

Item 8 - Question Time

Response to Mr M Green

We welcome the Town Centre Advisory Group report and we invited Malcolm Fraser to a Workshop with Members to underline the importance of our Highland Towns and High streets and explore new ideas. The Administration has a number of strategies already in place which chime with the report.

For example, one of the main recommendations of the Town Centre Review published in June 2013 is the principle of “Town Centres First”. The Council’s PED Committee recently approved the Inner Moray Firth Proposed Local Development Plan (www.highland.gov.uk/imfldp). Policy 1 of the Plan re-emphasises the importance of our city and town centres by encouraging a sequential approach to development for a wide range of uses. This puts the onus on developers to show how existing centres are being considered for such uses before any other locations are considered. The Policy also encourages development which attracts more people to living in town and city centres and the Council has recruited an Empty Homes Officer to make best use of vacant buildings and space above shops for residential development.

Inverness plays a vital role as a hub for the Highlands and Islands in terms of its economy, culture and connectivity, and also as one of Scotland’s Seven Cities (<http://scottishcities.wordpress.com/>). Last year, the Council published the Inverness City Centre Development Brief which identifies a number of opportunities for new development and improvement of key buildings and streetscape. This has set the framework for a joint review of land use and transport priorities for the city, which begins next month with a targeted consultation with business and other interest groups. In addition, the Council is introducing further environmental/streetscape improvement to the city centre through the River Ness flood alleviation scheme.

The network of towns across Highland play an important role in supporting our communities by providing employment, education, essential services and facilities and places for social interaction. The Council is using various measures to improve the vitality of these towns. For example, the Dingwall Conservation Area Conservation Scheme (CARS) aims to support regeneration through investment in the historic environment including the conservation and repair of historic buildings. In addition, as the first stage in preparing the Caithness and Sutherland Local Development Plan the Council ran innovative Charrette consultation events in Wick and Thurso where local communities designed the future of their towns.