providers/operators, not to individual members of the public.

It should be noted that the above voucher scheme is not considered by Council officers to be a truly future proofed solution given this can only be achieved through a full fibre connection to properties which provides **Gigabit** speeds of **100MBps**. Therefore officers have suggested to Scottish Government Officials that Argyll and Bute Council could provide top-up vouchers to enable the premises to receive Full Fibre Gigabit connectivity.

Scottish Govt. officials have however stated that R100 was the provision of a Superfast Broadband connection (30MBps or above) and not necessary a full fibre Gigabit connection (100MBps or above).

Scottish Government officials do though anticipate that, in the roll out of the R100 programme, full fibre connection to properties will be the default position.

Scottish Government officials also highlighted that the voucher limit of £5k, was set to cover all properties across Scotland therefore questions would be asked as to why Argyll and Bute required additional funding within the local authority area. It was also indicated that other local authorities have had similar discussions with Scottish Government officials and had been given similar advice, directing them away from following this proposal.

In some cases, rural addresses may be eligible to combine Scottish Government voucher funding of up to £5,000 with funding from the UK Government's Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme (GBVS) which provides £1,500 for rural homes and £3,500 for rural businesses. If this is the case, broadband suppliers take this into account automatically and manage this on the individual's behalf.

In short, if for example you have poor broadband speeds you could apply for a Scottish Govt. voucher now and receive a broadband speed of at least 30MBps or above. However what that individual does not know is whether their premise is set to be covered under the R100 programme which could mean they are due to receive full fibre solution to the premise giving broadband gigabit speeds of 100MBps. The dilemma is does the individual take the voucher now or decide to wait for the roll out of R100?

It is still considered that Argyll and Bute Council have a strong case to work with Scottish Government Voucher Team to top-up SBVS and the UK Governments Gigabit Voucher where required, at individual premises level, and Scottish Government officials are speaking internally again to their policy and voucher teams on the matter.

The maximum top up funding the Council would provide would be £2,500 per premise to allow Gigabit speeds of 100MBps.

4.5 Option 2: Work collectively with local communities who have identified connectivity failings where current vouchers do not meet the necessary financial requirements to achieve Gigabit Speeds 100MBps.

This will need a legal contract drawn up between different Communities and the Council to ensure that funding being provided by the local authority is paid directly to the private sector infrastructure provider. For example, Openreach are the infrastructure provider that Jura Community Council entered into a Community Fibre Partnership (CFP) with.

This is necessary to ensure that Subsidy Control (The new term for State Aid) is adhered to, as the Council cannot pay the infrastructure providers directly

This option is considered the one by officers to best target the local communities and assist their digital connectivity out with the national digital schemes.

- 4.6 **Option 3: Defer the fund until the full R100 intervention area is released and premises not included in the R100 programme are clearly identified. The fund would then supplement the Scottish Government vouchers and the UK Government's Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme (GBVS) for premises excluded from R100 working in association with the Scottish Government and UK Government's Voucher Teams.**

Whilst this option would target premises that clearly would be left behind out with the R100 programme, there will be a significant delay in delivery given there is no intervention area yet published. Significant work will be required to engage with communities, or individuals, that are not included in the R100 programme.

- 4.7 **Option 4: Utilise the funding to provide hardware, smart boards, computer training for village halls or community hubs.**

The Council could administer the fund as a competitive challenge fund for local communities to bid into, to secure grant funding for IT hardware for use in their local village halls or community hubs. Application criteria would be established and the challenge fund advertised.

A maximum amount could be applied to ensure more than one community benefits for example £10k-£20k. This option however does not address access to superfast broadband of at least 30MBps or future proof with gigabit capability 100MBps.

- 4.8 **Option 5: Utilise the funding to invest in business parks to provide Gigabit capability.**

The Council could administer the fund as a competitive challenge fund for business parks across Argyll and Bute to bid into, to secure funding to provide Gigabit capability. This would make business parks more attractive for developing business to invest in and could attract potential match funding through HIE or SE for example.

This would future proof business parks with Gigabit capability 100MBps. A maximum amount could be applied per Business Park to ensure more than one business park benefits for example £50k per Business Park.

- 4.9 The following appraisal table details each option and the potential criteria that could be applied. The appraisal table also gives an indication of how many premises could potentially benefit from the funding mechanism applied.
- 4.10 Based on the latest information provided by Digital Scotland, within Argyll and Bute there are a total of 57, 493 premises. At present 47,327 of these premises have access to superfast broadband speeds of 30MBps or more.
- 4.11 This leaves 10,166 premises eligible for the Scottish Govt. voucher scheme or alternately due to be covered within the R100 programme.
- 4.12 Option 2 is currently officers preferred option as this targets communities already identified as lacking in suitable digital connectivity. There is currently 2 community within Argyll and Bute who have already engaged with Openreach looking at a community fibre partnership (CFP). One as you know is the Jura Gigabit Island Project and second is James Lithgow of Ormsary Estate he has received potential costings for two programmes and is looking to extend this towards Kilberry. Initial cost estimates are over £500k with the estate doing most of the civils themselves.
- 4.13 Additionally officers have also identified premises in the Pennyghael area of Mull that are currently out with existing programmes however these might come into scope on full release of the R100 intervention area.

Option Appraisal Table

Option	Advantages	Disadvantages	Rank
<p>1:- Top Up Scottish Government Broadband Scheme voucher plus the UK Government Gigabit voucher to achieve 100MBps at individual premise level.</p> <p>Criteria: ABC will provide a £2,500 max top up for ever premise eligible for Scottish Govt voucher scheme plus the UK Gigabit voucher scheme.</p> <p>Potential No. of Beneficiary Premises:- 100</p>	<p>This could be the easiest option to administer - UK Govt or Scottish Govt could administer on ABC's behalf, along with their own established voucher schemes.</p> <p>Full fibre connection to the premise will be future proofed, providing Gigabit broad band speed 100MBps.</p>	<p>May have political implications as Scottish Govt consider £5k adequate for all premises across Scotland to reach Superfast Broadband speeds of at least 30MBps.</p>	2
<p>2:- Work with local communities who have already engaged with broadband service providers and have identified connectivity failings where current aggregated vouchers do not meet the necessary financial requirements to achieve Gigabit 100MBps.</p> <p>Criteria: Define Community Group project as two or more residents or</p>	<p>This could achieve future proof Gigabit speeds (100MBps)</p> <p>Precedent set with the Jura Gigabit Island - project supported by the allocated £50k Crown Estates Fund.</p>	<p>Will need a legal contract or Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) drawn up between different Communities and the Council.</p>	1

<p>business whom get together to combine their vouchers towards the shared cost of installation. ABC will provide a £1,300 max top up for each premise eligible with a combined total maximum of £50k per community.</p> <p>Potential No. of Beneficiary Premises:- 192</p>	<p>Similar level of intervention as applied per property on Jura to achieve Gigabit capability.</p>		
<p>3:- Defer the fund until the full R100 intervention area is released.</p> <p>Criteria: ABC will provide a £2,500 max top up for ever premise eligible for Scottish Govt voucher scheme.</p> <p>Potential No. of Beneficiary Premises:- 100</p>	<p>Would allow targeting premises that would clearly be left behind and out with R100 programme.</p>	<p>There would be a delay in delivery until R100 intervention area is released. Significant work required to engage with communities, or individuals, that are not included in the R100 programme.</p>	3
<p>4:-Utilise the funding to provide hardware, smart boards, computer training for village halls or community hubs</p> <p>Criteria: ABC set funding criteria and a max level of grant £10-20k per application.</p> <p>Potential No of Beneficiary Communities: 12</p>	<p>The Council could administer the fund as a competitive challenge fund for local communities to bid into, to secure grant funding for IT hardware for use in their local village halls or community hubs.</p>	<p>Resource intense to administer. Would not address access to Superfast broadband 30MBps. Would not future proof with Gigabit capability 100MBps.</p>	5
<p>5:- Utilise the funding to invest in business parks to provide Gigabit capability.</p> <p>Criteria: ABC set funding criteria and a max level of grant £50k per application.</p> <p>Potential No of Beneficiary Business Parks: 5</p>	<p>The Council could administer the fund as a competitive challenge fund for business parks to bid into, to secure funding to provide Gigabit capability. Would make business parks more attractive for developing businesses to invest in. Could attract potential match funding through HIE or SE for example.</p>	<p>Resource intense to administer.</p>	4

5.0 CONCLUSION

5.1 The roll of digital infrastructure continues across Argyll and Bute. Modern digital connectivity promises a number of direct economic and social benefits to our communities. The Scottish Government has always maintained however that the initial R100 programme will not reach every premise in Scotland and that additional funding, or alternatively, innovative technological solutions will be required to ensure delivery. Given the increasing importance of digital connectivity to our communities it is now imperative that every premise across Argyll and Bute receives equitable coverage notwithstanding our geographical and dispersed population challenges in Argyll and Bute. The new digital fund created by the Council can assist with this objective of digital coverage. Members are asked in to consider the identified options and agree officers preferred option, which they will take forward, working with the Scottish Government and commercial operators as appropriate.

6.0 IMPLICATIONS

6.1 **Policy** – the Single Outcome Agreement (SOA) and Economic Development Strategy and its associated Action Plan support improvements in the digital infrastructure across the whole of Argyll and Bute.

6.2 **Financial** – Across Scotland funding of £600M has been committed to the R100 programme across Scotland and the council has committed £250k of capital funding to tackle digital exclusion. There are no direct financial implications to the Council at this time arising from the contents of this report.

6.3 **Legal** – None albeit there may be a need to enter into legal negotiations with third parties depending on which option is taken forward.

6.4 **HR – None.**

6.5 **Fairer Scotland Duty:**

6.5.1 **Equalities** – the differing nature of the deployment of new digital technology has the potential to lead to inequalities in terms of access to digital services including those which support business and personal development.

6.5.2 **Socio-economic Duty** - there is an overall risk that the economic and social benefits rising from modern digital infrastructure are not fully realised if there is not equitable access across Argyll and Bute.

6.5.3 **Islands** - There are risks that islands which do not benefit from digital infrastructure could become less attractive locations within which to live and work which could have implications in relation to the SOA objective of growing the population.

6.6. **Risk** - The various programmes are reliant on new technology and innovation which is developing rapidly. Some projects are reliant on commercial operator decisions to invest whilst grant funding is necessary for many aspects of digital

infrastructure improvement in Argyll. These aspects all create a level of uncertainty around the extent of infrastructure improvements.

- 6.7 **Customer Service** - improvements in broadband and mobile technology helps deliver additional opportunities for digital based customer services.

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

22/07/2021

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ARGYLL AND BUTE COUNCIL

**Environment Development and
Infrastructure Committee**

Development and Economic Growth

3rd June 2021

Digital Update

1.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 The original purpose of this report was to bring, to the members of the Environment Development and Infrastructure Committee, a set of options and criteria for the administering of the £250K Tackling Digital Exclusion Fund that the council approved at its budget meeting in February 2021. However due to the current complexity of the Scottish Government's R100 contract, that will see significant investment in Argyll and Bute, it is proposed that these options be delayed. A paper will instead be brought to the September ED&I meeting, as at this point the full R100 intervention area will have been published. This will enable officers to present a clear direction, ensuring that the fund targets those premises that require further assistance to provide the much needed connectivity.
- 1.2 This report will provide an overview of the current position of the ongoing Scottish Government Reaching 100% (R100) programme and explain the reasons behind the delays to the implementation to this national initiative.
- 1.3 The report also provides an update on the proposed bid to the UK Govt.'s Rural Gigabit Fund as Scottish Govt. officials have given an early indication that these remote sites are now covered within the forthcoming R100 programme.
- 1.4 Finally, the report provides a brief summary of the current position for the ongoing plans for the implementation of the Gigabit Jura proposals that is part funded through Crown Estate funding previously agreed by the council at its February 2021 budget meeting.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 The recommendations are:-.

- (i) To note the progress of the R100 programme and delays that have hindered its progress and the measures Scottish Government have taken to mitigate these delays.

- (ii) For members to agree to pause further development of a bid to the Rural GigabitFund (renamed "Place") until the full intervention area of the R100 is released, with the recommendation that these sites have been given early indication by Scottish Government officials that they are covered within the R100 Programme.

Digital Update

3.0 INTRODUCTION

- 3.1 The original purpose of this report was to bring, to the members of the Environment Development and Infrastructure Committee, a set of options and criteria for the administering of the £250K Tackling Digital Exclusion Fund that the council approved at its budget meeting in February 2021. However due to the current complexity of the Scottish Government's R100 contract, that will see significant investment in Argyll and Bute, it is proposed that these options be delayed. A paper will instead be brought to the September ED&I meeting, as at this point the full R100 intervention area will have been published. This will enable officers to present a clear direction, ensuring that the fund targets those premises that require further assistance to provide the much needed connectivity.
- 3.2 The report provides an overview regarding the progress of the Scottish Government's Reaching 100% (R100) initiative.
- 3.3 This is a very complex and costly programme that if not done correctly could have significant impact of rural communities across the area. It is essential that there is cross departmental cooperation to ensure any issues are mitigated at the earliest opportunity.

4.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 The recommendations are:-

- (i) To note the progress of the R100 programme and delays that have hindered its progress and the measures Scottish Government have taken to mitigate these delays;

- (ii) For members to agree to pause further development of a bid to the Rural Gigabit Fund (renamed "Place") with the recommendation that these sites have been given early indication by Scottish Government officials that they are covered within the R100 Programme.

5.0 DETAIL

Update on Scottish Government's R100 Digital Programme

- 5.1 The roll out of digital infrastructure in rural areas of the country across the UK has proven to be problematic despite the funding provided by national Governments. The situation has been complicated further on account of changing political commitments and objectives together with a significant delay in the delivery of the North R100 intervention area. The R100 is a £600M Scottish Government investment to reach premises that were not reached in the original Digital Scotland Superfast Broadband (DSSB) programme. These premises are located in some of the remotest and geographically challenging parts of our area, including our island communities, resulting in very high implementation costs.
- 5.2 As part of this programme Scotland was split into 3 Lots North, South and Central. Most of Argyll and Bute is in the North Lot apart from Helensburgh and Lomond Area which are in the Central Lot. South and Central Lots had contracts signed in December 2019 but the North Lot had its preferred bidder status challenged. This challenge was finally settled out of court and the contract with BT was signed December 2020.
- 5.3 As a result of this challenge Building Digital UK (BDUK) requested that an Open Market Review (OMR) had to be undertaken to ensure that public money was not being spent on areas that had already seen investment or was going to in the next 3 years. This resulted in the remodelling on the intervention area that saw around 20,000 premises removed and 10,000 added into the programme resulting in a net reduction of 10,000 premises across the whole North Lot. This remodelling is still ongoing and the full intervention for the North Lot is expected in the next few months. Due to the delays it is anticipated that the contract will extend now to 2026.
- 5.4 To ensure that the Scottish Governments commitment, to meet 100% Superfast Broadband coverage across Scotland by 2021 was met, the Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme (SBVS) was established. The SBVS was a £5,000 voucher to every premise that was not in an R100 intervention area. An interim voucher (IVS) of £400 is available to every premise that is in an intervention area but will not see a connection until after 2021.
- 5.5 Officers have been given early sight of some of the premises that are in the R100 programme and these premises are eligible for the Interim Voucher Scheme. Appendix 1 of this report details some screenshots showing some of these locations.

Argyll and Bute Council's Tackling Digital Exclusion Top Up Fund

- 5.6 The purpose of the Tackling Digital Exclusion fund, as outlined in the budget proposal, was to assist Argyll and Bute communities that were out with current

Government programmes or out with delivery scope through commercial providers such as BT.

- 5.7 After lengthy discussions with Government Officials from both the UK and Scottish Governments, together with the private sector infrastructure providers, it has been established that due to numerous factors, identifying delivery options for the fund, is at the moment not possible.
- 5.8 Due to the complex nature of the R100 contract and partial release of the intervention area it is proposed that officers delay the options appraisal until the September ED&I. This will avoid spending funds where it is not required.

Update on bid to UK Govt.'s bid to the Rural Gigabit Fund

- 5.9 Members are also asked to consider whether officers should continue their current work with Capita and the DCMS on the development of a bid for full fibre to the premise at a number of rural remote sites. This initiative was examining the securing of DCMS funding to a number of our remote schools and other key sites to provide a public service in areas on the Ross of Mull, Glendaruel, Tayinloan and Easdale. Early indications from the Scottish Government suggests that these locations are included in the R100 premises although this is not confirmed. It should be noted that there is currently no definitive timescales associated with the R100 build yet. However Scottish Government officials consider that these premises will be in the early stages of the programme build.
- 5.10 If officers continue with the bid, and the timeline for R100 build is excessive then this would allow the option to de-scope these premises from the contract and progress with an earlier build date. However there is a risk that de-scoping will result in further remodelling of the R100 contract which could result in further delays.

Update on Gigabit Jura Programme

- 5.11 The work on the **Gigabit Jura programme** is continuing to progress. Contractors have been appointed and are on site. This programme joined up two objectives to provide a better solution for all. This was achieved through utilising the Scottish Government's investment in the Scottish 4G Infill (S4GI) programme and the Openreach Community Fibre Partnership (CFP) to future proof two 4G mast sites on Jura (Craighouse and Ardlussa). This investment would effectively install a full fibre network across the whole inhabited part of this remote island community. That said the project remains reliant on the Scottish Government paying for the fibre backhaul instead of being radio linked. The Government appears to have agreed to pay for the backhaul and the full fibre network is funded utilising community pledged vouchers. These vouchers came from the DCMS Gigabit Vouchers and SBVS. Members are aware that the council agreed to utilise an element of Crown Estate funding to help assist the delivery of this important

project with significant economic and social benefits for the community if it can be delivered.

- 5.12 A site visit with Roads Officers, Openreach and Contractors went very well with the contactors even agreeing that the original survey was not accurate and did not highlight a number of the issues that were outlined by Council Officers during a conference call undertaken before going on site. Officers are still waiting on a wayleave clarification for one section and work plan for another section.

6.0 CONCLUSION

- 6.1 The rollout of digital infrastructure continues across Argyll and Bute. Modern digital connectivity promises a number of direct economic and social benefits to our communities. The Scottish Government has always maintained however that the initial R100 programme will not reach every premises in Scotland and that additional funding, or alternatively, innovative technological solutions will be required to ensure delivery. Given the increasing importance of digital connectivity to our communities it is now imperative that every premise across Argyll and Bute receives equitable coverage notwithstanding our geographical and dispersed population challenges in Argyll and Bute. The new digital fund created by the Council can assist with this objective of digital coverage with accurately targeting assistance where it is most needed.

7.0 IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 **Policy** – the Single Outcome Agreement (SOA) and Economic Development Strategy and its associated Action Plan support improvements in the digital infrastructure across the whole of Argyll and Bute.
- 7.2 **Financial** – Across Scotland funding of £600M has been committed to the R100 programme across Scotland and the council has committed £250k of capital funding to tackle digital exclusion. There are no direct financial implications to the Council at this time arising from the contents of this report.
- 7.3 **Legal** – None albeit there may be a need to enter into legal negotiations with third parties depending on which option is taken forward.
- 7.4 **HR – None.**
- 7.5 **Fairer Scotland Duty:**
- 7.5.1 **Equalities** – the differing nature of the deployment of new digital technology has the potential to lead to inequalities in terms of access to digital services including those which support business and personal development.

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Kirsty Flanagan, Executive Director

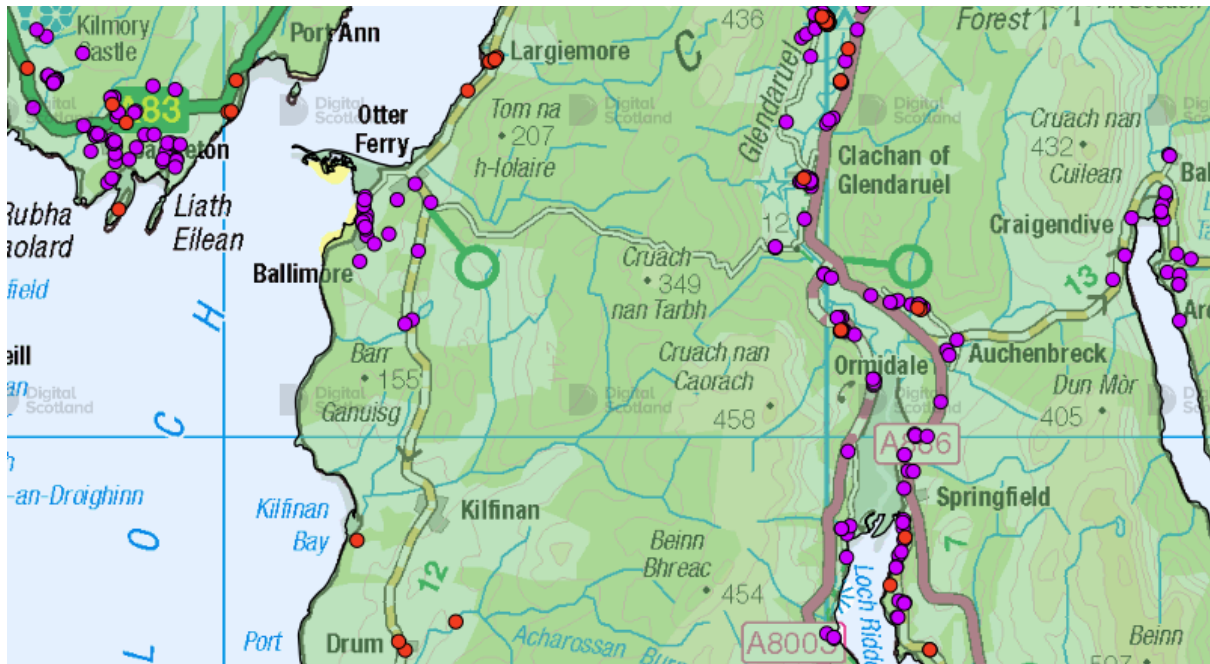
Councillor Alasdair Redman, Policy Lead

28/04/21

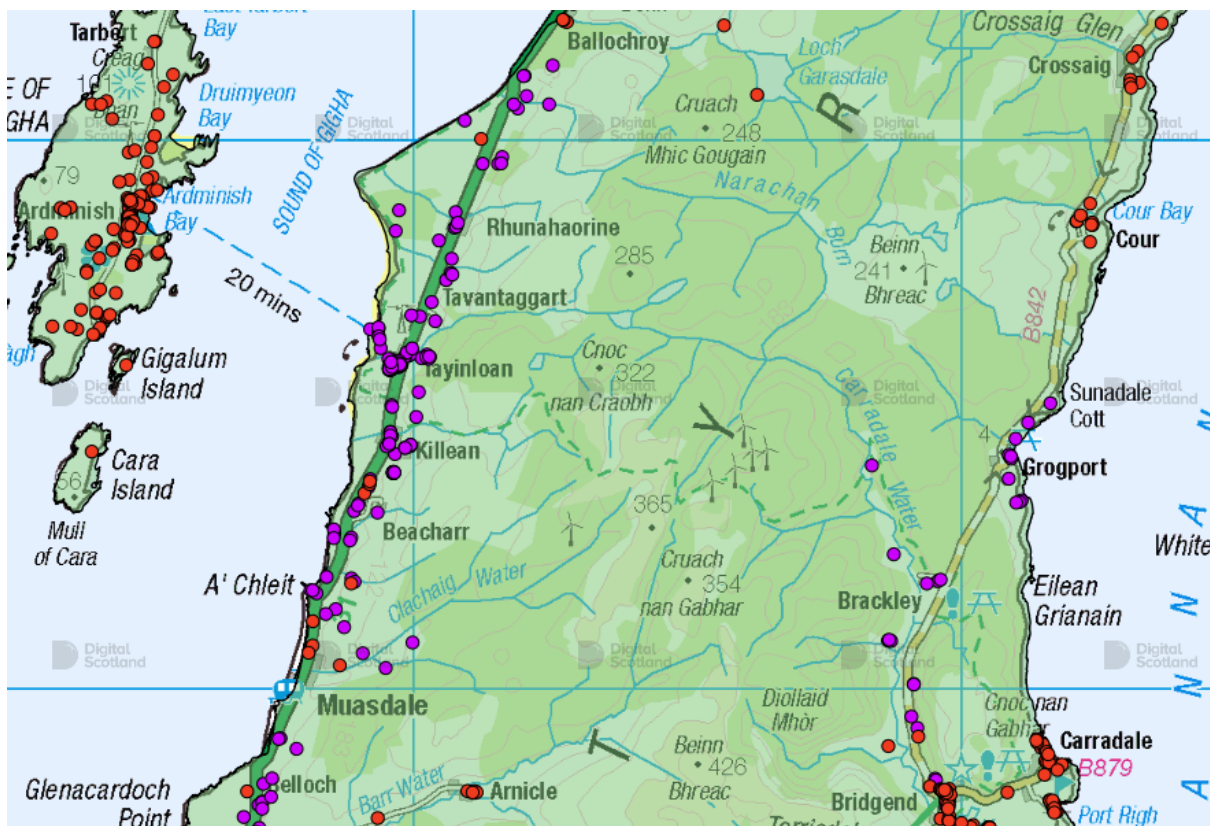
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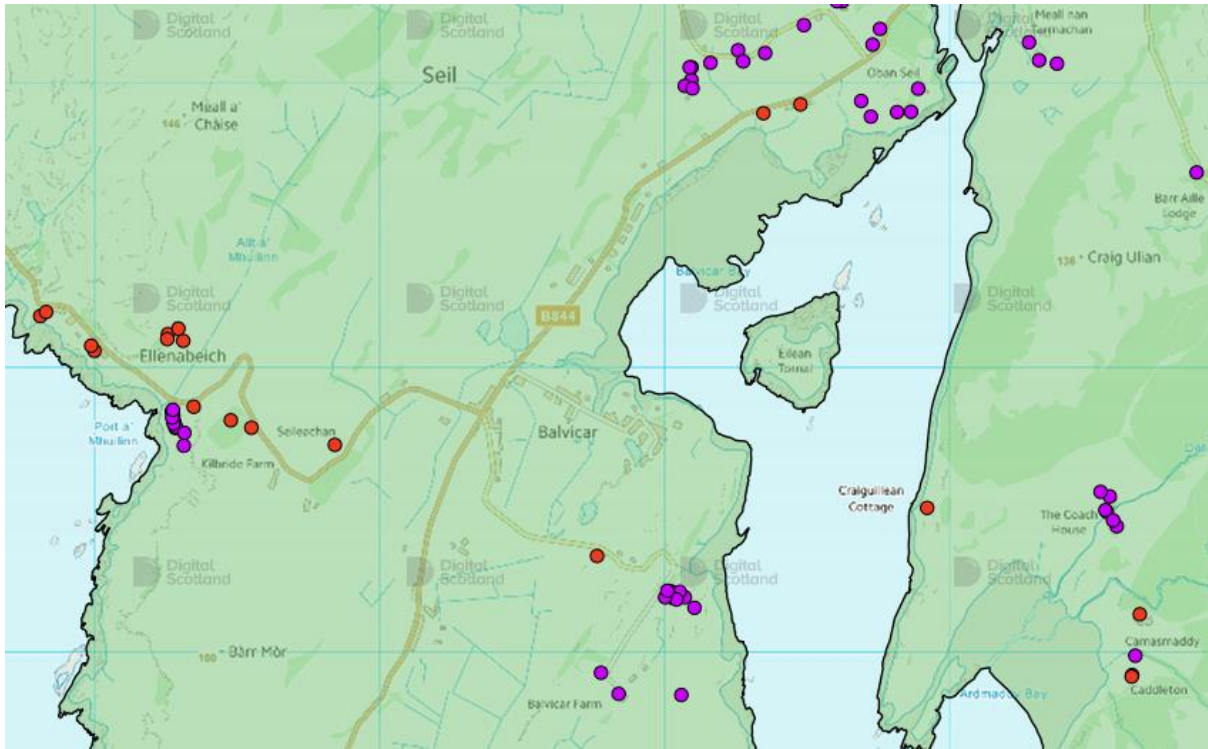
Appendix 1 Sample of the premises that are in the R100 programme.



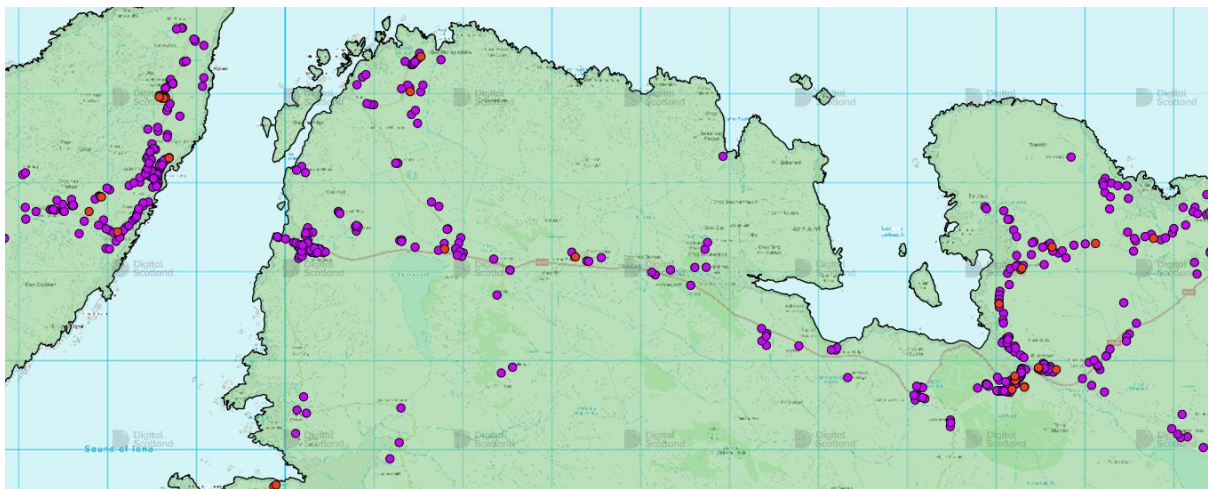
Glendaruel (Map 1)



Tayinloan (Map 2)



Easdale (Map 3)



Bunessan (Map 4)

For reference the purple dots are the premises that have been released to date that are in the R100 North Lot intervention area (with more to follow on full release).

The orange dots are currently not yet in scope or is not a habitable premise but has a UPRN associated.