

THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Agenda Item	9
Report No	HC/48/23

Committee: The Highland Council

Date: 14 December 2023

Report Title: Assessing Future Population Related Challenges in the Highland Council Area

Report By: Executive Chief Officer – Infrastructure, Environment and Economy
Executive Chief Officer – Housing and Property
Executive Chief Officer – Health and Social Care

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 Following the census of 2022, a number of population trends for the Highland area have been identified, which are shown in this paper. These show an on-going pattern of increase in the urban areas around the Inner Moray Firth, as well as a drift of people away from the western Highlands, Sutherland and Caithness areas in particular.
- 1.2 The impact of the changing demographics is felt on a number of services. For example, our ageing population creates pressures on the adult social care services which have a documented challenge in meeting needs. There is a lack of available housing supply, including housing suitable to meet the needs of an ageing population, which creates challenges in sustaining and growing populations in rural areas.
- 1.3 The paper explains the challenges in meeting the care and housing needs and describes potential options for solutions that would require to be explored with national government (by Scottish and UK). These issues will potentially be exacerbated by pressure on future finance. In the meantime, Members are asked to acknowledge the position and reflect on the radical solutions that will be required.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to:
 - i. **Consider** the population trends affecting the Highland area;
 - ii. **Acknowledge** the specific challenges facing Highland Council and NHS Highland relating to social care provision; and
 - iii. **Agree** that further planning be done on a comprehensive response to the Scottish Government Repopulation Action Plan, using the framework set out in Paragraph 7.4.

3. Implications

3.1 Resource

3.1.1 Highland Council is funded per head of population but its service provision is more costly than others due to the geographical expanse of its authority area. Its resource can be diluted and its service provision can lack resilience due to specific pressures that can build up, for example, related to the inability to recruit staff to key roles in social care. Maximising the use of our resource and ensuring that financial planning mitigates the risk of service operation in rural areas is an on-going challenge.

3.1.2 Meanwhile, resource will have to be effectively allocated to sustain infrastructure to cope with an increasing population in the Inner Moray Firth area.

3.2 Legal

The National Islands Plan published in terms of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 makes statutory provision for improved outcomes for island communities including, population, housing and health and social care. Due regard to these particular provisions must form part of any planned actions to sustain communities.

3.3 Community (Equality, Poverty, Rural and Island)

The future population trends affecting rural and island areas needs to be factored into longer term planning by the Highland Council, as an operating model for the future is considered. Highland Council needs to think about its future civic footprint and local service provision and to respond to these continuing challenges in current and future activity.

3.4 Climate Change / Carbon Clever

Climate change and the drive to net zero is having a net positive population effect in the Inner Moray Firth area, but a net negative effect in rural communities, which may experience considerable disruption to infrastructure due to significant climate events.

3.5 Risk

3.5.1 There is a clear risk of not intervening to deal with the emerging risk of significant population growth in the Inner Moray Firth and the concomitant population drain from western Highlands and Caithness areas.

3.5.2 Focusing on only challenges and difficulties can risk overlooking the huge untapped opportunity that exists across the Highland area. We have a wealth of natural land-based and marine resources and the scope for renewable energy initiatives is almost limitless with the potential for the Highlands to become the green powerhouse of the nation. We have also secured the Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport which promises significant wider benefits for the whole of the Highlands as well as for Scotland. The biggest risk possibly lies in limiting the opportunities we have due to a lack of supporting infrastructure and a long-term vision for growth.

3.6 Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)

As the change process for the future council operating model is considered, the workforce implications will require to be worked through. This will involve the normal policy considerations of health and safety matters.

3.7 Gaelic

Clearly, some of the communities most affected by the loss of population are some of those with high prevalence of Gaelic medium communication. Part of the recipe for

sustaining communities is related to realising the benefits of the Gaelic Language Plan.

4. Scotland's Census 2022

4.1 Some early results from [Scotland's Census 2022](#) were released on 14 September 2023, including:

<u>Population</u>	<u>2011</u>	<u>2022</u>	<u>% Change</u>
Scotland	5,295,403	5,436,600	2.7% increase
Highland	232,132	235,400	1.4% increase

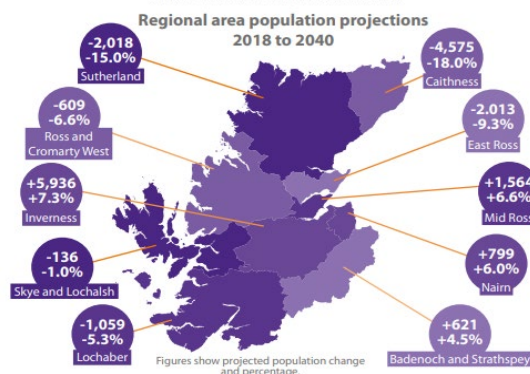
<u>Age 65+</u>	<u>2011</u>	<u>2022</u>	<u>% Change</u>
Scotland	16.8%	20.1%	3.3% increase
Highland	18.5%	23.7%	5.2% increase

Population Trends:

Settlement	2003 to 2020		Population change	
	2003	2020	-/+	%
Fortrose and Rosemarkie	1,800	2,320	+520	+22.4%
Inverness*	52,470	65,020	+12,550	+19.3%
Portree	1,920	2,310	+390	+16.9%
Nairn	8,570	10,190	+1,620	+15.9%
Fort William	9,700	10,260	+560	+5.5%
Wick		7,100 to 6,870	-230	-3.3%
Thurso and Scrabster		7,680 to 7,390	-290	-3.9%
Kinlochleven		890 to 760	-130	-17.1%
Mallaig		780 to 660	-120	-18.2%

*Inverness total includes Culloden and North Kessock

Population Projections:



Source: Highland Council Corporate Plan 2022-2027 and National records of Scotland

- 4.2 Overall slight population growth in Highland masks significant regional disparities and, although the 2022 Census has not yet published local data (due Spring 2024), there is no indication that the trends have changed in any way, with severe population decline projected for Caithness (-18%) and Sutherland (-15%) by 2040.
- 4.3 Natural change in Highland was negative (more deaths than births) between 2011 and 2018. Migration into the region is therefore the key driver of population change, and the nature and extent of this varies substantially across the region, impacting demographic changes.
- 4.4 Younger age groups are decreasing in numbers, whilst the older age groups are growing. Between 2001 and 2021, the 0 to 15 age group in Highland saw a decrease of -6.7%. The 75+ age group saw an increase of +60.6%. The age structure within areas is critical to growing and sustaining communities. The older population structure of the Highlands and Islands has been linked to its attractiveness as a retirement destination. Due to the natural ageing of the population and in-migration of people aged 65+, numbers in this age group have grown considerably.
- 4.5 Reflecting this, dependency ratios (the number of dependents (under 16's and over 65's) per 100 people of working age (16-64)) across the region are higher than the national average and projected to increase significantly. However, it should be

recognised that demographic change has prompted much policy attention on extending working lives beyond traditional retirement ages. The employment rate of those aged 65+ has shown a slight increase, so there is significant potential for growth in the employment rate of older people.

- 4.6 In Spring 2024, further Census data will be released including population by age and sex at all geographies down to output areas (unrounded). Output areas are made up of approximately 50 households.
- 4.7 The Council has been engaging through COSLA, the Convention of the Highlands and Islands, and directly with Ministers in relation to the challenges presented by population changes in the Highlands. Addressing population decline, rapid population growth, and changing demographics require a range of approaches that need to be nuanced and geographically sensitive.
- 4.8 The Scottish Government's draft Addressing Depopulation Action Plan (ADAP) sets out what is being done across government departments and elsewhere to address a range of factors that have an impact on population issues. It shows that there is a significant amount of historic and current activity, and it demonstrates that the Scottish Government acknowledges the depopulation crisis facing rural Scotland. However, the latest census figures suggest that, taken together, it is having little effect in terms of altering the current trajectory and doing more of the same is therefore unlikely to deliver a different outcome. Issues around access to housing, transport, quality employment and the availability of skilled workers are all interconnected. Consequently, a whole system approach is needed if the compound impact in rural areas of historic underfunding, combined with the high cost of service delivery and widespread market failure is to be reversed.
- 4.9 As referenced above, there are however great opportunities (beyond the Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport) throughout Highland to ensure long term sustainability. Developments in renewable energy of all types, activity at ports and harbours like Kishorn, Wick and Scrabster related to the offshore sector or to decommissioning, space, aquaculture and the continued importance of the tourism sector are all key areas that require a joined up approach to retaining and attracting population to the region. The Council is working with partners such as local Chambers of Commerce, the Regional Economic Partnership and other partnerships such as Fort William 2040 and Focus North to ensure that the interconnected issues identified above have actions attached to them.

5. Delivering Social Care Services in Remote, Rural and Island Areas

5.1 Highland Council's Current Position:

Delivering Social Care Services in the Highlands and Islands is particularly challenging at the current time. In specific, these relate to:

- care home sustainability;
- workforce challenges and skills gaps; and
- delivering person centred care at home, including adaptations to meet particular needs through delivery of the Care and Repair and Handyperson Services.

5.2 Workforce Challenges and Skills Gap

- 5.2.1 Highland Council is facing significant current staffing pressures, which Impact on service delivery and challenges over recruitment. In the current years, we are seeking

to address this through Cross Sector Collaboration and Care Academy and NHS Reserves.

5.2.2

There is for instance a significant current vacancy level in Children's Services Social Work of circa 35%. This creates pressures in sustaining effective operations and a considerable leadership challenge in providing mitigation. Likewise, a shortage of people available to deliver care at home services make it harder for older and vulnerable adults to remain looked after in their own communities. Police Scotland, the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and NHS Highland report similar challenges related to providing an effective workforce for rural areas.

5.3 **Care home sustainability**

5.3.1 There are also significant concerns regarding the sustainability of the independent care home sector particularly in the context of the National Care Home Contract which is based on a 50-bed care home, operating at 100% occupancy. This model does not adequately recognise that the Highlands has a widely dispersed population living in small and remote communities and consequently will operate very small care home facilities compared with the national average.

5.3.2 Only 8 homes in Highland have over 50 beds (the minimum number at which homes are generally considered to be financially viable) and 20 care homes have fewer than 20 beds. Six care home closures since January 2022 and one acquired by the Council. Care home provision in Highland presents significant financial sustainability and vulnerability risks.

5.4 **Delayed Hospital Discharge**

There is also a concern at levels of delayed discharge, unmet need and poorer outcomes for those experiencing delayed discharge. The levels of delayed discharge in NHS Highland is connected to the care provision operation for adults by NHS Highland. This increases costs to Highland Council and means that there are challenges in achieving best value.

5.5 **Transformation**

5.5.1 There is a need to transform and reframe the way adult social care services are delivered. In Highland there is a clear need to shift the balance of care from residential provision by developing Self Directed Support options, improving housing to enable people to stay within their communities and expanding the provision of care at home services through: -

- Self-Directed Support (Choice and Control)
- Housing
- Community Led Support
- Whole Family Wellbeing Approach

5.5.2 There are current restrictions affecting how SDS moneys can be deployed by families which cuts against the priority to create community capacity to sustain people at home and avoid residential care. This has been raised with Scottish Government and a unique solution for rural communities in the Highlands and has the support of both NHS Highland and Highland Council senior officers.

5.6 **Desired Outcome:**

5.6.1 There are a number of desired outcomes from current engagement with Scottish Government officials, which are listed below:

- rurality weighting to calculate National Care Home rates;
- support growth and development of social care workforce;
- expand provision of affordable housing and Childcare; and
- enhanced flexibility over SDS option1 payments.

5.6.2 Clearly, when Highland as a local authority area is funded on a per head of population basis, the rural challenges including high unit costs of delivery and market failure, will dilute the positive effects of funding and make policy implementation difficult, as well as creating system fragility in the operating model, with potential weaknesses in partnership, due to the impact of this on key partners.

6. Housing Strategy

6.1 The Council's Programme has "Accessible and Sustainable Housing" as one of its 5 key themes reflecting the critical role housing plays in sustaining communities and promoting economic growth. Programme commitments include:

- Building quality, affordable, energy efficient, and accessible homes;
- Develop housing options that help vulnerable and elderly adults to be cared for close to home and community; and
- Work with partners to develop key worker housing opportunities to sustain public services and economic growth.

6.2 There are large numbers of households across Highland experiencing 'housing need' whilst at the same time there continues to be substantial pressure on Highland's supply of affordable housing. To provide the evidence required to calculate local housing and land requirements over the next 20 years, Highland Council has produced a Housing Need & Demand Assessment (HNDA), which has been used to arrive at targets within the SHIP.

6.3 The Highland Local Housing Strategy 2023-2028 was approved at Housing & Property Committee in April 2023. It confirms the ongoing pressure on social housing, but also considers projected future housing demand across all tenures. This analysis was based on the Housing Need and Demand Assessment which was verified by the Scottish Government in 2021-2022.

6.4 The Strategy analyses the potential housing impact of changes in the number and type of households living in the region. The main concern identified is the substantial increase in the older population in Highland. A key objective of stakeholders who drafted the Strategy was therefore to ensure that Highland households can stay in a home of their choice for as long as possible.

6.5 The Strategy agrees on key housing priorities to support improved health and wellbeing outcomes for older people. These include:

- building all affordable houses to 'Housing for Varying Needs' standards and enhanced whole-life design features;
- improving access to adapted housing by enabling re-use of adapted properties;
- improving equipment and adaptations processes, speeding up assessment and installations; and
- supporting the roll out and implementation of telecare/telehealth and Care and Repair services.

6.6 Increasing the supply of affordable housing to meet the needs to older people remains a key commitment in Highland. The current Strategic Housing Investment

Programme 2023-2028 is based on a target of approval for at least 500 units each year. Of these 70% will be for affordable rent and 30% for intermediate affordable housing (e.g., low-cost home ownership or mid-market rent), in line with overall Scottish Government targets. There is ongoing discussion with the Scottish Government as to indicative subsidy levels for a revised Programme. These will be submitted to Housing and Property Committee in January 2024.

- 6.7 Repopulation of remote rural communities relies on access to land and infrastructure services as well as sustainable employment opportunities and access to support services. There is a need to work with Communities through development officers based and connected locally. Settlement Officers were established as a pilot project in areas identified as suffering from acute depopulation: Western Isles, Argyll & Bute and Highland, to assist people moving to the region and, provide relocation advice and gather information about any problems they encounter to provide real-time data to inform future actions. However, given that lack of housing was one of the biggest issues for North West Sutherland, Highland Council's Settlement Officer is focussed on working with the communities and landowners to identify land for housing. The availability of housing was deemed of critical importance to the area and while accepting any work in relation to housing and land takes time to achieve outcomes, the project development being carried out by the settlement officer has been an essential part of the response to population challenges in the region. Benefiting from strong local knowledge, the officer has been able to successfully develop positive engagement with the owners of private estates, public bodies, and community groups in the area, with all parties now considering their role in delivering housing projects to support the retention and attraction of people into the area. A cumulative area of 19.4 hectares has been identified by communities for potential housing sites within Community Council Areas, of which a range of sites (6 ha) are being taken forward by the Council for further development consideration.
- 6.8 The higher cost of developing in remote areas is recognised as a potential barrier to the provision of new housing. The Council will continue to work to support new initiatives such as modern construction methods to mitigate challenges.
- 6.9 The Council is working with other Highlands and Islands local authorities as part of an HIE-led Housing Task Force to look into more innovative ways of delivering employment related housing – an essential pre-requisite for further economic growth and to deal with the population challenges.

7. Next Steps

- 7.1 Members should be aware that at present the Scottish Government is engaged in consultation on its forthcoming Addressing Depopulation Action Plan, which has a range of socio-economic considerations within it. As part of the consultation process, the Leader wrote to the Scottish Government. This letter is included for reference in **Appendix 1**.
- 7.2 In the letter, it was stated that 'There also has to be an understanding of the compound impact in rural areas of historic underfunding, combined with the high cost of service delivery and widespread market failure. The impact of these factors makes itself felt across every aspect service delivery and drives people away from rural areas towards towns and cities that are ill-equipped to deal with the influx.' This cites the major challenge that is presented in sustaining communities in the context of decreasing local government funding.

- 7.3 In preparation to respond to the publication of the action plan and to ensure that Highland Council has done its own research as to what may work best to sustain communities, a number of workshops for senior colleagues recently have focussed on the issue of changing population demographics and what an appropriate policy and service design response should look like.
- 7.4 The following headings are expected to feature in the Highland Council plan to Sustain and Develop Rural Communities. It is drawn from engagement with Scottish Government officials and wider research and dialogue across the senior team. It is being posed in recognition of the specific challenges faced by communities in the Highland area.

Draft Elements of a Future Plan to Sustain and Develop All Rural Communities

The following priorities will shape planning in these areas:

Investment in Infrastructure and Place Making

- Job creation through inward and internal investment programmes
- Developing social and affordable housing solutions
- Lands stewardship and appropriate marine conservation
- Revitalising Town Centres

Integrating Service Provision

- Further incorporating educational and training pathways into mainstream educational provision and practice (Workforce for the Future Strategy)
- Enabling healthcare access through community-based solutions
- Building sustainable cultural and recreational amenities (Income Generation Strategy)
- Community engagement to build stronger local place plans

Leveraging Economic Drivers

- Marketing and promotion of the places and the area of the Highlands as a whole
- Promotion of rural tourism, and support through appropriate investment
- Maximising the potential of green energy to transform economic eco-systems of places
- Developing travel solutions to enable more effective service provision and active travel (particularly community transport solutions)
- Encouraging digital and robotic innovation to enable more effective agri-business solutions

Maximising Government Support Through Policy Alignment

- Positive action to promote youth retention
- Leveraging the potential of tax incentives in the Green Free Port to enable change throughout the wider Travel to Work area
- Collaboration with NGOS, trusts and foundations who can be co-opted to support the strategy
- A burning focus on addressing the root causes of poverty and enabling social justice for rural communities.

It is proposed that the future action plan will also reference a number of test of change projects which have been in development across the Highland area which show the power of investment in areas thus far, as part of the Council's programme. These will include:

1. The impact of investment in transport and other significant infrastructure e.g. roads

Connectivity is key to the future of remote rural areas, and it is essential that the benefits of significant investments already carried out, including funding for community transport schemes, investment in roads and bridges and support for air services are measured and reported on, and that this informs local and national funding mechanisms in the future. Decisions on future growth deals or funding bids must be data-led, and this is very much the focus of both UK and Scottish Governments.

2. The status and potential of demonstrator projects

The Council is involved in two specific demonstrator projects in Portree and in Caithness. By promoting a joined-up approach to the use and redevelopment of key public sector buildings in these locations, the hope is that underutilised buildings can be freed up for conversion to housing, as well as delivering a more integrated local service delivery.

3. Pathfinder activity to grow sustainable community based activity

The role of the Council's Settlement Officer in Sutherland has been funded for a further year. It is essential that the outcomes, whether in respect of working with local communities and landowners to identify land for housing or working with other stakeholders to address challenges in child care, are part of a knowledge transfer to other areas in Highland.

Place planning activity underway throughout the area is also critical to identifying locally important changes that are necessary to attract and retain people within the rural parts of Highland.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer – Infrastructure, Environment and Economy

Date: 27 November 2023

Authors: Malcolm Macleod – Executive Chief Officer, Infrastructure, Environment and Economy
Mark Rodgers – Executive Chief Officer, Housing and Property
Fiona Duncan – Executive Chief Officer, Health and Social Care



Mairi Gougeon MSP
Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands
Scottish Government
St. Andrew's House
Regent Road
Edinburgh
EH1 3DG

13 November 2023

Dear Mairi

Addressing Depopulation Action Plan

As you will be aware, the Addressing Depopulation Action Plan (ADAP) was on the agenda for the Convention of the Highlands and Islands. As a result of COHI being rescheduled to a virtual meeting on 27 November, I have taken the opportunity to set out the Council's position below. We would very much welcome ongoing dialogue as this workstream matures and would be happy to engage at both an official and ministerial level to help develop this critical area of work.

I am keen to stress that we are encouraged by the attention the Government is giving to rural depopulation and it is helpful that the ADAP sets out what is being done across government departments and elsewhere to address a range of factors that have an impact on population issues. It shows that there is a significant amount of historic and current activity, and it demonstrates that the Scottish Government acknowledges the depopulation crisis facing rural Scotland.

There are several specific aspects and actions of the ADAP I would like to highlight before concluding on a more strategic reflection:

- The Addressing Depopulation Fund of £180k in the current financial year, split between 3 councils, while welcome, is insufficient to deliver strategic long-term benefit.

- Community Councils – it is not clear how the actions listed in the ADAP will reduce depopulation. The plan is correct in its inference that investment in community growth and local infrastructure is essential if rural depopulation is to be tackled effectively; and that community councils should have a role in informing that investment. However, the reality in the context of reducing local authority budgets is that, unless there is additional funding coming forward, Community Councils are really only able to help to inform decisions about service reduction and cessation. This is more likely to disincentivise people from settling in rural areas.

- Rural Community Hubs – the actions here are very encouraging. We know that with the ongoing pressures on public sector budgets, enabling and empowering the delivery of community-led and managed services is essential. It is also really helpful to develop approaches informed by best practice examples from elsewhere to provide an evidence base of the benefits that can be delivered.

- Housing – this is a critical factor in stabilising and growing the rural population. It supports the rural workforce we need to sustain essential services as well as enabling economic growth across all sectors. The Highland Council has always engaged pro-actively with all Government initiatives to deliver mixed tenure housing and we will continue to do so. We do have a number of comments more specifically which I hope are helpful:
 - Whilst the R&IHAP is welcomed as an initiative, it is light in direct actions and interventions.
 - The review of CPO legislation is helpful but could be difficult and lengthy.
 - The continued support for community-led affordable housing is positive but requires substantial financial support and capacity building.
 - The report needs to have a clearer approach to attracting private developers to rural areas and tackling the impact of lack of housing on the economic stability of rural areas.
 - The single biggest challenge to the delivery of affordable housing and housing for businesses is the excessively high cost of delivering housing in rural areas. The negative cost/value relationship renders many projects unviable. Currently in Highland we have tenders for projects with overall costs exceeding £400,000 for standard 2/3 bedroom homes. This is a clear example of market failure in rural areas and the need for direct government intervention.

- Transport – Possibly even more than housing, access to transport and supporting transport infrastructure is essential to the sustainability of rural communities. It is consequently extremely concerning that the Plan states that its focus on digital is to “inform potential future decision making concerning digital connectivity as a substitute for physical transport connectivity”. Digital is an essential tool and can support and augment wider connectivity, but it absolutely cannot be considered a replacement for actual physical transport – particularly if the intention is to halt rural population decline.

In Highland we are very keen to understand how the Strategic Islands Connectivity Plan will set a vision and priorities for delivery of ferry services in Scotland which will support development of local authority delivery plans and identify benefits to communities and the wider economy.

The commitment to the A9 and A96 is welcome but it is noteworthy that the initiatives listed in the ADAP for Highland have very little relevance to the remote rural areas experiencing the most rapid depopulation.

Ultimately, the section on transport does not provide confidence that there are measures being developed that will genuinely support the growth of our most vulnerable rural areas in Highland and whilst the commitment to further research on transport and digital is positive, it is important to stress the need for pace and urgency.

- Education – LEIP 3 whilst providing for 3 island communities, has not assisted any of the Highland Council’s schools. With only 20% of Highland schools rated as ‘Good’, we are very interested to learn more about the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills’ stated intention to engage and collaborate with COSLA to explore how to address the remaining substandard condition schools, and we are very happy to enter into early engagement on how this would help to support and sustain some of our rural communities in Highland.

It is good to see reference to Gaelic in the ADAP and the recognition of the importance the language has in many rural communities. In terms of Gaelic education more specifically, it would be helpful for there to be a greater recognition that Gaelic Medium Education (GME) is about much more than e-Sgoil. Indeed, there is a pressing need to increase the supply of GME teachers, improve the quality of Gaelic learning resources and the numbers continuing with GME into High School and beyond as this really will help to support Gaelic communities to survive and to thrive. This is recognised by the Government’s Faster Rate of Progress workstream and in UHI’s recently published Gaelic Language Plan and could easily be reflected in the ADAP.

- Health and Social Care – the shortage of workers in the health and social care sector is a major issue in Highland, particularly in social work and care services for older adults, so we welcome the initiative on Support in the Right Direction, and also for further engagement around the delivery of SDS. The Council has authored a report for COHI on this issue and would very much endorse the need for continuing attention to this area of work.

It would be very helpful for the Plan to provide evidence of the impact that current initiatives are having in terms of the demographic challenges and declining population. The latest census figures suggest that, taken together, it is having little effect in terms of altering the current trajectory and we strongly suspect that when the sub regional data is available early in 2024 it is likely to show a further reduction in working age population and a deterioration in the areas most at risk of depopulation. If this is the case, then whilst there are undeniably a multitude of initiatives captured in the ADAP, doing more of the same is unlikely to deliver a different outcome.

To have a sustained and systemic impact, there needs to be a guiding philosophy which delivers a whole system approach, informed by best practice and validated by data. This would be greatly strengthened by greater alignment between government departments and the synthesis and simplification of funding streams. This is not sufficiently apparent in the Plan as currently drafted.

There also must be an understanding of the compound impact in rural areas of historic underfunding, combined with the high cost of service delivery and widespread market failure. The impact of these factors makes itself felt across every aspect service delivery and drives people away from rural areas towards towns and cities that are ill-equipped to deal with the influx. To manage the pressure of the latter the Government must do more to address the root causes and it is of significant concern to us that focus appears to be so quickly directed towards rapid population growth when little of real lasting value is yet to be achieved with regard to depopulation. This is by no means meant to suggest that addressing rural depopulation is simple - it clearly is not - but we do take the view that the ADAP, as currently drafted, does not yet provide the solutions.


I appreciate that many of the comments above may appear negative, however I want to stress how much we welcome the Government's commitment to tackling the depopulation crisis facing rural Scotland.

It is clear that a huge amount of work has gone into drafting the ADAP and I know that there has been a lot of engagement with stakeholders in the process, including ourselves. The comments above are genuinely intended to be helpful in developing these actions further so that the Plan can have the impact that is so clearly intended.

Often, focusing on the challenges and difficulties of sustaining remote and rural populations can overlook the huge untapped opportunity that exists in our rural areas. We have a wealth of natural land-based and marine resources and the scope for green energy initiatives is almost limitless. In Highland we have also secured the Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport which promises significant wider benefits for the whole of the Highlands as well as for Scotland. However, we risk limiting these opportunities we have due to a lack of supporting infrastructure and a long-term vision for growth.

I do hope these comments will be helpful in shaping the Action Plan and would reiterate that we are happy to engage at both an official and ministerial level to help develop this critical area of work.

Yours sincerely



Councillor Raymond Bremner
Leader of The Highland Council

An Comhairliche Raymond Bremner
Ceannard Chomhairle na Gàidhealtachd