

## **From Slogans to Sound Strategy?**

### **What's happening in Dunoon?**

#### **Dunoon Bingo**

We would like you to join us in a game of Dunoon Bingo. Listen out for the key words and phrases on your bingo cards and you could win a prize.

#### **Introducing you to Dunoon**

Here we are on the Clyde Estuary, the rural market town for the Cowal peninsula, with a population of around 8000 in the town and an additional 2,000 across the peninsula.

We are 20 minutes by ferry from Inverclyde, but 90 minutes by road from the administrative centre of our local authority, Argyll & Bute Council (which covers a coastline longer than that of France and includes 23 inhabited islands). Or 90 minutes by road to Glasgow via the Rest and be Thankful (when the ferries are off and the Rest is closed, we're virtually an island).

Our heritage story is key to the nature of the town as we find it today:

A tiny farming settlement until the early 1800s, Dunoon was 'discovered' by wealthy merchants from Victorian Glasgow looking to establish second homes by the sea (bringing the additional baggage of their links to the slave trade).

This patronage led to the establishment of a Royal Burgh and the rapid growth of a thriving holiday resort, bursting at the seams with Glaswegians heading 'Doon the Watter' for the Glasgow Fair.

Cut to the 1960s and the Clyde Coast resorts were struggling against the rise of package holidays to the Spanish sunshine and heading into decline.

Dunoon had an unexpected reprieve in the form of the US Navy Site One nuclear submarine base, located with little notice and no local consultation on the Holy Loch, just three miles from the town centre. Uniquely, naval personnel weren't housed in a separate base, but rented accommodation across the community and their children attended local schools. For 31 years the base injected enormous amounts of cash into the local economy – Dunoon is said to have had the highest proportion of taxis per capita in the UK at the time. Friendships were formed, babies were born, pubs and sex work flourished.

Just as suddenly as the base arrived, it was withdrawn in 1992 with little time to prepare any exit strategy for the town's survival. Hundreds of properties became empty, spending in local shops and hospitality dried up, and most of those taxis stopped running.

Thirty years on from that economic shock Dunoon is still in recovery, dealing with the added impacts of population decline, a disproportionately elderly demographic, decades of public

sector service cuts, property value stagnation, poorly maintained buildings, austerity and COVID.

## **So, what's going on in Dunoon?**

In 2012 research by the Scottish Agricultural College Rural Policy Centre identified Dunoon and Campbeltown as the most vulnerable rural towns in Scotland.

In 2017 with funding from the Scottish Government Charette Fund, SURF led on the Think Dunoon Charette, which took a design-led approach to create a vision for the town centre identifying 59 potential projects with a prioritised list of 22.

With funding from the National Lottery Community Fund SURF created a part-time Facilitator post in 2018 (hello!) to support the Dunoon Area Alliance steering group to progress place-based action and to encourage and support cross-sector collaboration.

### **Current Anchor Projects in Dunoon:**

**Dunoon Burgh Hall** – £1.8m capital building rescue; community owned and community led; cultural centre; COVID community anchor organisation.

**Live Argyll Queen's Hall** - £10m capital refurbishment of local authority venue; now run by the arm's length leisure trust; venue, library, soft play and leisure facilities.

**A&BC CARS Scheme** – 5 years of HES funding for priority building repairs; shopfront improvements; heritage skills development; heritage engagement activities.

**Dunoon Presents Business Improvement District** – an events-focused BID now in its 10<sup>th</sup> year and preparing for its third ballot.

## **Dunoon Area Alliance initiatives**

Work to date has used a variety of approaches: developing thematic working groups; supporting volunteer-led projects; encouraging partnership working; gathering and sharing information; and generally providing a 'match-making' service to support cross sector collaboration. Project examples include:

### **Active Travel**

**Active Travel Network** - bringing together public sector, community groups and organisations, and businesses to identify assets and potential for development and collaboration which led to **Dunoon Bothy Active Travel Project** – partnership project with Cycling UK and Argyll & Bute Council to support more everyday walking and wheeling.

**Signage Improvements** – engagement in upgrade and rationalisation of on-street signage

**Forward Dunoon App** – using and promoting heritage to encourage more everyday walking and wheeling.

## Heritage

**American Years Revisited** – Impacted by COVID19, volunteers developed a digital heritage project recording and sharing oral history podcasts.

**Dunoon & Cowal Heritage Trust** – supporting funding applications and building links to other organisations

## Environment

**Grow Food, Grow Dunoon** – new, volunteer-led, shared food growing initiative in partnership with a local primary school

**Green Map Systems** – working together to map Dunoon's assets (e.g. Care, Share & Repair Map) and identify gaps.

## Communications & Networking

**Dunoon Town Team Network** – supporting and building positive connections between workers with a regeneration remit.

**Community Engagement Events** – pre-Covid Let's Talk Community Tea Parties

**DAA e-newsletter** – sharing information weekly from across our national, regional and local networks to community members, public sector officers and community organisations.

## Economic Development

**Dunoon & Cowal Co-works Network** – Action based research into the needs of freelance and homebased workers and microenterprises.

**Covid Open for Business Directory** – addressing an urgent short-term need

**Microbytes Business Support Pilot** – testing local delivery of peer-to-peer business support

## Community Engagement & Community-led Regeneration

**We Are Building a Beach Hut** – creative engagement around an environmental theme

Overall, the learning from the DAA project identified the need for a place-based legal entity that could take the lead on collaborative action. As a result, our most recent work has focused on the establishment of **Dunoon Community Development Trust** to continue and extend DAA place-based, community-led, cross sector action.

## Watch this space...

Looking forward, a series of new initiatives are underway or in development and Dunoon Area Alliance is working to build positive connections.

**Shaping Places for Wellbeing** – Dunoon is one of the locations for this Improvement Service Initiative considering place-based approaches to improving wellbeing.

**Dunoon Victorian Pier & waterfront** – Levelling up Fund Bid submitted by A&BC for major restoration

**Dunoon Ferry Terminal redevelopment** – an ongoing saga of unsuitable CalMac boats providing an unreliable passenger service needs to be resolved. Reliant on Transport Scotland and A&BC capital funding bids.

**The Dunoon Project** – local initiative that is developing a masterplan for a large scale outdoor activity tourism attraction in the forests and hills surrounding the town.

**Argyll College UHI** – currently developing the curriculum in direct response to place-based employment and economic development needs (e.g. marine, forestry, hospitality, care).

## Challenges & Opportunities

Through the work of DAA, **using our neutral position** and through our cross-sector, place-based activities, we have built up **valuable granular knowledge** of our community – its context, complexities, challenges, priorities and potential solutions. We want to ensure this knowledge informs local development **BUT power, decision-making and service delivery remains regional**. And how do we avoid contorting our community-led priorities to fit **national policies and funding priorities?**

**Collaborative working is difficult** for organisations, agencies, departments, volunteers and staff who are under resourced, overstretched and chasing the next round of relevant funding or avoiding the next round of cuts, **BUT** with Dunoon Community Development Trust we **now have a community-led legal entity that can take the lead** on collaborative initiatives. However, at this stage ‘we’ are only one part-time worker and rely on partnership working and volunteer time to develop action.

Post-Covid the **housing market has revived** significantly and new residents are arriving with new skills, ideas and enthusiasm, **BUT we must be aware of the impact of rising house prices** on the ability of local people and key workers to afford a suitable place to live in the town and we must avoid priorities being set by those with the loudest voices.

**Tourism** campaigns and The Dunoon Project **promise a significant upturn in visitor numbers** with attendant spend within the local economy, **BUT we must learn from the examples of other areas with a strong dependence on tourism** and guard against any negative impact on housing availability and infrastructure and set out to retain as much economic benefit within the community as possible.

**Short-notice, quick-spend capital funding** – How can Levelling Up result from capital investments? Our experience is of a **patchwork of interventions on ‘shovel ready’ options** decided at a regional level to avoid losing funding opportunities, rather than **thoughtful investment in strategic, community-led priorities with a sustainable purpose**. Capital funding needs to come with the revenue funding required to ensure sustainability and community benefit.

**Cost of living crisis – wage levels** in our town are **already** 20% lower than the Scottish national average with a high dependence on the hospitality sector and call centres. **How can we support our community to cope** with rising food prices and spiralling energy costs?

### **In conclusion:**

**Should Dunoon aspire to be** a 20 Minute Neighbourhood, to develop a Wellbeing Economy, to take a Community Wealth Building approach, to be a Zero Carbon Town, to be a Dementia-Friendly Town, to use the Place Standard Tool, to progress Community Ownership and Asset Transfers, to develop a Doughnut Economy approach, to create a community-led Local Place Plan?

Well, yes, yes and probably yes, BUT to achieve any of this **communities need effective, long-term investment and support at a grassroots level** that will

- build and sustain effective community engagement
- develop local skills to support effective asset transfer
- ensure diversity and inclusion in local structures and decision making
- grow sustainable approaches that meet community needs.
- encourage genuine cross-sector commitment to collaborative working

Waiting for national policies to be adopted as regional approaches that then cascade through departments to impact on local delivery could be like waiting for a tanker to turn. Communities can be much more nimble than that – many local charities, social enterprises and micro-enterprises are already working to adopt Community Wealth Building

approaches. We need place-based investment to support and connect this grassroots action with regional and national ambitions, and to build and support effective collaboration.