



CORPORATE STRATEGY 2024 – 2027



OUR VISION

To have a sustainable population and socially and economically thriving communities with a focus on our quality of life, natural heritage, and Gàidhlig language and culture.



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T A B L E O F C O N T E N T S



INTRODUCTION





Our Corporate Strategy aims to set out the priorities and strategic direction of the Comhairle for the period 2024-2027. A review was undertaken to ensure that the Corporate Strategy continues to state and communicate the ambition, aspirations and commitments of the Comhairle for this Comhairle term.

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar hopes to celebrate in 2025, 50 years of local government in and for the communities of the Western Isles, and it is as important now as in 1975 for the Comhairle, as the elected representative authority for our islands, to be clear and confident about our strategic ambitions for the immediate future but also to acknowledge all that has been achieved.

As well as delivering key services to our Island communities, the Comhairle, as the only local democratically elected organisation in the Western Isles has been the Islands' key advocate. This advocacy has had significant impact throughout these years in areas such as promoting the Gàidhlig language, funding for infrastructure such as causeways and bridges, economic development through the Island's Growth Deal and Crown Estate funding, the building of new schools and care homes, national recognition of the uniqueness of our Islands through the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 and the development of a National Islands Plan and more recently our work in lobbying the Scottish Government on transport and infrastructure concerns.

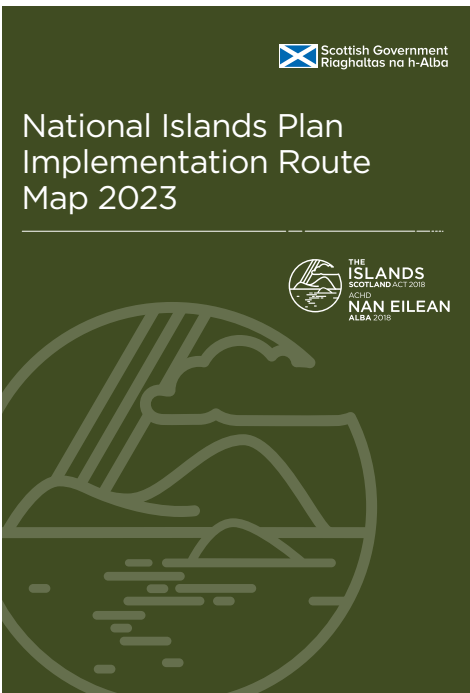
Our aim is to continue to be ambitious as we set out the strategy for the next three years.

We must also acknowledge all that is happening on the national and international stage as well as locally, and its impact. The COVID-19 pandemic had significant effects on our communities and economy, demonstrating that the Outer Hebrides are not insulated from global shocks, but also confirming that we have resilient, innovative and collaborative communities, businesses and organisations. Yet, the pandemic which was the main focus from 2020-2022, has been largely overtaken by issues such as cost increases caused by, among other issues, high levels of inflation, particular increases in energy, food and construction costs, Brexit and the Ukraine war.

The conflict in Ukraine has had its impacts locally, and the Comhairle has supported the UK and Scottish Governments efforts to ensure provision for those seeking refuge from Ukraine by providing housing and support to those displaced persons and through the local management of the Homes for Ukraine scheme. This work is done alongside the work already in place to support refugees and asylum seekers from Afghanistan and Syria.

These programmes have been successful as we have worked closely with our communities and partners to ensure that arriving families have been supported to participate fully in island life.

The rising cost of living has affected families and individuals across the UK with rising inflation and fuel price increases. These increases have been particularly felt by individuals, families and communities throughout the Outer Hebrides, which as well as being a relatively low wage economy also has high levels of fuel poverty. The Comhairle responded by identifying funding to establish a support scheme in December 2022, supplemented by £360k from the Scottish Government's Islands Emergency Cost Crisis Fund to ensure that support went further and was longer lasting.





The scheme supported individual households, by way of a £100 payment to households in receipt of CTR (Council Tax Reduction) and sought applications from community groups to support households in dealing with the cost of living crisis with the remaining funds allocated to community groups for a variety of initiatives, such as food and electricity/fuel vouchers and the provision of warm spaces, including meals and refreshments.

holiday it is more important than ever that people are enabled to have confidence in our transport infrastructure.

With significant and relentless budget cuts over recent years and with much of our funding directed to specific service areas, the Comhairle, as the elected community leader is arguing for more control over deciding its priorities and how the total resource for our islands is prioritised and spent. It should be for elected and accountable Local Authorities to determine how public money is best spent within their localities, taking account of local needs and priorities, and in consultation with communities, building on principles of Community Wealth Building and

wherever possible, participatory budgeting. With this in mind, we have therefore been influential in – and wholly supportive of – renewed commitment to public sector reform and the need for the development of a single authority for our islands.

In developing our latest Corporate Strategy it is important that we address as far as we can the key challenges the Comhairle and the Islands face. The Comhairle remains as committed as ever to ensuring our strategies and priorities resonate with the people we serve and that local communities are at the heart of our decision-making. These ambitions are not limited by budget, and we will continue to explore all available opportunities to access funding to achieve these ambitions.

With our partners across the public, private and third sectors, we will work to ensure that the Outer Hebrides has a sustainable population, a strengthened economy and a skilled workforce to match the challenges and opportunities that will emerge as we progress with and deliver our vision, focusing as always on our people: our children and families, elderly and vulnerable, and on our local businesses, communities and unique heritage, culture and natural environment.

Chief Executive

Comhairle Leader



Locally, there have been severe challenges with transportation infrastructure, primarily the lack of resilience within the ageing ferry fleet, and impacting particularly on communities in Uist. The Comhairle has been a leading voice in challenging the Scottish Government and transport providers over the significant impact that is having on island life and local businesses. Indeed, as we promote the islands as an attractive location to live and do business as well as a place to

Community wealth building in the Outer Hebrides
 Final report – March 2021




CLES
 the national organisation
 for local economies

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AMBITION



OUR AMBITION 2024-2027

OUR VISION

To have a sustainable population and socially and economically thriving communities with a focus on our quality of life, natural heritage, and Gàidhlig language and culture.



OUR MISSION

The mission of the Comhairle is to deliver quality, customer-focused services with an emphasis on community empowerment and partnership working to ensure that the Islands maintain their social cohesion and have a strong and sustainable natural and economic environment.

OUR CORE VALUES

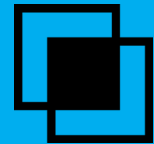
The Comhairle's Core Values will guide Services in the delivery of their business plans to the local community to:



Be ambitious



Be efficient



Be open and transparent



Listen and empower our communities



Care for and support those in need



Work in partnership



Promote our natural environment



Promote community wellbeing



Promote fairness and equality for all





PRIORITIES AND COMMITMENTS

We deliver local services to nearly 27,000 people living in the Outer Hebrides and through greater partnership working and aligned allocation of resources, supported by public service reform, we can strengthen the communities and economy of the Outer Hebrides by supporting a strong and socially inclusive plan that creates empowered, resilient communities, based on a green economy in which digital connectivity and innovation are prioritised.

The Comhairle will work together with partners to deliver this updated Corporate Strategy for 2024 - 2027. The Corporate Strategy ensures that there is a golden thread that runs from national priorities through the Community Planning Partnership and its Local Outcome Improvement Plan, into the Comhairle's priorities. These priorities are then delivered through the service business plans.

THE GLOBAL GOALS For Sustainable Development



NATIONAL OUTCOMES



LOCAL OUTCOME IMPROVEMENT PLAN



CORPORATE STRATEGY 2024 - 2027 STRATEGIC PRIORITIES



A Suite of KPIs has been collated to provide a consistent basis for the Comhairle to assess if the outcomes of people in the Western Isles are improving over time and support data-driven decision making. An annual progress report is made available to the public on the Corporate Strategy web page.



ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS



A key element of planning is to understand the internal and external environment that may have an impact on the Comhairle’s ability to achieve its strategic priorities. An environmental analysis was undertaken to identify and assess the level of threat or opportunity key issues may present and to ascertain the strengths and weaknesses within the Comhairle that may support or hinder the delivery of its commitments. The analysis will help the Corporate Management Team align strategies with the environment and is summarised below.

INTERNAL

EXTERNAL

STRENGTHS

- Islands Deal
- Islands Act
- Strong Community Spirit
- Apprenticeships
- Low Employee Turnover Rates
- Strong Financial Management
- Coterminous Boundaries with Partners
- Good Governance
- Strong Advocacy
- High Reputation
- Good Community Engagement

WEAKNESSES

- Ageing Assets
- Funding Constraints
- Lack of Discretion to Allocate Funding
- Loss of Structural Funding
- Lack of Island Based Outsourcing Opportunities
- Increased Costs and Commitments
- Data Demands
- Dependence on External Transport Providers
- Resilience of Services due to Reduced Funding and Recruitment Challenges

OPPORTUNITIES

- Digitalisation
- Green Agenda
- Gàidhlig
- Island Culture and Heritage
- Islands Deal
- Service Redesign
- Inward Migration
- Tourism
- Natural Capital

THREATS

- Tourism Infrastructure
- Recruitment and Workforce Challenges
- Cost of Living and Inflation
- Reduced External Funding
- Transport Links
- Lack of Balance in Migration
- Ageing Population
- Loss of Skills
- Climate Change

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CONTEXT

DEMOGRAPHICS

Sustaining and growing our population is at the heart of this Corporate Strategy and is the overarching outcome of all our work. Our entire Corporate Strategy is designed to support the overall aim of ensuring that the Outer Hebrides maintains a sustainable population in the longer term.

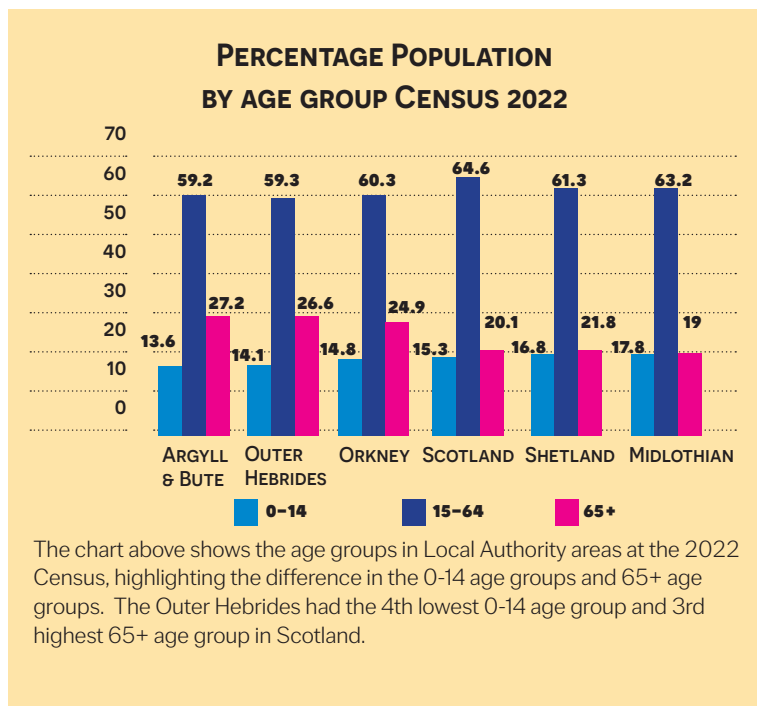
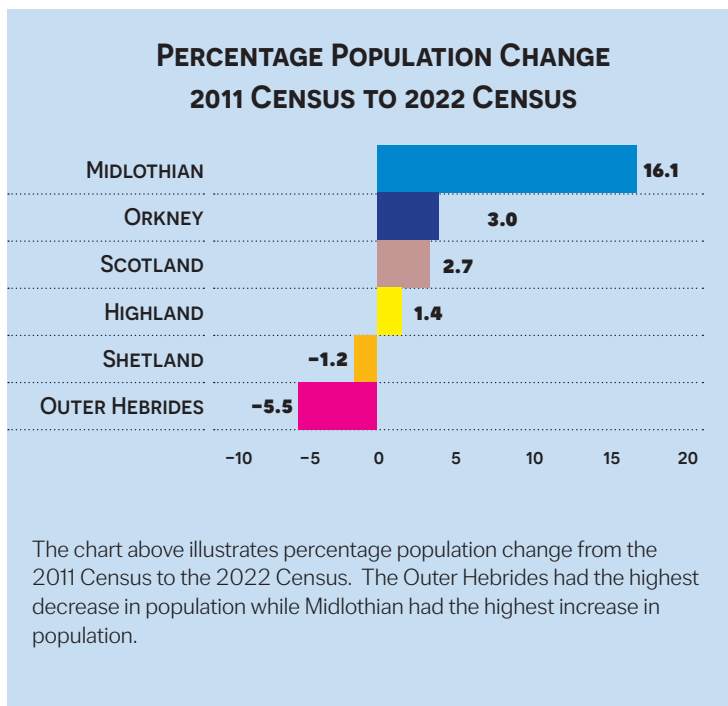
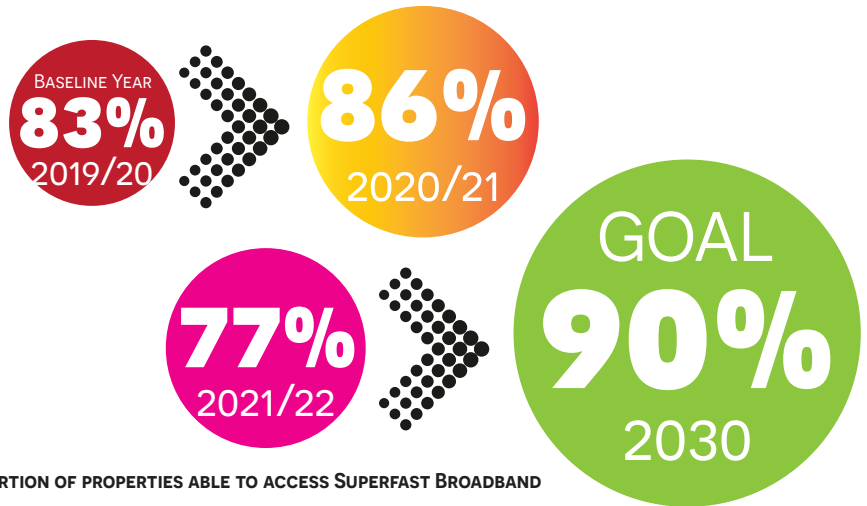
Population decline and an ageing demographic are highlighted as a key issue in the previous Corporate Strategy and in the Local Outcome Improvement Plan 2017-2027. The National Records of Scotland (NRS) migration data (August 2020) reports that there is a reduction in the 15-29 age groups for the Outer Hebrides. However, the reduction in the 15-19 year age group is less than in previous years as more young people take up local opportunities and apprenticeships.

The largest population group in 2018 was

aged 50-54 years. By 2028, this is projected to be the 75-79 age group and over the period 2018 to 2043 the Outer Hebrides is projected to have the highest decrease in households at 11%. But projections do not tell the whole story, and despite these predictions and statistics, over the period 2009 to 2019 net migration has varied greatly in

all island areas and we have had positive net migration since 2016-17.

It is vital that population retention and attraction, particularly of working age individuals and families remains an overarching theme, with key areas such as transport and digital connectivity providing opportunity for businesses and individuals to relocate



BUDGET

The Comhairle budget is largely determined by the level of funding received from the Scottish Government through the Financial Settlement, which has seen a significant reduction in recent years, the largest pro rata reduction in Scotland. In addition, a larger portion of the funding is formally ring fenced or provided with direction for it to be spent in line with government priorities and initiatives, thereby limiting opportunities to spend in line with local need.

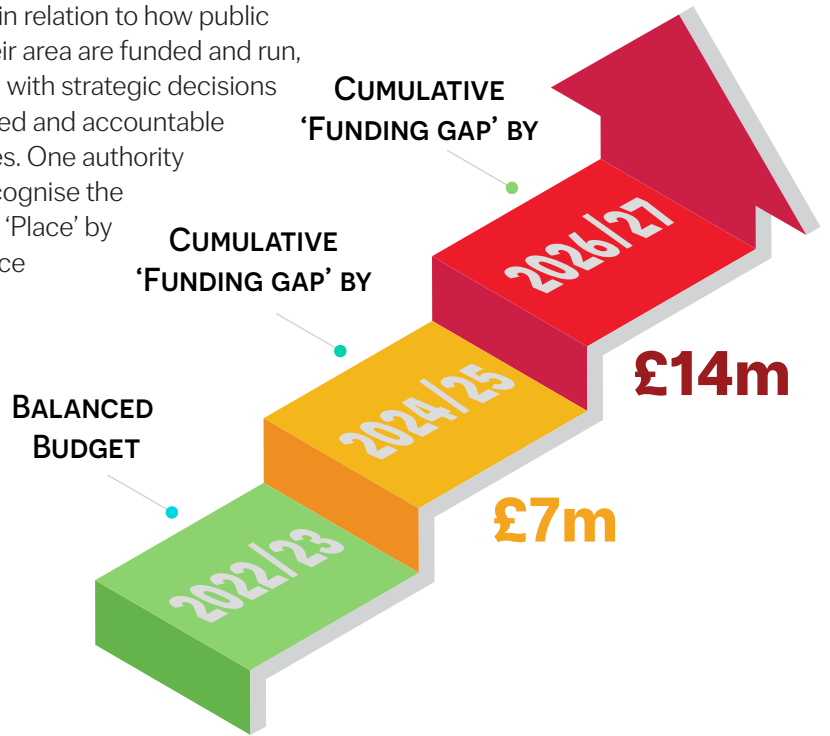
Overall, the Local Government share of the Scottish Government budget has reduced, when compared to other parts of the budget, mainly as a result of Government prioritising spend on health and, less so, on social care. This has meant that, for many years, the Comhairle has had to make efficiency savings, redesign services, reduce its employee numbers and use reserves to bridge the budget gap, arising from service demand and inflationary pressures.

Local authorities have been lobbying for a new Fiscal Framework - more flexibility and powers in how they use their budgets, and to this end the Scottish Government, in June 2023, pledged the Verity Agreement. This is based on the principle that councils know best how to serve the people in their communities and that by giving them greater flexibility on the use of funding they can be empowered to put this knowledge into practice.

As options for service efficiencies dry up and the reality of the cuts becomes more unpalatable, it is more important than ever that there is public sector reform and that the money coming into the islands is combined and used as

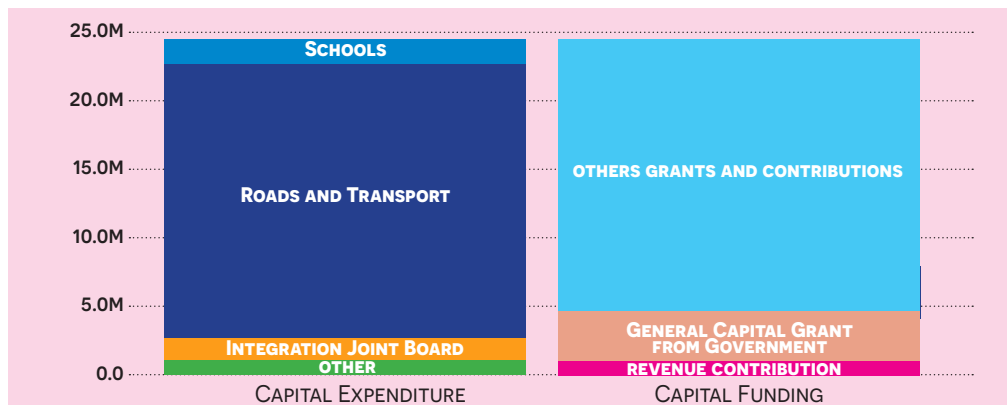
effectively as possible for local priorities. A Single Island Authority model would help to reduce unnecessary bureaucracy and ensure that local communities had more say in relation to how public services in their area are funded and run, in accordance with strategic decisions taken by elected and accountable representatives. One authority would also recognise the importance of 'Place' by focusing service provision and planning on an area rather than an organisational or sectoral basis. This level of empowered community

leadership and the ability to have control over the resources which our community needs could sustain and transform these islands.



MEDIUM TERM FINANCIAL STRATEGY

Work will continue on the development of the Medium Term Financial Strategy, which indicates a budget gap of £7m in 2024/25, rising to just under £14m by 2026/27. The Comhairle has made significant levels of savings in recent years and it is acknowledged that bridging this gap will be extremely challenging.



CAPITAL EXPENDITURE AND FUNDING

The Comhairle spent £24.4m on capital projects (excluding community projects funded through capital grants) in 2022/23. This was financed primarily through capital grants, with any excess funds used to reduce the need for future borrowing, as illustrated above and detailed in Note 34 of the Annual Accounts 2022/23.



WORKFORCE

Effective delivery of our Corporate Strategy requires adequate resources, and for these resources to be directed in the right way. While budget is essential for service delivery, so is our workforce. We have a skilled, and often long-serving, workforce who live in the community and are also recipients of the services delivered. Our employees therefore understand the roles required and the community they serve.

With working from home having been 'the new normal' during the Covid pandemic, many of our employees will continue with a more flexible 'hybrid' approach to working between home and the office.

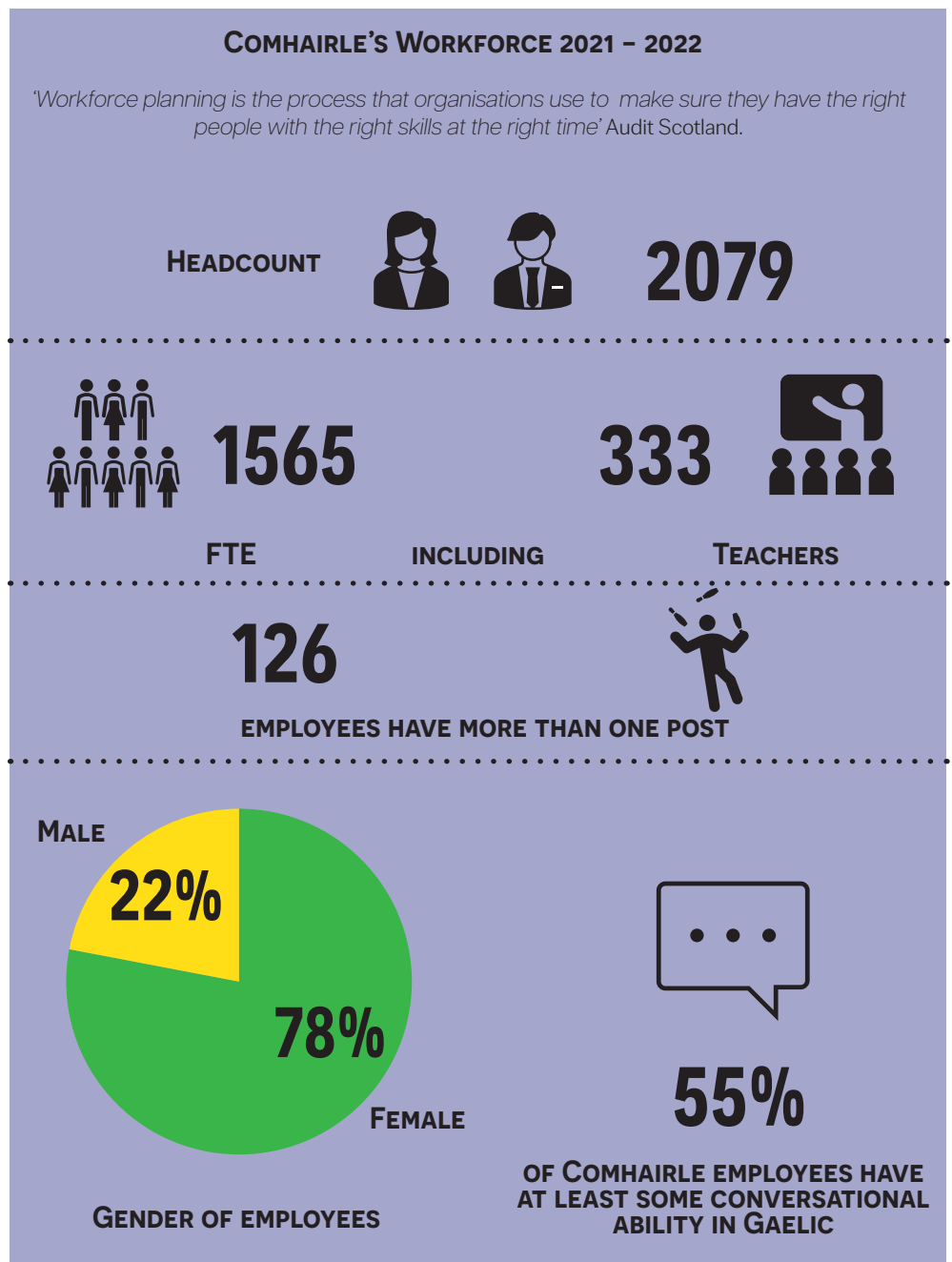
Moving away from work being a place that you go to, to being about what you do, provides a mix of new possibilities, especially as we move towards increased technology and digitalisation. There will be opportunities for the Comhairle to become more flexible and to deliver our priorities in innovative ways.

The Comhairle has always been a strong supporter of Gàidhlig and through our employees we support the Gàidhlig language through our service delivery and through our Gaelic Medium Education (GME). We encourage employees who do not currently speak Gàidhlig to learn the language through the offer of classes. Supporting the growth of our Gàidhlig speaking workforce, particularly in key service areas such as GME and customer services, is important to help us to deliver our strategic priorities.

Our Workforce Strategy anticipates that reductions in funding and increasing costs will continue to be a challenge. We also have an employee profile reflective

of the local demographic of an ageing population and have been working on sustaining our services, upskilling and succession planning, and supporting recruitment, apprenticeships and career grades in areas where recruitment to some posts has become particularly challenging.

As part of our workforce plan, we are committed to providing career pathways and to supporting employees to have high quality work-based learning and to gain qualifications in a wide range of disciplines, including professional qualifications, through apprenticeships and career grades.



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STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

STRENGTHEN THE LOCAL ECONOMY



A strong and vibrant economy is crucial to unlocking the future potential of our communities and will provide employment and income which will benefit all in the Islands. It will also help us retain our young people and attract new families. It will also help us retain our young people and, where they have chosen to complete their studies and training elsewhere, encourage their return, in addition to attracting new families.

To encourage inward migration and support local businesses it is essential that high-speed digital infrastructure is available across all communities in the Outer Hebrides. In our constantly evolving digital age, it is essential that everyone has the digital skills necessary to participate and we are working to provide training that equips young people to meet the needs of our economy.

Economic growth should also support all that we value and therefore contribute to a wellbeing economy. Assets such as our natural heritage

and Gàidhlig language and culture and our overall quality of life are all highly rated and can be used to our economic advantage.

The growth of the tourism industry requires the Comhairle to work with partners to shape the developments, impacts and business opportunities that this growth presents. This partnership



is evident in projects such as the Deep-Water terminal in Stornoway due to open in 2024 which will further support cruise ship tourism and open up other opportunities for developments at Arnish, particularly in the renewables sector.

Redirecting wealth back into the local economy and placing control and benefits into the community is key to the Community Wealth Building approach, to which the Comhairle has always been committed.

The Comhairle is likewise committed to delivering positive change through the green agenda. The new electricity interconnector designed to meet offshore wind targets is scheduled for delivery by 2030 is key to unlocking the renewable energy potential of the Outer Hebrides with the potential for significant community benefit.

The Comhairle is working closely with key energy sectors to promote renewable energy, particularly hydrogen developments, off-shore wind power



and community-owned wind power. The climate change and renewable energy economy provides real opportunity to build innovation and jobs and investment in skills and training between now and 2030 is essential to ensure that the community is able to maximise the benefits locally.

An agreement to invest £100 million in the future economic prosperity of Orkney, Shetland and the Outer Hebrides was signed on 20 January 2023 in Orkney by UK and Scottish Government Ministers and the Council Leaders of the three island groups. The Islands Deal provides funding for specific projects which it is anticipated will help to establish these new industries and unlock return on investment.



SUPPORT CHILDREN, FAMILIES, AND YOUNG PEOPLE

We are committed to having a sustainable population with an emphasis on retaining and attracting families. This requires a focus on quality of life and job availability as well as access to childcare and the quality of education on offer.

Keeping our children and young people safe is our primary concern and child protection is integral in all our work with children, families and young people. We invest in early intervention and work closely with families and the community to ensure that targeted support is available when it is required. We will improve the outcomes of care experienced children and young people through being a good corporate parent and in doing so, address improvements in their experiences as learners in both the quality and sustainability of their post-school destinations.

Through our work on the Scottish Attainment Challenge we support families experiencing poverty and continue to work to close the poverty-related attainment gap.

We continue to work with the Scottish Government to support families and to provide the levels of childcare that will enable those with young children to access work if they wish to.

We will ensure that there is a mix of childcare facilities available and that those provided are of high quality.

In our schools we work with parents, children and young people to promote excellence - both academic and skills excellence.

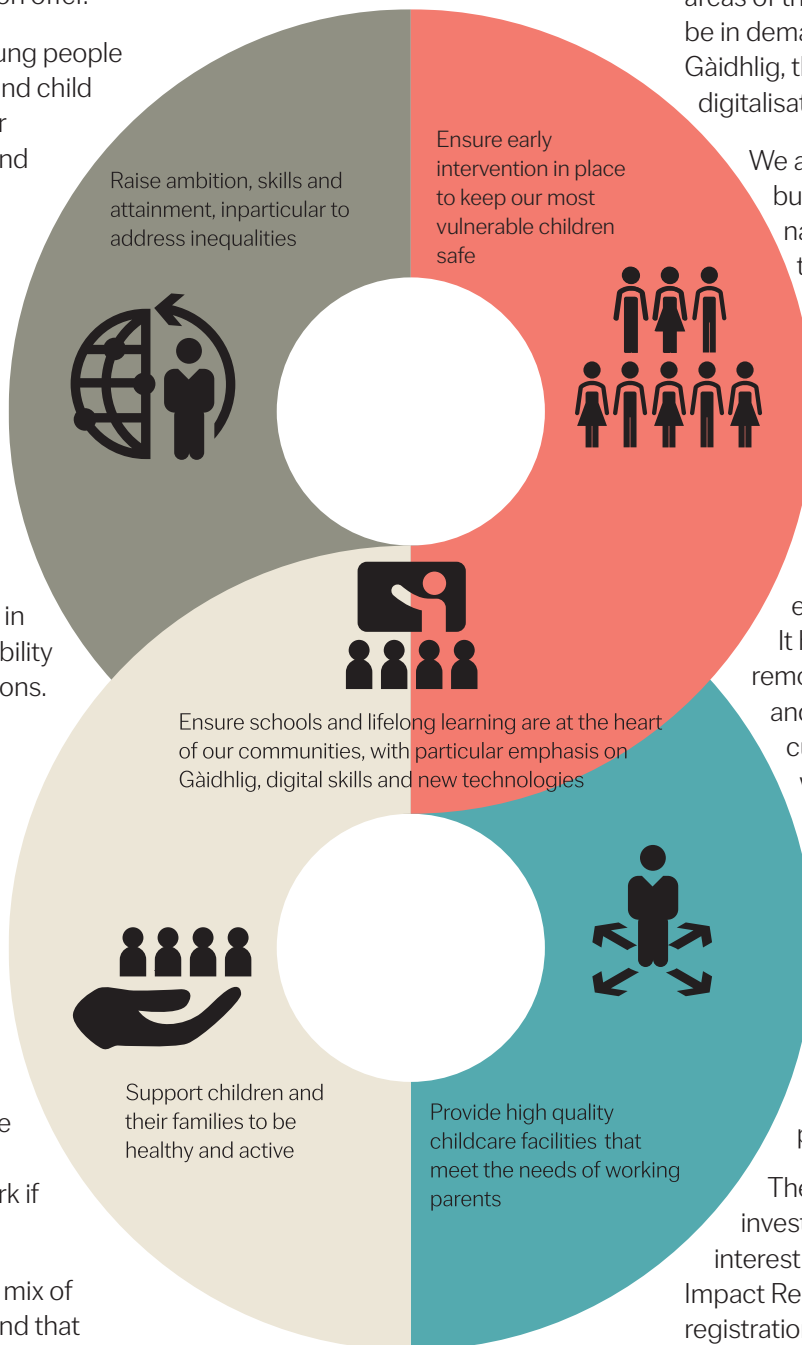
Our focus is on achieving strong and sustained positive outcomes from Education, ensuring that young people are leaving school with the knowledge and skills that employers are looking for and understand the developing areas of the economy where skills will be in demand – areas such as tourism, Gàidhlig, the green agenda and digitalisation.

We are working closely with businesses, both local and national, to understand what the skill needs are, and are working through our schools and employability provision to support young people to meet those needs.

e-Sgoil is an innovative digital school model designed to enhance the equity of subject provision. It has a strong focus on removing barriers to learning and has expanded the curriculum offer to include webinars and evening and holiday study support. It has also developed a sector-leading online interrupted learners programme that supports children and young people to progress their learning and return to school attendance after periods outwith education.

The success of our digital investment has been of national interest and the 2023 Evidence of Impact Report highlights its reach with registrations from all 32 local authority areas in Scotland.

OUR COMMITMENTS





SUPPORT CARING AND RESILIENT COMMUNITIES AND QUALITY OF LIFE

Caring and resilient communities and quality of life are measured by themes such as the Gàidhlig language and culture, our population and demographics, the natural environment, our crofting communities, housing quality and availability, transport and connectivity, the economy and jobs, community safety, health and wellbeing and care and support networks. These are all interconnected, and this Corporate Strategy aims to continue this balance as we protect those most in need, provide care for those who require it, promote equality and offer opportunity for those living in the islands. We will support communities through infrastructure and connectivity development as well as protecting

our Gàidhlig language and cultural heritage.

Support for those who are elderly or vulnerable has always been important in our community. The care undertaken by immediate and extended families, neighbours, voluntary organisations and Comhairle services is of a high standard, and supporting it remains a key priority. Recent investment in our home care service, as well as the new care home and housing with extra care in Stornoway, delivered in partnership with the Hebridean Housing Partnership (HHP), ensures that our elderly and vulnerable continue to get the support they need to continue to live in their own home or in a comfortable care home setting

wherever possible.

While there remains uncertainty about the Scottish Government's direction on a National Care Service, we have been clear that taking a centralised approach is unlikely to improve the delivery of services for those whom we serve.

Services should be designed and delivered by, and accountable to, local communities. Models of service delivery should reflect local need and priorities, and it is the Comhairle that is best placed to understand lived experience within more rural communities.

With our ambition for a thriving economy and population, it is



important that there is adequate housing available to meet demand and we are committed to the delivery of our Local Housing Strategy. With a thriving tourism sector there is a significant amount of short-term rental available but longer-term rental, social housing and private sector housing collectively is not keeping up with demand. There is concern that increases in house prices, mortgage rates and rents is pricing people out of the market and that older housing stock with poor insulation and the increases to domestic heating bills is adding to cost of living pressures faced by many individuals and families. The Outer Hebrides already has



the highest levels of fuel poverty in Scotland and the Comhairle will continue to work with partners on poverty action and housing development.

Our natural heritage, with its unique habitats and coastlines, needs to be protected with adaptation in place as necessary to reduce climate change impacts. These islands have scenery and wildlife that is attractive and a Gàidhlig language and cultural heritage that is exceptional; all of which makes this a key destination for visitors. Our vision for these islands supports sustainable development which protects and emphasises all that is good.



DELIVER COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

As the democratically elected voice of the Outer Hebrides, the Comhairle advocates strongly for the Islands, lobbying and providing leadership on strategic issues. This has been evident in recent times on issues such as the Islands Act, the Islands Growth Deal, ferry, air, broadband and mobile connectivity, key capital projects such as the Deep Water terminal, Barra and Vatersay Community Campus, and on public sector reform. To retain this influence, we must have sufficient funding to sustain and develop our services and to have control over how the money is spent.

As an inclusive local authority, we work closely with our communities through engagement and empowerment and our Elected Members are well known and visible within their ward areas. As we enhance our commitment to community engagement, we are keen to engage our communities actively both digitally and face to face and to do further work on participatory budgeting.

The revised Scheme for the

establishment of Community Councils and associated Governance Documents introduced for the new term of Community Councils runs to October 2027. It is envisaged that this will enhance our commitment to community engagement further.

The Comhairle's new Gaelic Language Plan 2022-2027 highlights our role as a leader in respect of sustaining the Gàidhlig language in our communities and we are committed to the aim of ensuring that Gàidhlig has a sustainable future as an economic, social and cultural asset for the Western Isles.

Our Climate Change Strategy seeks to provide strategic direction on climate change within the Comhairle and ensure that statutory obligations on mitigation and adaptation are met. It commits us to continuing to work with our partners and the community to move towards Net Zero and we will share all the plans that we develop. We are committed to reducing the impact we have on the global environment and on minimising

any environmental damage and pollution to our islands. Our ambitious approach to renewable energy innovation, our procurement practices and our environmental services will be integral to drive improvement but there must at the same time be support for a truly just transition which reflects the circumstances of our islands and the need for meaningful investment in housing and other infrastructure.

As a service provider we are committed to providing high levels of customer service. While we are ambitious about our digital engagement, we will ensure that we continue to support face-to-face customer service where there is a demonstrable need. By integrating equality considerations into our day-to-day work, we can improve the way in which we conduct business as an employer and when we plan and deliver our services. Everyone working for, or with, the Comhairle has a responsibility to promote equality of opportunity and build positive relationships between different groups.

OUR COMMITMENTS







CORPORATE STRATEGY 2024 – 2027



Comhairle nan Eilean Siar

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Graphic Design: The Print Room Comhairle nan Eilean Siar 2024