
28th April 2022

LEADER'S REPORT

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1** The Leader of the Council and Policy Lead Councillors provide a report outlining their strategic activities for consideration at each meeting of Argyll and Bute Council, except the budget meeting in February. The last Leader's Report and Policy Leads Report were considered at the council meeting on 25th November 2021. This report covers the period from that date until 14th April 2022.
- 1.2** The report includes an outline of the council Leader's activity during the period, and includes updates in relation to his Policy Lead portfolio and the Business, Regeneration and Commercial Development remit currently being covered by the council Leader.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1** Members are asked to consider the report.
- 2.2** Members are asked to note that any reports, briefings or copy correspondence referred to in the report can be requested as appropriate through the Leadership Support Manager, although it should be noted that some confidential reports provided by external organisations such as COSLA may be restricted.

3. COSLA MEETINGS

- 3.1** COSLA board meetings are operating according to their normal schedule but continue to take place virtually, via Teams. Below are the agenda items for the COSLA Leaders and strategic board meetings that I have attended during this period. I have also been able to participate in a number of Leadership Sounding Board meetings, which support the development of the final agenda and reports for Leaders' meetings, and

also Group Leader meetings, which shape any amendments to officer reports.

COSLA Leaders and COSLA Convention, 26th November 2021:

The winter Convention agenda featured the following items:

- COSLA Audited Financial Statements to 31st March 2021
- COSLA Constitution Update
- COP26
- Councillor Safety
- Incorporation of the European Charter of Local Self Government

The Leaders' agenda included a number of significant items:

- Affordable Housing Supply Programme
- Draft National Planning Framework 4
- Local Government Finance and Distribution
- Pay Update
- Employability Funding
- Expansion of Universal Free School Meals Programme
- Health and Social Care National Workforce Strategy
- National Transfer Scheme for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children

December saw three COSLA Special Leaders' meetings called urgently - the announcement of the Scottish Government budget settlement does require this every year, but the rapidly changing Covid-19 position of the time also demanded additional meetings, where the following matters were considered:

- 10th December - Pay Update, Budget Settlement
- 15th December - Covid-19 Omicron
- 21st December - Finance, Covid Business Grants, Self-Isolation Support Grants, Funding for Early Learning and Childcare

A further additional Special Leaders was held on 14th January to consider Covid Business Grants and the Scottish Local Government Budget Settlement, as well as a paper on Prioritisation of Social Care.

On 26th January, along with a number of COSLA Group Leaders, I took part in a meeting with the First Minister, where we put the case for additional funding for Scottish councils. Following this meeting the Scottish Government confirmed that the settlement would be boosted by a further £120m.

COSLA Leaders, 28th January 2022:

A substantial agenda for Leaders was in order for the January scheduled meeting, including:

- UK Shared Prosperity Fund
- Council Bandings
- Review of UK Fiscal Framework
- National Care Service update
- Complex Care - Delayed Discharge
- £10.50 for Adult Social Care Workers
- Funding for Additional Support Work Capacity in Adult Social Care
- National Care Home Contract Negotiations
- Whole Family Wellbeing Fund

COSLA Community Wellbeing Board, 21st January:

Agenda items for this first Strategic Board meeting of 2022 included:

- Presentation from Disasters and Emergency Committee on the Afghanistan crisis
- Humanitarian Protection
- Improving housing outcomes for those experiencing domestic abuse
- Equally Safe at Work - Sexual Harassment
- Rented Sector Strategy
- Ending the Need for Foodbanks - Consultation
- Good Food Nation

COSLA Environment and Economy Board, 11th February:

The following items were considered:

- Levelling Up/Shared Prosperity Fund
- Road Safety
- Young Persons (Under 22) Free Bus Travel Scheme
- Electric Vehicle Charging Infrastructure
- Waste Policy
- Local Heat and Energy Efficiency Strategy
- Climate Change

COSLA Annual Conference, 24th and 25th February:

This year's conference, focused on the theme 'Living Well Locally', coincided with the council's budget meeting - however, because it was held on a virtual basis, it was possible to catch some of the speakers, who included Michael Gove, Minister for Levelling Up, and Nicola Sturgeon, First Minister.

The two-day programme featured, as normal, a COSLA Special Leaders meeting which included the following issues for discussion:

- Levelling Up/Shared Prosperity Fund
- Local Government Pre-Election Period and COSLA Planning
- Finance and Pay Update
- National Strategy for Economic Transformation

- National Insurance Increase to Adult Social Care
- National Care Service update

COSLA Leaders, 25th March:

The very substantial agenda for this meeting was:

- National Planning Framework 4 Consultation Response
- Learning Estate Investment Programme (LEIP) update
- Town Centre Action Plan
- Local Government Finance
- UK Shared Prosperity Fund
- Pay/Workforce Update
- Equally Safe: Scottish Government Strategic Funding Review of Specialist VAWG Services.
- 2022 Summer Programme
- Councillor Remuneration update
- Scottish Milk and Healthy Snack Scheme
- National Care Service
- National Care Home Contract Negotiations
- The Promise
- Scottish Attainment Challenge – Framework for Recovery and Acceleration
- Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children Mandated National Transfer Scheme
- Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan
- Ukraine – Local Government Role
- Distribution

Within the following two weeks, though, a further two Special Leaders' were called in relation to the UK Shared Prosperity Fund Allocation Methodology (with the initial meeting on 5th April including an update from Neil Gray MSP, Minister for Europe and International Development, in relation to the Ukraine situation).

The initial proposals in relation to the methodology were very closely and carefully scrutinised by the leaders of our fellow Highlands and Islands local authorities. We had to meet together (virtually) at great pace to formulate our position and ensure that any final decisions made would safeguard the position of the Highlands and islands and its communities, given our prior dependence on European funding and the very considerable need to ensure that its replacement would continue to deliver for the region.

Working together over the course of days leading up to the meeting, participating in a number of group discussions and preparing background notes and correspondence, we were able to feed into the COSLA process

and ensure that the matter was considered further at another meeting on 7th April, where the final outcome was one which will work for the Highlands and islands as well as other areas in Scotland. The fact that we have all become adept at operating in a virtual environment, at pace, over the past couple of years, certainly helped the Highlands and Islands Leaders Group in this situation where we had to move and respond very quickly indeed to secure a successful outcome.

At the time of writing no further special meetings are planned and the next and final Leaders meeting of this term will take place on 29th April.

3.2 Islands Issues:

Islands Strategic Group: There have been two meetings of the national Islands Strategic Group in the period since my last report to council. Details of these are noted below:

15th December:

- National Islands Plan Delivery Group
- Carbon Neutral Islands
- Islands Bond
- Islands Plan Programme
- National Care Service
- Islands Housing
- Covid

24th March:

The meeting agenda included the first five topics from the December meeting and also considered Resilience and Community Wealth Building in the islands context.

Argyll Islands Sounding Board, 24th March: It was helpful that our own Argyll Islands Sounding Board meeting took place on the same date as the national Islands Strategic Group, providing an opportunity to update Board members on the morning's discussions.

We also had a presentation from Fergus Murray, Head of Development and Economic Growth, on the ongoing work taking place across our island communities. This included updates on projects supported by various funds, including the Regeneration Capital Grant Fund, Islands Infrastructure Fund, the Rural Growth Deal and the Levelling Up Fund. The board also received an updated on the Improving Our Places initiatives which included the Shop Local campaign and Town Centre Fund Projects.

They heard that a Population Officer has recently been appointed to work in partnership with Highlands and Islands Enterprise to target key areas

where there are population challenges, with a focus on housing. A breakdown of planned, ongoing and completed housing developments was also given along with information about progress on tackling digital connectivity issues.

Carbon Neutral Islands: Members may recall from my previous report that I advised that I had written to Mairi Gougeon, Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs and Islands, making the case for Islay to be considered as part of the Scottish Government's pledge to support delivery of three carbon neutral islands. In the intervening period our officers have had significant engagement with Scottish Government officials as they progress this project. At the time of writing this latest report, no announcement had been made as yet, but we hope that by the time of the council meeting there may be a further update to share.

Islands Programme: This £4m fund for 2022/23 is the subject of a separate report to council in April. It is part of a £30m commitment over five years to support delivery of the Islands Plan. For the first time, this next tranche will be subject to a competitive bidding process between the six Scottish councils with islands and members will have an opportunity to consider the council's list of proposed projects.

UK Government proposals for an Islands Forum - Levelling Up Agenda: Colleagues may recall press reports in late January/early February about the UK Government's intention to establish an Islands Forum, for local authorities with islands across the country, as part of its Levelling Up agenda. The focus for this forum would be transport and population in particular and it is of course vital that Argyll and Bute is included in any forum going forward.

I wrote to Mr Gove on 2nd February, citing our prior successful lobbying of the Scottish Government for inclusion in the Islands Act and, more recently, our leadership on the west coast depopulation trend. Building on my previous correspondence to him in October last year, I repeated my invitation to him to visit Argyll and Bute where there are many examples of the economic contribution our communities make to the national and, indeed, international economy. I was clear about the essential need for Argyll and Bute to be part, from the outset, of any forum that is established. This is a matter which should be picked up as a matter of urgency in the new council term, along with our work on west coast depopulation.

3.3 Gaelic:

Gaelic Gathering, Saturday 12th March: The many months of significant preparation ahead of the third Argyll and Bute Gaelic Gathering paid off, with another very successful event taking place in a virtual environment for the first time.

We were grateful for the contributions made by a number of key partners who, like us, want to see Gaelic growing and thriving in Argyll and Bute and beyond. The programme included a recorded message from Shirley Anne Somerville, Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, and we very much welcomed her encouragement and support of the event.

Delivering the Gathering is a key element of our Gaelic Language Plan and this year's event focused in particular on Argyll Gaelic and local variations in dialect - once again a very interesting and positive opportunity for people to come together and consider our rich Gaelic culture and heritage.

Support to Strategic Events and Festivals promoting Gaelic Culture: In 2021 funding awards included the Mull of Kintyre Music Festival which was one of only a few festivals that took place over the past two years. A number of festivals supporting Gaelic culture have been awarded funding for 2022-23 including Cowal Highland Gathering, Highlands and Islands Dance Festival, Inveraray Highland Games, Jura Music Festival, and Mull of Kintyre Music Festival. Funding is also in place for the Royal National MOD Oban 2025.

Partnership working with CHARTS on Gaelic initiatives:

The council has worked in partnership with CHARTS on a number of Gaelic developments as follows:

The Colmcille Legacy Award: With funding from Bòrd na Gàidhlig [Colmcille – Home – Colmcille](#), Colmcille1500 offered awards of up to £750 and an online exhibition to profile and support Gaelic culture and language. Gaelic artists' and non-Gaelic speakers worked in partnership with Gaelic speakers, to create and display artwork that celebrated, remembered and interpreted the role of Colmcille in the past and in contemporary society. Eleven awards were made and the artists have been sharing their work on-line and in exhibitions including the Argyll Gaelic Gathering 2022.

CHARTS and the council will continue to be part of a collaboration with Colmcille1500 in Northern Ireland (NI), Ireland and other areas of Scotland, with the postponed potential Colmcille Exhibition from NI to Scotland being suggested for later in 2022.

Illuminations 6th December 2021: The Colmcille Legacy Award for Gaelic Artists completed in December 2022 and culminated in an Illumination Festival held on the 7th December in Argyll, Ireland and Northern Ireland, to mark the birth of St Columba. In Argyll, the Gaelic art works were illuminated in Oban, Islay and Dunoon. Prior to this an on-line shared learning event took place across these countries to discuss Colmcille works and the Gaelic language, hosted by the University of Ulster.

First Ever World Gaelic Week 21-27 March 2022: The postponed Illumination Festival in Hermitage Park, Helensburgh, included Colmcille 1500 Gaelic art works and music and illuminations across the park during World Gaelic Week.

CHARTS Gaelic Cultural Officer Post: Working together with the council CHARTS have received funding for a one year p/t Gaelic Cultural Officer post from Bòrd na Gàidhlig. This soon to be advertised post for a fluent Gaelic speaker will champion Gaelic culture and provide support for Gaelic heritage and arts members and develop innovative projects.

Gaelic Translation Project (working with Gaelic Community Officer): CHARTS are also delivering the Gaelic Translation Project which has received publicity in the Oban Times with regard to the successful Tiree Community Council meeting translation

3.4 Strategic Transport:

Strategic Transport Projects Review 2: In January the Scottish Government launched its consultation on the second Strategic Transport Projects Review (STPR2). I took the opportunity to write to the lead minister, Michael Matheson, reiterating the importance of the right solutions for Argyll and Bute and seeking a meeting.

A83: Jenny Gilruth MSP was appointed as Minister for Transport in January and I have written to her on a number of occasions since, pressing for a meeting to discuss the A83 in particular as well as the wider transport connectivity issues that are vital to Argyll and Bute. She has agreed to meet with the council leadership after the local government elections and again this is an offer which should be progressed as a matter of urgency post-May.

The A83 Taskforce met virtually on 3rd March, with Ms Gilruth in attendance. Lawrence Shackman, Transport Scotland's Director of Major Projects, has now taken over as the lead official for the RABT project and chaired the meeting.

As well as an update on ongoing remedial works, the Taskforce heard about progress on a medium-term solution (which is yet to be determined) and action being taken in relation to a longer-term option.

The Minister made a welcome commitment to engage with officials with a view to exploring possibilities to accelerate the works. Transport Scotland backed this up with a commitment to engage further with senior members on progress and options. While these commitments are positive, it is essential that we as a council continue to build on our previous lobbying activity, over a decade and more, given the ever increasing urgency here and the vital importance of maintaining access in and out of Argyll and Bute.

I joined local industry representatives and members of the Rest and be Thankful Campaign Group in Inveraray a week after the Taskforce meeting for a discussion with Iain Stewart MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Scotland. While the UK Government does not have responsibility for infrastructure projects in Scotland, the RABT Campaign Group sought to meet with Mr Stewart to highlight the critical need for action, the economic impact of the challenges impacting the route, and to explore whether there were any opportunities for support, for example through the Levelling Up or Union Connectivity agenda.

Both Mr Stewart and local MSP Jenni Minto, who was also present, agreed to speak to their respective government colleagues as appropriate with a particular focus on ways to speed up delivery of medium and long term solutions.

Scotrail office closure proposals: At the request of constituents and colleagues, I wrote to Scotrail management in relation to their ongoing consultation on ticket office closures. The impact on Argyll and Bute travellers, should these proposals become reality, extends far beyond the Helensburgh area where the offices are located. Those travelling outwith Argyll and Bute by rail must often, by necessity, travel at off peak hours, when it is proposed that offices will be closed, impacting their ability to purchase tickets and get information. They deserve parity of access to rail products and services and it is to be hoped that this is taken into account before any final decision is made.

3.5 Economy and Growth:

Highlands and Islands Economy:

I mentioned earlier in this report how our Highlands and Islands colleagues came together in the best interests of the region in relation to the methodology for allocating the Shared Prosperity Fund. There are a number of areas where we work in partnership to focus on the unique challenges and opportunities that characterise the region.

One such is the newly established Highlands and Islands Regional Economic Partnership, which brings together the area's local authorities with key partners including HIE, Skills Development Scotland, Scottish Funding Council, NatureScot, University of the Highlands and Islands, and others to include private and third sector representatives. Regional Economic Partnerships aim to align resources, ideas and thinking to promote and accelerate inclusive economic growth and are also a key element of national Covid recovery strategies.

The inaugural meeting took place on 3rd December, looking at terms of reference and the National Strategy for Economic Transformation (NSET).

The next meeting was held on 14th February and, alongside an NSET update, considered Scotland 2045L Fourth National Planning Framework, Labour Market and Skills and Renewable Income Opportunities.

Convention of the Highlands and Islands, 21st March: Again, the latest COHI meeting had to be held on a virtual basis given the Covid context of the time. Prior to the meeting we had the opportunity for a discussion with HIE to consider agenda items of significance and agreed that support in relation to population and housing would be of particular importance.

Agenda topics were:

- Introducing the work of the new Regional Economic Partnership
- Population
- Transport
- Labour Market and Skills
- National Strategy for Economic Transformation
- Outcomes
- Forward Look

COHI is next due to meet in October.

West Coast Depopulation: Members will recall from previous Leader's Reports over the life of this council that we have led on partnership activity in relation to the concerning west coast depopulation trend. There have been a number of changes in leadership among the group of eight west coast councils involved in this work, along with a new Cabinet Secretary with responsibility for population issues following last year's Scottish Parliament elections. In late 2021 we wrote to Angus Robertson MSP, Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, External Affairs and Culture, and chair of the Ministerial Taskforce on Population, seeking a meeting to progress the west coast depopulation agenda.

Our group of eight west coast council leaders met with Mr Robertson and his team on 8th February. We were able to set out the key areas that we feel would help to tackle the trend - targeted business support, with economic enterprise zones; alignment of the national workforce footprint and distribution; development of regional immigration policies (UK and international) to offset natural change, including potential for national action and liaison with the UK Government; and second homes policies in the depopulation context.

We also wanted to hear about the current position of the Population Strategy and next steps, and the Scottish Government's Rural Migration Pilot proposals.

While this was a positive meeting, there is still more that needs to be done and a need for clear, targeted action to urgently halt and ideally reverse this trend. Since this work was first started by Cllr Aileen Morton during her time as Leader, and subsequently proactively progressed, driven by this council, throughout the current council term, it will be important to maintain the momentum and reconvene the group following the local government elections.

Seasonal Clyde cod spawning closure: During my time as Leader I have met with the Clyde Fishing Association on a number of occasions. In response to significant concerns raised by them and other local fishing industry representatives, I wrote in January to Mairi Gougeon MSP and Lorna Slater MSP, as the responsible Scottish Government ministers, about proposals for the season Clyde cod spawning closure.

Both the CFA and local vessel owners had significant concerns that a different approach to the seasonal closure would have potentially devastating consequences for this already fragile sector, leaving many small or single-vessel businesses without any income for three months.

The CFA has traditionally been co-operative and supportive of actions taken to safeguard future stocks, given the exemptions that were previously provided. This different approach was of the utmost concern to them given the very severe impact on an industry already trying to cope with considerable challenges. They have continued to express their concerns including giving evidence on the impact to the Rural Affairs, Islands and Natural Environment Committee in March.

Oban City Status Bid submission, 8th December 2021: Our ambitions to see Oban become a city took a step closer with the submission of our final, formal bid on 8th December last year.

Colleagues will be well aware that, since first hearing about the City Status element of HM The Queen's Platinum Jubilee Civic Honours Competition, I have been immensely excited and enthusiastic about the opportunities for Oban, as one of Argyll and Bute's larger towns.

My enthusiasm is matched, and more, by the potential that Oban brings if chosen as one of Scotland's newest cities.

Oban has elements of all of the good things that Scotland has to offer - but in Oban, we have them all in the same place. In recent years Oban has seen considerable and continuing growth. It is home to arguably one of the world's leading marine science institutions, the Scottish Association for Marine Science, which attracts students from all over the world every year. Oban's town centre is full of independent businesses, including top class restaurants offering the best local produce and, of course, a distillery right in the middle of the town.

As I said in a letter to the UK Government at the time: "We believe passionately in Oban's potential. We are highly ambitious for the town, for its contribution to life in Argyll and Bute and, in turn, the whole country. I am sure that when you read our application (or, even better, come to experience Scotland in one place, in Oban, for yourself) you, too, will be convinced."

With announcements expected in the summer, I hope that one of the first key successes for the new council to celebrate is the confirmation that Oban has, indeed, secured city status.

Local economic growth achievements - vibrant communities:

There is a tremendous amount of work going on across the entire area to stimulate growth and increase the vibrancy of life in our communities. I have noted just a few local highlights below:

Dunoon Sound and Lighting: An investment of £245k was made in Dunoon town centre to illuminate a range of landmarks, and introduce a new sound system to support enhanced use of the bandstand area. The illumination of key town centre areas and landmarks will provide a warm and welcoming approach to visitors, especially when seen from the water. It is hoped that the enhancements will encourage higher levels of footfall through the town centre, not only throughout the day, but also importantly into the evening to support the night-time economy of the town. The sound component of the project will support existing and new events make better use of the bandstand area, and provide an alternative open air venue.

Rothsay Pontoons: New piled pontoons are being added to Rothsay Harbour to support and grow the short stay visitor market. This £869k investment uses a tubular piles mooring system rather than chain and anchor to increase the sustainability of the harbour for cruise and yacht tourism. The ability to welcome additional boats, and vessels with higher capacity will support a vibrant local economy.

Region-wide Shopfront Improvement Scheme: £200k of council funding has supported 125 local business owners across Argyll and Bute to make improvements to their properties in an effort to help with recovery and resilience beyond the easing of lockdown.

The shopfront improvement scheme has bolstered the construction industry in a difficult time, providing work to locally based contractors throughout the region. The works have increased the attractiveness of towns and villages, enhancing the environment for locals and visitors alike. The improvements are part of a suite of measures to support the economic recovery of Argyll and Bute's high streets, which encourage shopping locally.

Lochgilphead Front Green: The new play park and public square will provide important resources which will help to reactivate this area of the town centre. The site also incorporates additional seating and walking and cycling routes, all of which support a flourishing town centre environment. When combined with complementary regeneration activity, such as recent footway improvements in locally sourced stone, Lochgilphead CARS and shop local initiatives, the cumulative effect supports a much improved and connected town centre, which has the potential to encourage higher levels of footfall. In addition, the raised land and improved drainage will ensure Lochgilphead is better able to cope with the effects of climate change.

Funding Facts and Figures:

I make no apology for the following list of facts and figures - each one is linked to a tangible outcome for people, for communities or for both.

BUSINESS GATEWAY – 2021/22 Stats

- 128 new business start ups
- 200 new start up projected jobs
- £6m new start up projected turnover
- Customer satisfaction 86%

Business Gateway Digital Boost Results over the period of 2017/2018 – 2021/2022

- Digital boost is a national programme, with training and one to one expert help delivered by local business gateways

- Digital boost support in Argyll and Bute amounts to £247,466
- 156 workshops, webinars and coaching sessions delivered
- 105 businesses have received 1 hour surgery support
- 93 businesses have received intensive 121 support

Business Gateway Local Growth Accelerator Programme results to date over the period of 2017/2018 – 2021/2022

- Grants and specialist advice to support SME growth
- Total awarded to January 2022 is £682,415
- 118 unique businesses supported to date with a combined turnover of £29.6m
- Project impact
 - increased turnover £46,6m
 - increase in employees 595

COVID BUSINESS SUPPORT

- Economic Growth administered 17 different Scottish Government COVID business support schemes - *31 were delivered by Argyll and Bute Council in total*
- More than 17,400 grants processed
- Resulting in £49.7m paid out in COVID grants to support local businesses

**UK COMMUNITY RENEWAL FUND SECURED 2021/22 AND INTO 2022/23
£1,990,597 coordination of bid – eight funded projects:**

- Curriculum Development for STEM Hubs Project
- Driving Economic Growth Through A Bounce Back Curriculum For Argyll and Bute
- MACC Hydrogen Futures Viability study
- Optimising carbon sequestration for community wealth building.
- Recovery and regeneration of Tarbert
- The Dunoon Project Stage Two
- The Seaweed Academy
- West Coast UAV Innovation Logistics and Training Hub

**EUROPEAN MARITIME AND FISHERIES FUND RESULTS TO DATE
£985,184 allocated to six projects:**

- Feasibility of Seaweed Farming
- Piers Improvements Ulva (Preparation for Capital Works)
- Commercial Fuel Berth Tobermory
- Ulva Pier Improvements
- Aird Fada Seaweed Farm
- Clyde Fisherman's Association Project Enabler - Fishing Communities
-

ARGYLL AND THE ISLANDS LEADER PROGRAMME – DECEMBER 2021



Employability Fund delivered on behalf of Skills Development Scotland

- 100 individuals supported from February 2018 to March 2022 – 33 moved into work

Fair Start Scotland delivered

- 267 individuals supported since April 2018, 85 moved into work, 46 currently supported pre work and 16 receiving in work support

No One Left Behind – Argyll and Bute Employer Recruitment and Training Incentive delivered on behalf of Scottish Government

- 34 participants supported since January 2020, 24 leavers/completers, 19 moved into work, 25 employers accessed the funding

The Young Person's Guarantee delivered on behalf of Scottish Government

- 81 participants supported since January 2021, 46 leavers/completers, 32 moved into work, 4 attending college, and 52 employers accessed the funding

Parental Employability Support Fund delivered on behalf of Scottish Government

- 43 parents – 30 unemployed/13 low income employed supported since June 2020, 7 progressed into work

Kickstart delivered on behalf of Department for Work and Pensions

- 38 young people in work placements since April 2021, and 24 employers supported

Economic Growth

- Dunoon Community/STEM Hub supported by Clyde Mission Funds, Crown Estate Scotland and Argyll & Bute Council (project went live on 10th January 2022) - £790K
- Food and Drink Strategy with HIE (March 2022) - £30K

Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund

- South Islay Development Motorhome Park - £302K
- Glen Orchy Infrastructure Study - £28K

3.6 Housing Policy Lead update:

Virtual housing service: For the last two years, rising to the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic, the council's Housing Services team has sustained essential statutory front line services using a virtual platform. It was a considerable achievement to adapt the face to face service to a virtual service and implement the changes quickly under the constraints of lockdown. The quality of the service was not diminished by this essential change in the delivery method as it met the key indicators of success and achieved high levels of customer satisfaction for some of our most vulnerable households.

The Strategic Housing and Investment Plans (SHIP) 2017-2022: In the last five years, the council, in partnership with Argyll and Bute's Housing Associations, have developed five Strategic Housing and Investment Plans (SHIP), and each plan has obtained positive Ministerial approval. Consequently, the council has secured over £103.7 million of investment in the last five years for the new build affordable housing programme. This includes Scottish Government funding, RSL/Private finance, and a significant contribution of over £5 million from the council's Strategic Housing Fund. Over this period, the SHIP has delivered 465 affordable new build homes throughout Argyll and Bute, including a significant number of projects on island locations. Affordable housing is currently under construction on Islay, Jura and Colonsay.

The new homes financed by the SHIP will cater for people with a variety of housing needs providing specialist provisions for older people, wheelchair users, or those with learning disabilities. The council now has a dedicated Housing Occupational Therapist to assist in meeting need and demand.

Community Housing Projects: Housing Services actively work in partnership with a range of local community groups, including development trusts and other agencies, which can unlock specific community funding schemes such as the Scottish Land Fund and other funding initiatives for community-led housing projects, outwith the core SHIP programme. For example, the Scottish Land Fund provided funds to the community of Ulva Ferry. The Mull and Iona Community Trust also secured £777,855 from the Scottish Government's Rural and Islands Housing Fund, and Argyll and Bute Council's Strategic Housing Fund provided a further £48,000. This package of funding financed four new build affordable homes for the island. Since 2017, Ulva Ferry has gained a total of six new built affordable homes.

The council has established a Community Housing Network that brings together these community groups with a view to provide opportunities to share good practice and support each other both in terms of housing development and management as appropriate. The network also seeks to give the community groups better access to council support and services.

HNDA: Housing Services have undertaken extensive primary research and stakeholder engagement and used a wide range of national and local data to develop an extensive Housing Need and Demand Assessment. The Centre for Housing Management (CHMA) assessed the finished document and considered that the Argyll and Bute HNDA had successfully developed a framework that robustly and credibly outlined the number of houses required in Argyll and Bute. In addition, the CHMA and others recognised our HNDA as an exemplar of best practice for other local authorities.

Local Housing Strategy: During the pandemic, housing services not only produced the HNDA but built on this evidence base to develop Argyll and Bute Local Housing Strategy for 2022-2027. The strategy outlines the council's vision and investment priorities for Argyll and Bute for the next five years. The Scottish Government has approved the LHS, and the council will formally launch the strategy in May. The LHS received acclaim from the Scottish Government and praise from housing colleagues from the local authority who peer-reviewed the document. The overarching vision for housing in Argyll and Bute is that: *"Everyone in Argyll and Bute has access to a suitable, high quality home which is affordable and located within a vibrant, sustainable and connected community"*.

Home Energy Efficiency Programme Scotland (HEEPS): 1068 households have received energy efficiency measures through the HEEPs programme, equating to £6.2 million of investment in energy efficiency, which will result in lower energy consumption. It is anticipated that a further 278 properties will receive £1.5 million of spend by June 2022.

Empty Homes: The Local Housing Strategy prioritises bringing empty homes back into effective use. This is often a complex and difficult task; the LHS target was to bring 125 homes back into effective stock however, the council has significantly exceeded this by bringing 201 homes back into use. In addition, the service was shortlisted for five awards in the 2022 Shelter Empty Homes Award programme. This included projects in the "Best Old Wreck" category, and the "Best Before and After" category. The council also made the final shortlist in the Outstanding Team category and, at the Scottish Empty Homes Conference, which I was able to attend in person in March, the team were subsequently awarded the coveted Outstanding Team award. Congratulations to all involved.

Private Sector Housing Grant: 919 Private Sector Housing Grants have been approved, enabling £3.98million of spend to be invested into homes in the private sector. These monies mainly finance disabled adaptations or common repairs.

3.7 Digital Update: Over the last few years broadband and mobile coverage has continued to improve over Argyll and Bute:-

- Superfast Broadband Access across Argyll has reached nearly 86% and the remaining 14% of premises are now in the R100. Most of these remaining premises will see a Full Fibre Ultrafast Broadband Solution as the emphasis for connection speeds have moved away from Superfast (speeds greater than 30Mbps) to Ultrafast Broadband (speeds greater than 300 Mbps). Ultrafast Broadband in Argyll and Bute is currently at 4% and this will rise significantly over the next few years as R100 progresses.
- The UK Government has the £5bn Project Gigabit programme to provide Gigabit connections (speeds greater than 1000Mbps) across the UK.
- Strategic Transportation are working with the Scottish Government, Openreach and Jura Community Council having secured a £50k contingency fund to support Gigabit Jura if so required. The project has been delayed due to the Pandemic and the global microchip shortage, however we have been told that the expected completion is late summer 2022.
- Strategic Transportation staff also have responsibility for administering the £250K Digital Exclusion Fund on behalf of the council, with one project currently looking for our support to connect the remaining premises on Kerrera. The team are also working with Argyll and Bute Council Community Planning Partnership to identify community needs for digital equipment.

3.8 Other meetings:

The period covered by this report, December to April, is inevitably dominated by the council's budget process through December, January and February. During that time, though, as noted in the report, other key business must also be managed. In relation specifically to the budget process, I was glad to have an opportunity to meet with Jenni Minto MSP on 17th January, to set out the impact of the Scottish Government budget settlement on the council and its services, along with other key issues including the A83.

In line with our budget commitment I have also had an initial meeting with Live Argyll management to discuss the future budgetary approach, and I am sure that there will be further discussions taking place when the new council is in place.

As part of my Housing Policy Lead role, I participate in the Strategic Housing Forum which is a useful opportunity to catch up with all our local RSLs and other key agencies involved in housing delivery. Meetings have taken place on 7th December and 15th March.

Meetings continue with industry representatives from Argyll and Bute's key economic sectors. In December I met with the regional leadership of the National Farmers Union of Scotland, discussing a range of issues including the impact of transport and connectivity on the industry locally and labour/recruitment matters. These sessions have been constructive and positive and I hope that they will continue. I have also had a further meeting with senior management of the Scottish Salmon Company, who play such a significant role in Argyll and Bute's aquaculture activity.

Alongside this, of course, sits regular participation in the Argyll and Bute Community Planning Partnership Management Committee, which has also met twice during the period covered in this report, and the regular meetings of the Integrated Joint Board.

In relation to the latter, I was pleased to take part in the recruitment process earlier this year for the Health and Social Care Partnership Chief Officer vacancy. I am delighted that Fiona Davies has been appointed on a permanent basis, after providing support in an interim capacity over the past year.

I have welcomed the opportunity to work constructively with the SNP Group and to catch up with its leader, Cllr Jim Lynch, on issues of strategic importance. Engaging with Cllr Lynch and Cllr Dougie Philand, leader of the Argyll First Group, through the regular Chief Executive's Briefing sessions, has also been helpful and positive.

3.9 And finally...

Last, but by no means least, I would like to conclude this final Leader's Report of the council term with a series of thank-yous.

Thank you to all council staff, at all levels of the organisation, for their hard work, commitment and - over the last two and a half years in particular - their resilience and adaptability. At the start of this term, I do not think that any of us could have foreseen what would transpire. We have spent nearly half of the term working virtually - and our officers have been doing much more than that, particularly at the very start and height of the Covid-19 pandemic. They have been supporting the vulnerable, feeding those who need it, getting support straight to people and businesses, finding new ways of doing the day job, adapting to core service delivery in the most challenging of environments, and so much more. It is impossible to

list all of the challenges they have overcome and the ways that they have adapted and innovated. Thank you all.

Thank you to our partner organisations - public, private and third sector - who have also had to find ways of adapting. It has often been said that we do partnership working particularly well here in Argyll and Bute. The pandemic has proved that to be true beyond any doubt whatsoever. The positive relationships that we had in place meant that difficult times were a great deal easier to cope with than they may otherwise have been.

Thank you to our communities who, in so many ways, have joined us in rolling up their sleeves and getting on with whatever needed to be done in such incredibly difficult circumstances. Argyll and Bute can and should be very proud indeed of its tremendous community spirit.

Thank you to colleagues across the chamber for your co-operation and commitment to getting the best outcomes for our communities over the course of this five-year term. As an organisation we do have much to be proud of. We have made considerable progress, we have made improvements where they were needed, we continue to strive for further improvement and to do what is needed to secure that. We also, though, have successes to celebrate, and we leave much for the new council to build upon in the next term.

4. CONCLUSION

- 4.1** This report highlights the activities of the Leader of Argyll and Bute Council for the period from November 2021 to April 2022.

Councillor Robin Currie
Leader, Argyll and Bute Council

19th April 2022

For further information or to access the Leader's Report Pack please contact Aileen McNicol, Leadership Support and Member Services Manager, telephone 01546 604014 or email aileen.mcnicol@argyll-bute.gov.uk