

DEVELOPMENT AND ECONOMIC GROWTH SERVICE - Service Annual Performance Review 2021/22

DELIVERING OUR OUTCOMES – Our case studies help illustrate the positive contribution the Service has made to our communities and provides examples of good service delivery.

Corporate Outcome – People Live Active, Healthier and Independent Lives

Business Outcome BO103: We Enable A Choice of Suitable Housing Options

a) **Empty Homes**

The official 'Empty Homes Team' at Argyll and Bute Council, has just one Empty Homes Officer (EHO). However, as anyone who works in the field of empty homes will understand no EHO undertakes their role in isolation and collaborative and partnership working is crucial in our everyday roles, which is something we do really well across our teams.

The EHO is a key member of the wider housing team; all housing roles are closely aligned to ensure that staff are working towards the key aims and objectives of the Local Housing Strategy which includes maximising the use of existing resources and bringing empty homes back into use. A few examples of pro-active collaborative working just within the area housing teams include: close working between EHO and local Housing Improvement Officers, co-ordinating advice and actions to encourage investment in common repairs in tenements when looking at options to bring individual empty units back into use. Ensuring there is regular communication and signposting to the EHO from across the team when empty homes are involved in other renovation and regeneration projects, or when advice enquiries are received.

More widely, the EHO has the opportunity to regularly feed into the development of the Strategic Housing Investment Plan and local Housing Need and Demand issues, to ensure that we maximise use of existing stock if it offers suitable solutions. Empty homes have been renovated with assistance of grant funding and brought back into use as temporary homeless accommodation. We are also currently working with an owner renovating properties for possible use by NHS staff. Another diverse approach is Homeless staff contacting the EHO to bring to attention any Section 11 Notices that have been received from Landlords - this is a new protocol following on from good practice identified in the overlap of a mutual case.

With systems already in place for agile working, the EHO has been able to provide advice and assistance throughout the whole pandemic. Whilst site visits were restricted, we could engage by alternative means to ensure delivering an efficient service as possible, even participating in Zoom calls with owners on our personal devices to accommodate I.T. compatibility.

Within the Council the EHO has strived to establish strong and meaningful working practices across a number of internal services all of which contribute to supporting the EHO to achieve outcomes. Partnership working takes the shape of assisting in tracing owners, instigating action, or helping find funding or practical solutions. We continue to develop our partnerships to find suitable and innovative ways to assist owners and communities bring empty homes back into use. A few examples include:

- EHO is the Chair of our Area Property Action Groups which brings together Officers from range of Departments who deal with the most problematic buildings, and agree ways to engage with owners and find solutions;
- The EHO attends the Strategic Housing Forum to provide an update in the service, this highlights the high level priority and commitment that bringing empty homes back into use is for our Housing Partnership;
- Fraud Team – recent quote from Team Leader following joint working noted that “the EHO is an adopted member of our team!” recognition of how team working approach as strengthened relationships between Departments;
- Joint piece of work with EHO in Stirling Council to raise the profile of Empty Homes within the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park. A joint blog has been produced which was a great opportunity to highlight issues of empty homes and help available!

Whilst the empty homes service in Argyll and Bute Council has been established for a number of years, it continues to grow from strength to strength despite capacity remaining the same. The EHO has an overall remit to assist and encourage owners to bring empty homes back into use with an annual target set. This is monitored through the Local Housing Strategy. However, this in essence doesn't capture the wider outcomes that the EHO has achieved working in partnership, some include:

- Over 500 empty homes brought back into use
- The EHO and Council Tax Department work extremely closely together, effective communication is key to the success of this partnership. A recent example is where the EHO was alerted to a request to change the status of an account after a letter was issued confirming property had been empty over 2 years to claim reduced VAT rate –this enabled the EHO to discuss the implications of project with the empty home owner who would have no longer been entitled to reduced VAT rate.
- Implementation of a bespoke Empty/Abandoned Homes Enabling Budget to facilitate and/or instigate action to bring empty homes back into use
- First Empty Homes CPO concluded - renovation works undertaken with no financial support and flat leased as private let

- Worked in conjunction with Mull and Iona Community Trust to undertake joint communication exercise with all registered empty home owners on the Island.
- Hebridean Trust in Tiree supported by the EHO to drive forward plans for the long term use of all their buildings whilst assisting them to bring six listed empty flats back into use. Due to the scale of scheme, the EHO established a working group of relevant partners to maximise support to take this project forward.
- The EHO is working with Islay Development Initiative to bring two empty flats back into use as affordable housing. This also provides unique opportunity to consider a plug and play model on the grounds of property for additional housing provision.
- Regular Shelter Best Practice Group contribution and also provided support and shared good practice with a number of Local Authorities over the course of 2021 including: development of empty homes grant schemes; new Empty Homes Officer peer support; sharing details on funding mechanisms; and bespoke case management demonstration.
- Winner of outstanding team and Scottish Empty Homes Conference 2022.



Corporate Outcome - People Will Live In Safer and Stronger Communities

Business Outcome BO104: Our communities and supported and protected

a) Covid public health control measures

National Covid restrictions to businesses and communities were still in place in April 2021, and these changed over the reporting year. This placed additional responsibilities on the Councils Environmental Health service to support and enforce standards within businesses to ensure compliance with relevant public health control measures.

The changing landscape of controls made this work challenging and an example of this was the introduction of the vaccine certification scheme affecting some 220 licensed premises in Argyll and Bute. Through a proactive approach, businesses adapted their activities to develop compliance plans or bring their operation out with these requirements in a two-week period.

In the period 1st April 2021 to 31st March 2022, the environmental team carried out 862 Covid interventions and investigated 773 business enquiries and complaints. Compliance levels were high with 7 formal notices issued.

This is excellent performance by the environmental health team in challenging times, when they also were involved in the management of Covid outbreaks with NHS Highland and referrals through the Test and Protect regime.

b) Retaining Customer Standards Excellence accreditation

Planning and Regulatory Services retained their Customer Standards Excellence accreditation in 21/22 with the number of compliance-plus criteria increasing from 4 to 7, and 2 other partial criteria classified as fully compliant. This is a very positive outcome, particularly as services had to introduce new ways of working during the Covid pandemic.

c) Customer Service Requests resolved within targets

Demand on Regulatory Services to respond to customer service requests increased during the pandemic, from 1,549 in 2019/20 to 2444 in 21/22 (excluding export health certificates), an increase of 56%. This was particularly challenging and resource intensive, but the team responded well achieving 70% (increasing to 85% with export health certificates) resolved within service targets. Given the increasing workload, a demand reduction

project to review our triaging system for service requests will be carried out in 22/23, which may result in some complaints types not being investigated or being dealt with differently.

d) Local Air Quality

Local Air Quality Progress report 2021 for Argyll and Bute prepared by the environmental health, concluded that local air quality in Argyll and Bute continues to show a long-term steady or falling trend, with a marked reduction at most monitoring locations during 2020.

e) Air services out to the islands

Argyll and Bute Council operate three licensed aerodromes at Oban, Coll and Colonsay. These aerodromes are licensed by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) as required by law to allow scheduled passenger flight services (for use by paying members of the public) to land and take off. The licensed aerodromes above support the Public Service Obligation (PSO) air services out to the islands of Coll, Colonsay and Tiree (Tiree airport is owned by Scottish Govt and operated by Highlands and Islands Airports). Support to the firefighting staff and inspection of the aerodromes on Coll and Colonsay is provided by the Station Manager and two Crew Commanders from Oban airport. There are also scholar flights to the islands at the weekend. The air services transport pupils from the islands of Coll and Colonsay to Oban High School allowing them valuable time with their families during the weekend and offering further resilience in the event of ferry service cancellations during the winter months. (Tiree has its own high school). The PSO air services have proved essential for service provision to the islands with the NHS, Argyll and Bute Council, Argyll Community Housing Association being key business users.

During the Covid pandemic the Council continued to support and operate the air services out to the islands with all seats reserved for travel for essential users only e.g. key workers, NHS staff or island residents on the Wed and Thurs flights. The Council worked with the operator Hebridean Air Services to convert the weekend flights to cargo flights. The eight seats were removed from the aircraft to make way for freight.



f) Digital connectivity

The Council continues to have a significant interest and provide support to the national effort as it continues to improve communication infrastructure across our rural areas. The Council's Strategic Transportation and Infrastructure Team continues to provide support acting as a single point of contact for Government Officials, Industry bodies and numerous external consultants by providing assistance when it is required. Feedback from consultants has been complimentary of the processes which the council has implemented to assist in the progress of digital connectivity. With the numerous Government and Commercial programmes currently active, even through the difficult national lockdown the free flow of information, continuous communication and support has provided dividends with these national programmes. Our cross departmental working continues to play a major role in the successful development of digital connectivity across the area.



g) Active Travel

Active Travel is an overarching term covering journeys made by a physically active means, for example walking, wheelchair, cycling or scooting. Active Travel projects are usually split into two types, infrastructure and behaviour change, although some projects can include elements of both within a single project. Infrastructure development and delivery aims to provide high-quality, accessible routes for people to walk/wheelchair and, in the case of cycleways/cyclepaths to cycle or scoot, thereby enabling and encouraging them to travel actively. Research has identified that a lack of suitable and safe routes are one of the most frequently cited reasons for not travelling more actively. These physical barriers can be relatively minor items, for example lack of dropped kerbs, or larger, for example the lack of an off-carriageway route. This is particularly notable within Argyll and Bute where the majority of walking and/or cycling provision is limited or non-existent out with the built up areas, forcing users to walk/cycle on national speed limit carriageways.

Behaviour Change projects are designed to overcome challenges to give people the confidence or incentive to travel more actively, for example by providing walking or cycle training, by providing individualized travel plans to demonstrate the viability of travelling more actively within their life or providing activities which encourage active travel. Behaviour change elements are becoming increasingly common within infrastructure projects in order to encourage use of the infrastructure to maximise the benefits to the community. Research has demonstrated that increased activity, including travelling actively, has significant physical and mental health benefits, reduces inequality, creates a healthier and more productive workforce and reduces congestion and transport related pollution (e.g. air, noise and visual). As such promotion of active travel delivers benefits and savings across both the public and private sectors while supporting economic development and healthier, happier lives.

Argyll and Bute Council's Strategic Transportation Team during 21/22 has delivered active travel projects totalling £80k from Smarter Choices Smarter Places funding, £195k from Strathclyde Partnership for Transport, £376k from Cycling Walking Safer Routes and £628k from Sustrans funding.



Business Outcome BO105: Our Natural Environment Is Protected And Respected

a) Building Standards meets all key performance measures

Building Standards met all key performance measures in 2021/22. Building Warrant numbers have not recovered to pre-pandemic levels although the service were successful in obtaining commercial work in vetting applications from Scottish Borders and East Lothian Council.

b) Dangerous Buildings

The lack of maintenance in private properties has been challenging leading to an increase in reports of dangerous buildings. Building Standards surveyors are required to inspect these properties and where there are risks to the public, take action to remove these dangers. Any enforcement action can be challenging, particularly where the owners refuse to take immediate repairs, and initiation works in default has been resource intensive. An example is a fire affecting 4 commercial and a residential properties on the main shopping area in Dunoon, where the Council had to initiate actions to partially demolish the properties to remove immediate dangers and secure the site. There was continued pressure to clear the site and this took some months, following negotiations with the different owners and insurance companies.



c) Building Standards one of a few local authorities to introduce the new Building Standards Scotland Competency Framework

Building Standards was one of a few local authorities to introduce the new Building Standards Scotland Competency Framework. This was successfully introduced through an officer-working group, which identified that we have an experienced, professional and competent team, with some personal and professional training needs incorporated within a formal plan.

Corporate Outcome - Our Economy is diverse and thriving

Business Outcome BO110: We Support Businesses, Employment and Development Opportunities

a) Business Gateway support is the perfect piece for local jewellery maker

A jewellery designer based in Cardross, Argyll and Bute, has enhanced its e-commerce offering in response to the Covid pandemic, with support from Business Gateway via DigitalBoost, Scotland's national digital upskilling programme, and grant support from Argyll and Bute Council.

Led by husband-and-wife team Linda and Matt Scott, Linda Macdonald Jewellery specialises in hand-crafted silver and gold jewellery. The business benefited from Business Gateway support during the Covid pandemic as it navigated retail store closures along with wholesale and supplier issues.



With over 100 stockists in the UK and overseas, the team has been working with the service to grow the business for almost ten years. Most recently, Linda approached Business Gateway for support as the online retail side of the business grew during the pandemic. Through DigitalBoost, Linda and Matt accessed one to one support from a digital expert as well as digital webinars and online resources.

Linda Macdonald Jewellery also secured Recovery grant funding from the Business Gateway Local Growth Accelerator Programme to help with the cost of enhancing the existing e-commerce platform and the development of a hard copy trade brochure and digital display, as COVID restrictions ease and in-person events are back on the cards.

The Business Gateway Local Growth Accelerator Programme is funded by Argyll and Bute Council and the European Regional Development Fund 2014-20 Structural Funds Programme.

Linda said: “It’s been great to have the support of Business Gateway during what has been a very challenging period to run a business. Through DigitalBoost, we were able to access expert help which was invaluable as we started the process of improving our e-commerce offering. Additionally, the Recovery grant funding secured through the Local Growth Accelerator Programme was particularly helpful, allowing us to invest in upgrading our website and marketing materials as our focus shifts to recovering post-pandemic and getting back to business as usual.”

Jen Smith, Business Adviser for Business Gateway Argyll and Bute, said: “It is rewarding to see how this package of support has shaped Linda and Matt’s digital journey, and we’re pleased they have increased confidence to move to a greater focus on digital capabilities. Having a strong online presence will continue to be vital for businesses as we emerge from the pandemic. Through the DigitalBoost programme, digital specialists are available to help businesses across a range of issues with free, expert, impartial advice. Our Local Growth Accelerator Programme can now help businesses to recover from the pandemic, as well as those looking to grow.”

Find out more about Linda Macdonald Jewellery at lindamacdonaldjewellery.com

b) Business Gateway catapults consultancy to success with expanded team and ISO accreditation

A business consultancy that specialises in helping organisations deliver efficiencies and become more sustainable, has been able to expand its team with the appointment of a new graduate, following a package of support from Business Gateway.

DWS Associates, who help organisations solve problems and win opportunities, were able to take on a graduate placement through HR advice and signposting to funding through the Business Gateway Local Growth Accelerator Programme. The Business Gateway Local Growth Accelerator Programme is funded by Argyll and Bute Council and the European Regional Development Fund 2014-20 Structural Funds Programme.

Alice Masson was taken on at the start of the year and increased capacity in the team. She also helped the business secure vital ISO accreditations, as well as the Scottish Business Pledge and Cyber Essentials Plus.

Through Business Gateway, owner David Smart was also able to access support through DigitalBoost, Scotland’s national digital upskilling programme, delivered by Business Gateway. This included a Digital Health Check and webinars on video production for social media and LinkedIn for business.

David, owner of DWS Associates, said: “Our network of experienced directors’ were at capacity, and we knew we needed support if we were to achieve our wider business goals and growth ambitions. Through Business Gateway, we were able to access the help and funding we needed to

expand our team and take on Alice who has helped upskill the whole team with her creativity, research and communications skills. She also increased our capacity and resources, letting us achieve vital ISO accreditations that will help us facilitate further business growth.”

Alice said, “It’s been an incredibly rewarding experience working at DWS, and knowing that I’ve brought value to the organisation through my work in securing accreditations and developing our communications strategy. I look forward to building on this further in the coming months.”

Donald Melville, Business Gateway adviser, said: “By acknowledging their need for a new member of staff to help lighten the load, DWS has been able to achieve key certifications, ensuring their directors can focus on doing what they do best. Taking on a new employee can be a complex process. We can help businesses with each step, as they start their recruitment process through to hiring their new team member.”



NOTES TO EDITORS:

1. *The Scottish Government is the Managing Authority for the European Structural Funds 2014-20 Programme. For further information visit our webpages or follow @scotgovESIF.*
2. The Local Growth Accelerator Programme Argyll and Bute is open to businesses aiming to increase their turnover by £50,000 or more within the next three years; or aiming to increase annual turnover to pre-COVID levels or achieve modest growth (below £50,000 increase) within the next three years. Businesses must be based in Argyll and Bute; micro, small or medium sized (fewer than 250 employees and less than €50m turnover or balance sheet total of less than €43m); not account managed by Highlands and Islands Enterprise or Scottish Enterprise and not operating solely as retailers.

Business Outcome BO111: We Influence And Engage With Business And Policy Makers

a) **An enforcement intervention is performed in a consistent and fair manner with businesses supported throughout**

A survey of businesses which were subject to Covid enforcement interventions concluded that 95% of businesses were satisfied or very satisfied with the response of officers within Regulatory Services and believed they were treated fairly. This is an indicator of good enforcement practices by Regulatory Services.

b) **Food exports**

The UK withdrawal from the European Union on the 31st January 2020, introduced new arrangements for the export of food to EU countries. This was particularly challenging for food exporters in Argyll and Bute (primarily fish and shellfish) and to the Council Environmental Health service, who must certify that the product is compliant with food safety legislation and fit for human consumption. The creation of commercial hubs in central Scotland mitigated demand at a local authority level for export health certificates for EU consignment with the main exporters in Argyll and Bute using these hubs. To support business and meet our statutory requirements as a food authority, audits of the main exporters have been undertaken and attestations issued every 3 months to these key exporters to allow them to continue exporting to the EU using commercial hubs. In addition, the Council issued 1284 export health certificates in 21/22 to businesses to export to non-EU countries (e.g. China, Middle East etc.) and 195 certificates to exporters services to export to EU countries.

Business Outcome BO112: Argyll And Bute Is Promoted To Everyone

a) **Restoration of 39-43 Victoria Street, Rothesay, Isle of Bute**

A Rothesay Townscape Heritage (TH) grant of £311,601 supported the comprehensive repair of a prominent listed building in multiple ownership, serving to safeguard the property for future generations whilst helping to lift the appearance of Rothesay's town centre.



Traditional materials and methods of repair were used to ensure best practice, and align with Historic Environment Scotland's Advisory Standards of Repair. Works encompassed roof works, including leadwork, chimney and skew repairs, as well as substantial masonry works to front, rear and gable elevations, which included stone indents and stone replacements, as well as full re-pointing and structural repairs. Rainwater goods and dormer windows were also restored and the roof inspected for rot and treated accordingly. Timber sash and case windows were restored, and uPVC windows replaced in timber. New close doors were added to front and rear.

Rothsay TH is a heritage-led partnership project that is funded by National Lottery Heritage Fund, Historic Environment Scotland, Argyll and Bute Council, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Smarter Choices Smarter Places and LEADER. The partnership funding totals, £2,746,049. It is anticipated with private owner contributions included, the total value of the project will be in excess of £3.2m. The programme is being delivered over a 5 year period, and will conclude on 31st March 2023.

SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES – These are the significant challenges faced by the Service during 2021/22. These challenges either created pressures on the Success Measures or impacted on delivery. Specific additional activity or mitigating actions were carried out to reduce the negative impact on service delivery.

Corporate Outcome - People Live Active Healthier And Independent Lives

Business Outcome BO103: We Enable A Choice of Suitable Housing Options

- a) A significant challenge is emerging in relation to the statutory provision of suitable temporary accommodation for households presenting as homeless to Argyll and Bute Council. We rely on the private rented sector for the provision of temporary accommodation and over recent months the housing market has picked up significantly and a number of landlords have asked for their properties back thus reducing the number of temporary accommodation units available to the Council. There has not been a budget increase in relation to the temporary accommodation budget for a significant time period so the ability to pay a competitive rent to secure replacement units is very limited. The increasing pressures on accommodation managed by Housing Services in the form of changes to the way that Asylum Seekers will be accommodated, the Ukrainian Resettlement Programme and changes in the Criminal Justice system to relieve pressures on prisons will and are making the situation even more challenging. At present close scrutiny of this issue is being carried out in order to quantify and identify any emerging trend and potential solutions.

Corporate Outcome - People Will Live In Safer and Stronger Communities

Business Outcome BO104: Our Communities And Supported And Protected

- a) There is considerable work and resources ongoing to restart the official food safety programme in Argyll and Bute. This has involved the risk assessment of over 2400 businesses to develop a new interventions plan, the training of authorised officers in new process and systems and a review on how statutory food controls delivered. This will be a challenge to the environmental health team, given the resourcing difficulties and other conflicting work demands. Additional resources are required at a time when there is a national shortage of qualified environmental health and food safety officers.
- b) Recruitment and workforce planning. There are serious resourcing issues affecting the service due to the national shortage in qualified professional officers and the inability to attract to Argyll and Bute. On one occasion, after three adverts, no qualified officers applied for a post, despite the offer of flexible locations and home working. This reduces the team's capacity, and leaves the options of recruiting trainees or operating with long term vacancies.

Corporate Outcome - Our Economy Is Diverse And Thriving

Business Outcome BO112: Argyll And Bute Is Promoted To Everyone

- a) Significant shortages of skilled staff and rises in costs of materials and fuel and difficulties accessing supplies as well as delays experienced in the commencement of construction caused by Covid.

CONSULTATION AND ENGAGEMENT - WE ASKED, YOU SAID, WE DID....The following are all the consultations and resulting actions that the Service has carried out during this period.

a) **Argyll & Bute Local Housing Strategy 2022-2027: Public Consultation Final Phase: September – October 2021**

Following extensive consultation and stakeholder engagement in 2019/20 and 2020/21, the final consultative draft LHS was issued for comment and feedback prior to approval by the Strategic Housing Forum and full Council in November 2021. The responses were positive and reinforced key aspects of the strategy including the need to improve stock condition and energy efficiency; the need for more affordable housing to attract and retain permanent residents; the negative impacts of too much second/holiday homes; and the need to ensure sufficient infrastructure to support new build programme. The overall view was summed up in the comment: “I think the Housing Strategy does pin point the key issues and actions needed well.” At the same time the draft LHS was submitted to the Scottish Government and the formal Peer Review process, and again very positive feedback was received, with particular commendation on our approach to community engagement, consultation and partnership working. This included the support and joint working with local community groups and led to the establishment of a dedicated Community Housing Network for community-led housing projects. The consultation plan is available on the LHS page of the council website, and is summarised in the new LHS itself, which was formally launched at the Strategic Housing Forum in March 2022.

b) **Argyll & Bute Housing Contribution Statement 2022/23 – 2024/25**

Housing Services engaged with HSCP colleagues on the review and update of the new three-year HCS which forms part of the Joint Strategic Plan for the HSCP. This involved consultation and approval by partners on the SHIP Officers Group and the Strategic Housing Forum.

c) Regulatory Services and Building Standards Stakeholder Surveys

In 2020/21, Regulatory Services and Building Standards carried out a number of stakeholder surveys to attain their views on specific issues aimed at making service improvements. These included:

- i) A survey of businesses who received a Covid intervention to assess the quality of the service provided the appropriateness of information on public health controls and any enforcement was fair. This identified that businesses welcomed the advice and guidance from the Councils environmental health teams in assisting them to new and developing public health measures.
- ii) Following the national Pye Tate report for building standards, agents were surveyed to obtain their views on the reported slight reduction in user satisfaction and on the future of User Forums that had been poorly attended previously. As a result, the User Forums have been replaced with regular newsletters and a single MS Teams Agents Group, rather than 4 individual annual face-to-face meetings. In addition to support customers, a guide to “Do You Need a Building Warrant” was developed and published on the [Councils website](#)

d) Aviation Strategy

[Discussion document to inform the development of an Aviation Strategy \(transport.gov.scot\)](#) Ensuring that the Scottish Government uses this welcome review of the governance and support of air services to consider alternative structures and funding mechanisms that can best deliver improved affordable connectivity.

e) Strategic Transport Projects Review 2 (STPR2)

This review of the strategic transport network’s performance will inform transport investment in Scotland for the next 20 years (2022-2042) by providing evidence-based recommendations on which Scottish Ministers can base future transport investment decisions. STPR2 offered the opportunity for Economic Development Department to lobby for improvements to the Argyll and Bute transport network, to be delivered at a national level through, the Strategic Transport Project Review 2.