



**UIST REPOPULATION ACTION ZONE DRAFT PLAN**

Report by Director for Communities

**PURPOSE**

- 1.1 The purpose of the Report is to provide detail on the concept of the Uist Repopulation Zone and define actions to be taken in support of the Zone over the next period.

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 2.1 At the Convention of the Highlands (COHI) in October 2020 a paper was presented that outlined the population and demographic challenges across the Highlands and Islands in detail. It identified the areas of acutest challenge as being in Argyll, the Outer Hebrides and Caithness and Sutherland. COHI determined that there is a requirement for a targeted, inter-agency policy response to population issues and supported the establishment of a sub-regional population Working Group. A team was subsequently established comprised of the Local Authorities and Highlands and Islands Enterprise.
- 2.2 The Working Group explored options and approaches and began articulating ideas and actions around the concept of "Repopulation Zones". This approach was endorsed by COHI and geographies that lent themselves to specific, targeted actions were identified. The Zone in the Outer Hebrides was defined as Uist.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 3.1 **It is recommended that the Comhairle:**
  - (a) **notes the draft Uist Repopulation Action Plan; and**
  - (b) **agrees to use the appended Draft Action Plan as the basis of community engagement.**

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Appendix: Uist Repopulation Zone - Draft Action Plan  
Background Papers: Report to Sustainable Development Committee 16 June 2021

## IMPLICATIONS

4.1 The following implications are applicable in terms of the Report.

<b>Resource Implications</b>	<b>Implications/None</b>
Financial	None at this stage. As the Repopulation Zone concept solidifies and moves to implementation there will be requirement for financial resources to be released
Legal	None
Staffing	There will potentially be significant staffing implications across the Comhairle if the plan is to be adequately resourced. The staff resource will come in the main from Economic Development and from the Community Engagement Unit, although resources from other Department's may be required depending on the nature of the activity being pursued. Significant input is also anticipated from key partner agencies such as Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Skills Development Scotland and Bord na Gaidhlig.
Assets and Property	None
<b>Strategic Implications</b>	<b>Implications/None</b>
Risk	Population loss and demographic imbalance is one of the most challenging and protracted strategic issues facing the Outer Hebrides. The greatest medium to long-term risk will be the failure to deliver the policy innovations and investment requirements that are essential to impact on population dynamics
Equalities	None
Corporate Strategy	Population decline and an aging demographic are highlighted as a key issue in the Comhairle's Corporate Strategy and in the Local Outcome Improvement Plan.
Environmental Impact	None
Consultation	None

## BACKGROUND

- 5.1 Much of the discussion around Repopulation Zones has sought to reframe the discussion away from the negative connotations of depopulation onto a more positive, development-orientated focus on repopulation. Discussion over the period has resulted in a detailed draft Action Plan around several key headings. This is outlined in the Appendix to the report. It is anticipated that this document will form the basis for community consultation and engagement.
- 5.2 Concurrent to this activity was the launch of "A Scotland for the Future: The Challenges and Opportunities of Scotland's Changing Population". This is Scotland's first national population strategy and elements of it will help guide the work and activities of the COHI Population Working Group over the next period. Definitive actions have yet to fully emerge from the national Strategy, but it is anticipated that there may be a suite of additional activity that will emerge to supplement local efforts.
- 5.3 Population and demographic challenges are critical considerations for the Comhairle. This process and plan are geared to positively impact on the strategic imperatives around population. It is hoped that learning from the approaches in the Uist Repopulation Zone can be replicated out across the Outer Hebrides in due course

## **BACKGROUND**

- 1.1 At the Convention of the Highlands (COHI) in October 2020 a paper was presented on population and fragile communities. The paper identified population and demographic challenges across the Highlands and Islands and identified the areas of acute challenge as being in Argyll and Bute, the Outer Hebrides, Caithness & Sutherland and North Ayrshire.
- 1.2 COHI were clear that there is a requirement for a targeted, inter-agency policy response to population issues and supported the establishment of a sub-regional population Working Group. A team was subsequently established comprised of the four Local Authorities and Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE).
- 1.3 The Working Group has sought to explore options and approaches around population issues and began articulating ideas and actions around the concept of “Repopulation Zones”. The initial task of the Working Group was to identify geographies that lent themselves to specific, targeted actions. After analysis and assessment, the Repopulation Zone in the Outer Hebrides has been defined as Uist.
- 1.4 Much of the discussion around Repopulation Zones has sought to reframe the discussion away from the negative connotations of depopulation onto a more positive, development-orientated focus on repopulation. The issues are complex and deep-seated in nature and require on-going focus and sustained effort to deliver enduring, positive outcomes. Interventions and actions required to be place-based and focussed to be appropriate to local circumstances.
- 1.5 To deliver sustainable outcomes a menu of tools will be required to drive innovation and to build new approaches specifically targeted on population issues and specifically tailored to the geography. Learnings will be different in each Repopulation Zone and that will offer the opportunity for each Zone to cascade learning between Zones and beyond that out into the Highlands and Islands and wider across Scotland.
- 1.6 The interventions proposed in this plan follow the above principles are based around five critical areas of activity (with the initial focus on the first three):
  - Housing
  - Jobs
  - Critical Infrastructure – especially Digital and Transport
  - Access to Services – health, education, childcare etc.
  - Talent Attraction and Retention
- 1.7 Allied to this Action Plan there is work on-going to explore Zonal methodologies in more detail. The Scottish Government has commissioned its Expert Advisory Group on Population and Migration to lead a review of existing zonal methodologies to inform the development of the proposed Repopulation Zone concept. This will include building the evidence base to inform understanding on several critical factors, including:
  - how a strategic vision and aim of a Zonal approach has been defined in the past and could be defined in the context of repopulation
  - policy interventions that have been successfully delivered through zonal methodologies
  - potential impacts of zonal interventions – e.g., on zones and neighbouring non-zonal areas
  - how zonal boundaries can be appropriately identified and demarcated

## HOUSING

- 2.1 Across the Repopulation Zones housing is seen as a criticality. COHI agreed that the following offered high-level themes to be explored:
- greater local flexibility to utilise Resource Planning Assumption (potentially combined with Rural and Islands Fund) in a way that better matches local needs
  - initiate a serviced plots pilot in collaboration with a community landlord
  - establish a key workers accommodation pilot in partnership with key economic sectors
  - establish an empty home repurposing pilot
  - initiate a project to access to new-entrant crofts, allied to a streamlined process for access to building sites on croft land

### **Housing Supply – Resource Planning Assumption / Strategic Housing Investment Plan**

- 2.2 Eight units have recently been completed in Uist – two at Torlum; one at Winfield Way and five at Garrynamonie. Fourteen units are currently on site: four units at Howmore and ten units at Balivanich. A further twelve units at the Lochmaddy Old Hospital site are presently in planning and assessment.
- 2.3 Core housing supply through the present five-year Strategic Housing Investment Plan (SHIP) is presently as follows:
- Year 1 – South Uist – 6 units  
Year 3 – Benbecula – 4 units, South Uist – 6 units and North Uist – 4 units  
Year 4 – North Uist – 6 units, Benbecula – 4 units  
Year 5 – North Uist – 6 units

### **Government Engagement**

- 2.4 There are opportunities to engage with Scottish Government More Homes Division to explore opportunities for bespoke RPA flexibilities within the Repopulation Zone. Areas of opportunity include:
- utilising Partnership Support for Regeneration to facilitate developer-led initiatives
  - developing a Key Worker Accommodation pilot to support key sectors using the Mid-Market Rent model
  - undertaking an Empty Homes pathfinder to bring long-term empty homes brought back into use for sale or rent
  - undertaking a Rural Serviced Plots pilot
  - undertaking strategic land banking of sites for future use

### **Local Initiatives - Stòras Uibhist**

- 2.5 Stòras Uibhist have brought forward an indicative five-year plan for housing initiatives on the estate. This includes a Smart Clachan project at Rubha Bhuailt, the development of serviced plots, the development of a land match app and new croft creation at Askernish.
- 2.6 The first of these projects is the Smart Clachan project. This will be a mixed tenure / use development being implemented in partnership between Stòras Uibhist and Rural Housing Scotland. A development of up to six units is anticipated potentially funded vis the Rural Housing Fund.

### **Local Initiatives – Uist and Barra Housing Group**

- 2.7 The Uist and Barra Housing Group (UBHG) was established in 2020 to look for housing opportunities using local knowledge and contacts. UBHG consists of representatives of local groups and interested parties. A Project Manager appointed on summer 2021 and a schedule of potential activities have been developed.
- 2.8 UBHG have a range of plans in relation to bringing several derelict properties back into productive use; developing a localised pilot based on the Scottish Homes Rural Housing Ownership Grant and looking at opportunities for the decrofting of old house sites.

## JOBS

- 3.1 A package of capital investments has been identified under a broad set of headings which, if build out over the next period will have transformational economic potential. The individual components within this suite of projects are at differing stages of development and all are dependent upon achieving match-funding over the course of the next period. Initial indicative assessment suggests that if these projects are fully implemented, they will deliver circa £35m of capital spend and will generate in the region of sixty new full-time jobs. The suite of projects are as follows:

Project	Total Cost	Estimated Jobs
<b>Culture and Heritage</b>		
Sealladh Hiort	3,500,000	3
Taigh Chearsabhaigh	2,200,000	2
Eriskay School Re-Development	80,000	0
Berneray Community Hall	100,000	0
Comann Eachdraidh Uibhist a Tuath	2,500,000	2
Cnoc Soilleir Phase 2	6,000,000	5
Claddach Kirkibost Digital Hub	85,000	1
<b>Technology</b>		
Spaceport 1	3,200,000	25
5G Trial Project	40,000	0
Gigabit Fibre Infrastructure	750,000	1
<b>Food and Drink</b>		
Kallin Harbour Regeneration	200,000	2
North Uist Distillery	2,000,000	2
Grogarry Steadings Food Hub	2,300,000	2
<b>Pier and Harbour Infrastructure</b>		
Lochboisdale Harbour		
Ludag Waiting Room	68,000	1
Acarsaid Pier	1,500,000	5
<b>Infrastructure</b>		
Eabhal Business Park - Phase 2	2,500,000	9
Lochmaddy School	50,000	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>27,073,000</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>Uplift at 30%</b>	<b>8,121,900</b>	
<b>Revised Total</b>	<b>35,194,900</b>	

- 3.2 To enhance these capital investments and the related jobs, each of these projects will be supported with an appropriate skills package.
- 3.3 Current to the above capital investment programme, there are a range of individuals business and third sector organisations being supported by Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) and Business Gateway.
- 3.4 Between 2019/20 and 2021/22 HIE supported 42 financial interventions to a value of £3.8 million, which supported 117 jobs. Over the last three years Business Gateway supported 35 start-up businesses, dealt with over 500 business enquiries creating 55 jobs. In addition to this, the Comhairle's Economic Development Regeneration team has secured investment of over £6m to support 16 community economic regeneration projects, creating / retaining 14 jobs.

- 3.5 In addition to the above it is proposed to review present support mechanisms to explore if enhanced, bespoke packages of support are required to stimulate increased levels of entrepreneurialism, new business start-ups and the attracting new business to for businesses to relocate into the Repopulation Zone.
- 3.6 To support the above suite of investment projects and the wider aspirations of this Action Plan it is proposed to establish two new post equating to 1.5 FTE.
- 3.7 The first post (1 FTE) will be a Settlement Officer. The aim of the post will be to alleviate barriers faced by people seeking to relocate to the Repopulation Zone. The post will help and support to individuals and families to address the challenges and barriers, facilitating the access to local services, networks and the provision of overall guidance about the community. The post will also gather local intelligence regarding barriers to enable public agencies, service providers and the communities to proactively address these barriers and enable employment opportunities.
- 3.8 The second post will be a full-time post that will provide the dual function of secretariat duties for the Regional Economic Partnership (REP 0.5 FTE) and supporting population activities (0.5 FTE). It is anticipated that the post will seek to support the delivery of projects and initiatives identified under the Repopulation Zone Action Plan and other development activities for Uist based projects.
- 3.9 At the initial meeting of the Uist Repopulation Zone Working Group a range of potential new initiatives were discussed. It is anticipated that the two post-holders above will assist the development of these initiatives. These initiatives can be summarised as follows:
- development of a Strategic Communications Programme
  - scoping out of a “Digital Nomads” Initiative
  - exploring potential for the creation of a Creative and Media Hub
  - supporting the Lochboisdale Place-Based Initiative
  - researching potential for a pilot Uist Air-Freight Pilot
  - scope out opportunity for a “Trial the Isles” initiative
- 3.10 The Settlement Officer will be employed by Comhairle nan Eilean Siar and the REP post by HIE. There is a strong partnership between the Comhairle and HIE around the Repopulation Zone approach and it is anticipated that there will be good synergy between the two posts. Both posts will be steered and guided through the Uist Repopulation Zone Working Group.

#### **CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE – TRANSPORT, DIGITAL AND NET ZERO**

- 4.1 Infrastructure provision within the Uist Repopulation Zone is weak in comparison to other parts of the Highlands and Islands and wider rural Scotland. It is essential that basic infrastructure is significantly enhanced.

##### **Transport: Ferries**

- 4.2 Many would consider the critical lifeline ferry services to be in a state of disarray with many businesses in the aquaculture and tourism sectors of the opinion that the lack of reliability and resilience in the fleet is creating greater economic harm than either the Covid pandemic or Brexit. Exacerbating poor performance is the situation with the two new CalMac ferries: these are being built at the Ferguson shipyard and are presently four years late and will cost more than double the agreed £97m contract price.

### **Transport: Roads**

- 4.3 There has been considerable roads investment over past years utilising European funding, to upgrade the spinal route roads network through the Outer Hebrides. In Uist this has enabled the islands of Berneray and Eriskay to be linked by causeway to the main island chain, which is also linked by a series of bridges and causeways. 50km (44%) of the Uist / Barra spinal route has been double tracked. 64km, however, remains as single track on poor peat foundation.
- 4.4 There remains a desire to upgrade this route over time, which at 2022 prices would cost in the region of £100m. To complete the Spinal Route, including fixed crossings at the Sound of Barra and Sound of Harris remain within the aspirations of the Comhairle. This would have a significant impact on accessibility throughout the island chain, north to south.
- 4.5 Applications are being prepared to the Levelling Up Fund (LUF) for submission in July 2022 for additional lengths of double track road in Uist. This will benefit commuters and businesses. Decisions on LUF applications will most likely be known towards the end of 2022.
- 4.6 Additional resources have been made through the Local Bridge Maintenance fund which will allow repairs to bridge structures at North Ford and Loch an Obbe.

### **Digital**

- 4.7 The recently completed Next Generation Broadband (NGB) project managed by HIE connected nearly 1,700 premises to fibre broadband infrastructure. The Scottish Government's R100 North Lot contract is currently planned to deliver additional fibre coverage to the area in 2026. It is likely that the Scottish Government's Scottish Broadband Voucher Scheme offer, even with the Scottish Top Up from the UK Government's Gigabit Scheme of up to £6,500 for individuals and £8,500 for businesses towards the cost of a Giga speed service, will fail to have any impact in the interim period due to the very small nature of the communities affected.
- 4.8 Other efforts to improve rural mobile coverage include the Scottish Government's 4G Infill programme (S4GI) and the Shared Rural Network initiative (partnership between the UK's four Mobile Network Operators, MNOs and the UK Government).
- 4.9 It is likely that despite all these initiatives, additional effort will be required to deliver reliable digital connectivity to the Uist Repopulation Zone. Partner agencies will need to identify opportunities to work with both the Scottish and UK Governments as well as the telecoms supply chain to identify and deploy improved digital solutions. Some of the potential policy areas and solutions can be summarised as follows:
- piloting for new technologies / new ways of working – fibre, 4G, 5G, FWA and satellite
  - Identifying triggers to make the area as attractive as possible to generate interest by telecoms providers
  - assisting communities achieve better digital connections via the various voucher schemes
  - identifying funds to achieve improved service in the Very Hard to Reach Areas
  - review skills requirements to support the telecoms supply chain
  - identify opportunities and lobby for the rollout of R100 in the Repopulation Zone

### **Net Zero: Grid Network**

- 4.10 Uist and Barra are currently served by a Distribution connection from National Grid at Fort Augustus through Skye and subsea to Lochcarnan. This connection is rated at 14MW and was installed in the early 1990's. Following the recent failure of the contemporaneous subsea cable between Skye and Harris, SSEN Distribution is proposing, during its next (ED2) Business Plan period from 2023 to 2028, to replace the existing subsea cable and to add a second cable for resilience, both rated at 14MW. This will introduce more headroom for renewable energy projects in Uist and Barra but connection to grid will remain constrained until wider transmission network reinforcement is undertaken across Lochaber and Skye around 2026.
- 4.11 As Crown Estate Scotland's ScotWind Offshore Wind Leasing Round opens up 25GW of renewable generation around Scotland, Uist and Barra remain constrained in terms of the volume of Offshore Wind that can be deployed. Deployment to the west is heavily constrained by Ministry of Défense activity and deployment to the east is not possible due to the Southern Minch being scoped out of Crown Estate Scotland's 'Innovation and Targeted Oil & Gas Decarbonisation' (INTOG) Leasing Round which supports innovative deployment of Floating Offshore Wind at less than 100MW.
- 4.12 Engagement has been opened with Marine Scotland in support of Offshore Wind deployment around Uist and Barra. Firstly, the case has been made for small, single-turbine Floating Offshore Wind deployments to be permitted within the INTOG scoped-out area on a case-by-case basis. Small Offshore Wind deployments of 15MW to 20MW open opportunity for Green Hydrogen production or the supply of locally generated electricity to island homes and businesses.
- 4.13 An 'Area of Search' for Offshore Wind to the south and east of Barra featured in Marine Scotland's 2018 Regional Locational Guidance but was removed prior to finalisation of the Sectoral Marine Plan for ScotWind. This 'Area of Search' was apparently removed from guidance due to potential conflict with shipping. A smaller area, south and west of Barra, could be safely reinstated into the Sectoral Marine Plan for future rounds of ScotWind with no conflict between and shipping, defence or environmental designation. If this area off Barra can be reinstated it opens the opportunity for Lochboisdale to become a ScotWind Operations & Maintenance base and for South Uist to host Green Hydrogen production with conversion to Ammonia for export or for ship fuelling.

### **Net Zero: Energy Plan**

- 4.14 In 2021 Community Energy Scotland (CES) were commissioned to develop an Energy Plan for Uist. That plan will emerge by mid-summer 2022 with CES presently reporting that the main themes developing revolve around the following:
- the need for an electric vehicle charging network
  - identification of hydrogen options for larger vehicles
  - greater energy efficiency support
  - more efficient local waste and recycling services
  - exploration of mini heat from waste plants
  - initiation of peatland support schemes
  - removal of distribution grid surcharges
  - collective action on energy and climate change
  - energy and food – more local growing to reduce the food miles
- 4.15 Development of actions under the Energy Plan will be an important consideration when the Plan is published.

## **CROSS-CUTTING THEMES**

### **Gaelic**

- 5.1 Integrating Gaelic language development and opportunities into this plan is viewed as critical to its over-all success. There is an opportunity to think of the language progressively and seek to integrate Gaelic into each of the investments or initiatives from the outset. There are also opportunities to think more innovatively about local planning for the language and to support community-generated approaches and initiatives.

### **Skills**

- 5.2 Skills development is a critical component of the Repopulation Zone plan. It is essential for the skills and learning requirements of each job, investment or initiative to be fully assessed from the outset and for appropriate skills development approaches to be built into each project. Apprenticeships can be key to improving talent retention and maximising opportunities across the apprenticeship family are essential.
- 5.3 It will also be essential that the store of skills available in the community is fully understood to allow capacity to be built and developed. Consultation on the evolution of UHI Outer Hebrides and evidence informing the UHI curriculum review can support the development of a core community skills offer next steps, with support from the Scottish Government Island Team.
- 5.4 Improving access to skills support and provision will support talent attraction and retention. Settlement officers, working with agencies, providers and the third sector, can help the integration of business and skills support. There is also an opportunity to improve the CIAG ecosystem locally through early implantation of the career review recommendations.

### **Community Wealth Building**

- 5.5 The Outer Hebrides Community Wealth Building (CWB) Action Plan identifies the Uist Repopulation Zone as one of the critical elements within the CWB Plan. In this regard it states:
- 5.6 “Repopulating the islands will be crucial in achieving the community wealth building vision laid out in this document. As such, supporting the progress which is already underway with the repopulation zones and affordable housing places is a key recommendation, as it could be a way to deeply embed community wealth building into the Outer Hebrides. It is in these zones that a “Trial the Isles” type scheme could be embedded, to enable workers in key industries to come back to the islands as a way to encourage them to return full time. Any such scheme should be mindful of the identity of the Outer Hebrides and ensure that a unified brand identity is utilised across all media messaging.

## ACTIONS

<b>Action on Housing</b>
deliver 36 housing units via the Affordable Housing Programme
deliver the Smart Clachan project
Identify developer-led housing opportunities
develop and implement an Empty Homes project

<b>Action on Jobs</b>
create 1.5 FTE support jobs to support implementation of the Action Plan
deliver the suite of identified capital investment projects
develop support mechanisms for start-ups and relocating businesses
develop a Strategic Communications Programme
scope out potential for a "Digital Nomads" Initiative
explore potential for the creation of a Creative and Media Hub
support the Lochboisdale Place-Based Initiative
research potential for a Uist Air-Freight Pilot
scope out opportunity for a "Trial the Isles" initiative

<b>Action on Infrastructure</b>
deliver a LUF Transport Bid to double track priority road sections
Identify new technology digital pilots
Identify skills requirements to support the telecoms supply chain
Identify opportunities to accelerate R100 roll-out
engage with industry stakeholders to accelerate grid reinforcement
support the case for small offshore wind deployments within INTOG
lobby to reinstate an Area of Search into the Sectoral Marine Plan
support deliver of the emerging Uist Energy Plan

<b>Action on Gaelic</b>
ensure each individual project within this Action Plan has its own dedicated Gaelic development plan
build on the opportunities created by the demand for Gaelic language learning
promote Gaelic to those returning / moving to the area
empower Third Sector organisations and the network of Gaelic officers to create a Gaelic language plan for the area which supports existing residents and new arrivals
work with service providers to increase the use of Gaelic in health, social care, education, and childcare service

<b>Action on Skills</b>
skills and training opportunities considered within every new public sector job, investment, or initiative
early implementation of Career Review recommendations to improve the local CIAG ecosystem.
Introduction of a holistic CIAG offer to individuals and / or families, promoted through the Settlement Officer
Integrate business support and employer skills engagement activity
implementation of the UHI Curriculum review and wider expansion of apprenticeship family across all providers: Adhartas, Comhairle, UHI, and others
Identify opportunities to create and deliver Gaelic-medium apprenticeships
Identify routes to increase language fluency, skills and confidence for existing speakers and learners