

**The Highland Council
Caithness and Sutherland Area Committee**

Minutes of Meeting of the Caithness and Sutherland Area Committee held in Wick Town Hall, Bridge Street, Wick, on Tuesday, 23 September 2014, at 10.30am.

Present:

Mr G Farlow	Mr W MacKay
Mr B Fernie	Mr J McGillivray
Mrs G Coghill	Mr H Morrison
Mrs D Mackay	Mr M Reiss
Mr D Mackay	Mr J Rosie

Officials in attendance:

Mr D Haas, Inverness City Manager , Chief Executive's Office
Ms H Ross, Senior Ward Manager, Chief Executive's Office
T/Chief Inspector I MacLelland, North Area Commander, Police Scotland
Inspector N Clasper, Police Scotland
Mr A Gardiner, Group Manager, Fire and Rescue Service
Mr G Hamilton, Head of Environment and Development, Development and Infrastructure Service
Mr D Goldie, Head of Housing, Community Services
Mr C Simpson, Tourism Co-ordinator, Development and Infrastructure Service
Mr S Dalgarno, Development Plans Manager, Development and Infrastructure Service
Mr D Cowie, Principal Planner, Development and Infrastructure Service
Mr D Chisholm, Planner, Development and Infrastructure Service
Mr G Nichols, Area Education Manager, Care and Learning Service
Mr C Stewart, Area Community Services Manager, Community Services
Ms A Clark, Policy Officer, Chief Executive's Office
Mr A Bryce, Road Safety and Safer Routes to School Officer, Community Services
Ms A Macrae, Committee Administrator, Corporate Development Service
Ms A Grant, Team Leader, Finance Service
Mr A Sutherland, Clerical Assistant (Business Support), Finance Service

Also in attendance:

Item 7: Ms E Lamont and Mr A Mackay, Venture North

An asterisk in the margin denotes a recommendation to the Council. All decisions with no marking in the margin are delegated to Committee.

Mrs D Mackay in the Chair

The Chair advised the Committee that the meeting would be filmed and broadcast over the internet on the Highland Council website and would be archived and available for viewing for 12 months.

Preliminaries

- The Chair welcomed Members to Wick Town Hall and referred to the high standard of the refurbishment works which had been carried at the premises, noting that the works had been delivered on schedule and within budget. She advised that the Town Hall was of both civic and historical importance to the area and she thanked Members and staff for their patience pending completion of the works.

1. **Apologies for Absence** **Liesgeulan**

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr D Bremner, Mr N Macdonald, Ms L Munro, Mr G Phillips, Ms G Ross and Mr R Saxon.

2. **Declarations of Interest** **Foillseachaidhean Com-pàirt**

The Committee **NOTED** the following declarations of interest:-

Item 6 – Mr H Morrison (non-financial)

Item 14 – Mr G Farlow (financial)

3. **Recess Powers** **Cumhachdan Fosaidh**

The Committee **NOTED** that the Recess Powers granted by the Council at its meeting on 26 June 2014 had not been exercised in relation to the business of the Caithness and Sutherland Area Committee.

4. **Engaging with Police and Fire and Rescue Services at Area Committee** **A' Conaltradh ri Seirbheisean Poileis agus Smàlaidh is Teasargainn aig Comataidh Sgìreil**

There had been circulated Report No. CS/23/14 dated 1 September 2014 by the Head of Policy and Reform which described the role of Members in engaging with the new national services for police and fire and rescue.

In this regard, it was confirmed that the report had been provided as context for Members in considering the first round of new style performance reports from the national bodies at Area Committees.

The Committee:

- i. **NOTED** the requirements on the Council for the engagement and scrutiny of police and fire and rescue services;
- ii. **NOTED** the governance arrangements for this purpose through strategic, non-strategic and area committees, as well as partnership arrangements through community planning and district partnerships;
- iii. **NOTED** that local Members have important engagement and scrutiny roles, but have no role in specifying operational matters or in agreeing resource allocation; and

- iv. **AGREED** to scrutinise the performance of police and fire and rescue services based on information provided separately for the Area Committee and to make use of the good practice guidance for doing this as set out in Appendix 2 to the report.

5. **Police – Area Performance Summary** **Poilis – Geàrr-chunntas Dèanadais Sgìreil**

There had been circulated Report No. CS/24/14 dated 1 September 2014 by the Highland North Area Commander for Police which updated Members on progress with reference to the local priorities within the Highland 2014-2017 Policing Plan.

Following a summary of the report by the North Area Commander, Members raised the following issues:-

- that it would be helpful in future reports if statistics could be provided over a 3/4 year period to allow Members to consider trends;
- if further action could be taken to reduce the number of motorcycle accidents which had occurred in Highland over recent months, for example by warning motorcyclists about the type of roads they would experience in the Highlands;
- the potential for further campaigns and initiatives to improve road safety in the Highlands, with specific reference to the need to reduce speeding and promote responsible and courteous driving in the area; in this regard it was suggested that a leaflet campaign in conjunction with bed and breakfast establishment, guest houses and hotels in the area would help deliver key messages to drivers in this regard;
- concern at the lack of a permanent Police presence at Tongue Police Station;
- that concern had been expressed in regard to noise issues at Police Scotland's firing range in Caithness at a recent meeting of the Dounreay Stakeholders Group;
- that further information be provided on the liaison between Police Scotland and other blue light services to ensure all services could assist at the scene of accidents and whether officers were trained in the use of defibrillators;
- that the apparent lack of traffic wardens in Caithness meant that there was no deterrent in regard to illegal parking;
- a question in regard to the success of the various campaigns in securing improvements in road safety;
- the potential to engage with drivers at motor sport events to communicate key messages in regard to road safety;
- concern at the length of road closures which had occurred following road traffic accidents on lifeline routes and where drivers were faced with long detours to secure an alternative route, in specific reference was made to issues at Berridale Braes on the A9; the Chair confirmed she would raise Members concerns on this issue with the Director of Community Services;
- a query in regard to whether there was a policy on slow drivers who caused a build-up of vehicles leading to driver frustration and accidents;
- concern at proposals to relocate Police Scotland and the Fire and Rescue Service call handling to Dundee, it being suggested that local knowledge was extremely important in the delivery of a good service to the public;

- that road safety was consistently identified by community councils in Caithness as a high priority;
- that the 'Driving Ambitions' campaign had been well received in Caithness and Sutherland and that it would be helpful for meeting with all relevant agencies to be arranged with a view to the campaign being reviewed and refreshed including the potential for the scheme to be extended to youngsters who had left school to take up apprenticeships;
- it would be helpful if information could be supplied on the number of occasions armed police officers had been deployed in Caithness and Sutherland;
- a point in regard to the contribution the introduction of the graduated young driver's licence would make to road safety; and
- it would be helpful if information could be provided on accident rates following the introduction of 20mph speed limits around schools; the Chair advised that this information could be obtained from the Council's Safer Routes to Schools Team.

In responding to Members, the North Area Commander confirmed that he would follow up on a number of the specific points raised and feedback where appropriate. The Chair did note that traffic wardens remained available and that their deployment to the Area Committee area by the Police would be welcomed.

The Committee:-

- NOTED** the progress report in relation to the 5 Priorities: Road Safety, Alcohol and Drug Abuse/Misuse, Antisocial Behaviour/Disorder, Crimes of Dishonesty and Protecting People, and that feedback would be provided to Members in response to a number of specific points;
- NOTED** that the Chair would raise Members concerns with the Director of Community Services in regard to issues around road closures following road traffic accidents at Berridale Braes on the A9;
- AGREED** to request that consideration be given to future reports including statistics over a 3/4 year period to allow Members to consider trends; and
- AGREED** that a meeting of all the agencies involved in the 'Driving Ambitions' initiative as it applies to Caithness and Sutherland be arranged with a view to the campaign being reviewed and refreshed.

6. Fire and Rescue Service Seirbheis Smàlaidh is Teasairginn

Declaration of Interest - Mr H Morrison declared a non-financial interest as a member of the Fire and Rescue Service, but having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct, concluded that his interest did not preclude him from taking part in the discussion.

There had been circulated Report No. CS/25/14 dated 4 September 2014 by the Local Senior Officer for Fire and Rescue setting out:-

- Area Committee Plan for Caithness and Sutherland for 2014-15 (Appendix 1 – Booklet A); and
- Performance Report for Caithness and Sutherland for the period April-May 2014, together with an overview of performance figures for years 2010/11-2013/14 (Appendix 2 – Booklet B).

During his presentation of the report and appendices, the Local Senior Officer, set out the key areas of planned activity and performance identified during the Ward consultation sessions in 2013. He reported that activity areas were identified through a range of Intervention, Prevention and Protection activities delivered in partnership to reduce risk to the communities of Caithness and Sutherland.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- the opportunities to recruit more female firefighters into the Fire and Rescue Service in Highland;
- that consideration be given to how those householders who had not installed smoke detectors in their homes could be identified and targeted;
- that clarification be provided on progress with the upgrading of Thurso Fire Station and that staff at the Station be commended on the excellent service provided in the community;
- the scope for firefighters to have a wider role in rural communities particularly as they were often first on the scene in the event of an emergency;
- the challenges associated with training Fire and Rescue Service as paramedics/technicians and the use of defibrillators to support the Scottish Ambulance Service;
- that the Scottish Ambulance Service had commenced an audit of where defibrillators were located in Highland, and work had also commenced through the District Partnerships on how communities could be trained in their use and have them available; this demonstrated a joint approach to achieve an appropriate solution for rural communities; and
- it would be helpful if Members and the Local Senior Officer be circulated with further information on a scheme being progressed in Caithness whereby defibrillators were being installed in community halls and other community places and members of the community trained in their use;

In responding to Members, the Local Senior Officer confirmed that he would follow up on a number of the specific points raised and feedback where appropriate.

The Committee **NOTED** both the Plan and Performance Report and that feedback would be provided to Members in response to a number of specific points raised.

7. Caithness and Sutherland Tourism and Presentation from Venture North Turasachd Ghallaibh is Chataibh agus Taisbeanadh bho Venture North

Mrs Ellie Lamont of Venture North was in attendance to give a presentation on the organisation's activities to develop tourism in Caithness and North Sutherland. During her presentation Mrs Lamont outlined the organisation's vision which was to attract visitors to the North and reveal the hidden treasures in the area; to provide a central online marketing solution for tourism providers; and to be a voice for tourism businesses in the area.

Mrs Lamont advised that Venture North's strategy was to:-

- complement North Highland Initiative, Caithness and Sutherland Visitor Attractions Group, Visit Sutherland and Assynt Tourism Group;

- represent the area on Scottish Tourism Alliance, Historic Scotland, Visit Scotland, Highland Council, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Scottish Natural Heritage, Creative Scotland and Rural Tourism Area Boards;
- encourage collaboration and group initiatives between the tourism businesses in the area;
- identify new and sustainable opportunities for the area and encourage innovation; and
- provide an online portal and marketing activity for the area.

Thereafter, Mrs Lamont provided a summary of the current work being undertaken by Venture North, which was run by volunteers, and the range of funders which supported the organisation. In regard to current projects, she advised that the organisation's principal focus was on the development of Venture North's new website and she provided Members with an overview of the design and operation of the website.

Further projects included the development of a heritage application, proof of concept applications, ongoing work with Scrabster Harbour Trust and the co-ordination of an events calendar. The organisation's planned activities in 2015 included a food 'festival', archaeological festival; music festival; and also supporting other groups in delivering their events.

There had been also circulated Report No. CS/26/14 dated 2 September 2014 by the Director of Development and Infrastructure which updated Members on the development of a Highland Tourism Action Plan and the Council's work with the North Highland Initiative. The report also provides some strategic context to accompany the presentation being given by Mrs Lamont on Venture North's work to develop tourism in the Caithness and North Coast Sutherland area.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- that Venture North be commended on being a volunteer organisation and on its concentrated approach to developing online services and use of social media;
- that the opportunities to maximise the visitor potential around surfing and other water sports in Thurso be explored in conjunction with the Council;
- it would be helpful if Venture North had dialogue with other tourist organisations in the area such as Visit Dornoch, and also businesses involved in the tourist trade on the north coast of Sutherland;
- the opportunities for Caithness to benefit more from the economic benefits generated by large cruise liners docking at Scrabster;
- it was important that the Venture North website was one of the first sites accessed by potential visitors to the area when making enquiries online;
- that the opportunities for marketing and branding the archaeological heritage of Caithness and Sutherland be explored;
- the importance going forward of Venture North establishing strong links with the Council's Development and Infrastructure Service and the opportunities this would create in terms of, for example, accessing European funding.

The Committee **NOTED**:-

- i. the approach that has been taken to produce tourism strategies and agree actions to develop tourism across both the Highlands and the Caithness and Sutherland area;
- ii. that the Council has entered into a service delivery contract with the North Highland Initiative to assist their work to develop tourism in the Caithness and Sutherland area; and
- iii. the presentation given by Venture North.

**8. Land Reform Update: Report of the Land Reform Review Group
Fios as Ùr Ath-leasachadh Fearainn: Aithisg bhon Bhuidhinn Mheasaidh air
Ath-leasachadh Fearainn**

There had been circulated Report No. CS/27/14 dated 8 September 2014 by the Director of Development and Infrastructure reminding Members that 'Working Together for the Highlands 2012 - 2017' committed the Council to continue supporting the cause of land reform. The report advised that the Council had contributed to the Scottish Government's Land Reform Review Group (LRRG) inquiry and that the report of the Group has now been published. Containing sixty two recommendations, the report addressed many of the issues previously raised by the Council as important if the Scottish Government's 2020 target of 1 million acres in community ownership was to be achieved. This report introduced the recommendations of the LRRG, including those of particular relevance to local authorities.

It was confirmed that the full list of recommendations made by the Review Group was attached as the Appendix to the report.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- that further information be provided in regard to the next steps following the publication of the Land Reform Review Group's report together with the timescales involved;
- in regard to the introduction of the new Land and Building Transactions Taxation (Scotland) Bill with effect from April 2015 whether there was any information on the rates that would apply, on the basis this may have a direct impact on some of the issues covered in the Review Group's report;
- in regard to the recommendation on 'National Forest Estate' it was important that forestry should not be planted at the expense of farming ground due to the negative impact this may have on sustaining local businesses and fragile economies;
- that the Review Group's recommendations in regard to urban renewal should be welcomed on the grounds this would give the Council additional compulsory powers and opportunities to develop affordable housing in areas of vacant and derelict land;
- it was important that safeguards were put in place to ensure that landlords did not pass the imposition of a land value tax directly onto tenant farmers and crofters; it was also important that any such tax was introduced selectively to encourage more appropriate land use;
- that further clarification was required in regard to the impact on salmon rivers associated with the Review Group's recommendation to abolish the District Salmon Fishery Boards;

- it was important that the larger estates in the area be encouraged to release a small proportion of their land to communities to assist communities to achieve their aspirations;
- that new derelict buildings legislation currently going through the Scottish Parliament would give local authorities more powers to acquire properties but no additional funding to cover costs, and therefore could only be used in exceptional circumstances;
- further clarification was sought on the detail in regard to the Review Group's recommendations on 'watercourses'; and
- concern in regard to hillsides in some areas which had been spoilt and damaged by a proliferation of tracks and emphasising the need for such wild areas to be protected.

In conclusion of this item the Chair advised that Members would have the opportunity to consider further the recommendations and implications of the Land Reform Review Group's report at the Members workshop planned for 29 October 2014.

Thereafter, the Committee:-

- NOTED** the wide ranging recommendations made by the Land Reform Review Group;
- NOTED** that the Council has committed itself to working with the Scottish Government and others to extend the impacts and benefits of land reform in Scotland;
- NOTED** that the Council has sought a place on the proposed short term working group to develop the strategy for delivery of the Scottish Government's 1 million acre target by 2020; and
- AGREED** to support the Members' workshop planned for 29 October 2014 with Community Land Scotland partners, to consider in more detail the recommendations of the Land Reform Review Group, the benefits of land reform and how the Council can contribute most effectively going forward.

23. Exclusion of the Public Às-dùnadh a' Phobail

In accordance with Standing Order 18, with the consent of the meeting, items 23 and 24 on the agenda were taken at this point.

The Committee **RESOLVED** that, under Section 50A(4) of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, the public be excluded from the meeting during discussion of item 24 on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 1 of Part 1 of Schedule 7A of the Act.

24. Caithness Local Access Forum Membership Ballrachd Fòram Cothruim Ionadail Ghallaibh

There had been circulated to Members only Report No. CS/42/14 dated 15 September 2014 by the Director of Development and Infrastructure which provided Members with the opportunity to consider two new Forum members required to maintain a representative Local Access Forum; and to recommend their approval by the Planning, Development and Infrastructure Committee.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the content of the report and both applicants for membership of the Caithness Local Access Forum; and
- ii. **AGREED** to recommend these applicants for approval by the Planning, Development and Infrastructure Committee.

**9. Caithness and Sutherland Local Development Plan
Plana Leasachaidh Ionadail Ghallaibh is Chataibh**

There had been circulated Report No. CS/28/14 dated 11 September 2014 by the Director of Development and Infrastructure which presented the Main Issues Report (MIR) for the Caithness and Sutherland Local Development Plan (CaSPlan) for approval for consultation. The MIR marked the first formal stage in the preparation of the CaSPlan. It presented suggested outcomes that the plan should deliver in terms of Employment, Growing Communities, Connectivity & Transport and Environment & Heritage. It also sought people's views on the main issues affecting the area and the location of future development.

The MIR had been prepared taking into account the existing Development Plan, including the Caithness Local Plan and the Sutherland Local Plan, which CaSPlan would replace when adopted. It also took account of feedback from the previous stage - the Call for Sites and Ideas. Alongside, a Monitoring Statement and a Strategic Environmental Assessment provided background for the options presented. The consultation on the MIR would inform the preparation of the next stage – the Proposed Plan.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- that the approach set out in the MIR to consolidate settlements while not compromising open space amenities, and also to restrict ribbon development should be welcomed;
- the opportunity for Scottish Water to upgrade their waste water systems in settlements where this had been identified as a restriction to further development;
- that there could be issues in delivering Carbon CLEVER in Caithness and Sutherland due to the extensive area covered and lack of public transport in the area;
- in regard to the 'Assets and Strategy' map set out in the Main Issues Report, consideration be given to the map being amended to emphasise Ardgay as a gateway to Sutherland on the basis that this would allow community groups to access potential sources of funding;
- the proposed approach to settlements in terms of category was welcomed on the basis it would encourage growth;
- in terms of engagement with communities it would be helpful if separate consultation events were held in North, West and Central Sutherland given the geography of the area;
- there was a need to consider how growth in Central Sutherland could be encouraged;
- the priorities identified for Watten in terms of safeguarding open spaces and restricting ribbon development should be welcomed; however there was also the opportunity for housing development in an area between the local

primary school and Henderson Square which would further enhance the village;

- that the staff be commended on the quality of the report and their work in developing the main issues report;
- the proposal to make the consultation process as interactive as possible by encouraging people to make comments online via the Council's website should be welcomed; and
- it was important that Members encouraged as wide a range of people as possible to participate and engage in the consultation process.

The Committee:-

- APPROVED** the Main Issues Report content for publication, accepting that a number of minor presentational and typographical changes will need to be made prior to publication, in consultation with the Chair;
- AGREED** to the Main Issues Report and an associated Environmental Report being subject of public consultation for a period of 12 weeks, to commence during October 2014;
- AGREED** the proposed arrangements for consultation and role of Members in encouraging people to engage in the plan process; and
- AGREED** that the results of the consultation will be reported to this Committee in due course for consideration, prior to the Planning, Development and Infrastructure Committee deciding on the contents of the Proposed Plan.

10. Cumulative Landscape and Visual Assessment of Wind Energy in Caithness Measadh Tionalach Cruth-tìre agus Lèirsinneach a thaobh Lùth Gaoithe ann an Gallaibh

There had been circulated Report No. CS/29/14 dated 11 September 2014 by the Director of Development and Infrastructure which presented the findings of the Cumulative Landscape and Visual Assessment of Wind Energy in Caithness (CLVA) which has been produced as advice for the Council. Since the presentation of draft findings to the Planning, Development and Infrastructure (PDI) Committee on 14 May 2014, the Cumulative Assessment report had been revised and finalised. In addition, the Scottish Planning Policy (2014), which set out aspects of how planning authorities are to plan for onshore wind energy, had been published and highlights of that were presented to the PDI Committee on 20 August 2014. The Assessment was a technical study which provided evidence to feed in to Development Planning and Development Management.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- it would be helpful if further clarity could be provided in regard to the weight that would be attached to the CVLA as a material consideration in the determination of wind energy applications;
- that information be provided on whether the CVLA would be used by developers to assist in their consideration of applications for wind farm developments;
- that it would be helpful if the proposed Members' workshop was held in private session to allow as broad as possible discussion on the wider issues associated with wind energy developments;

- it was suggested that the CVLA favoured a clustering approach with gaps and that this was to the detriment of smaller single turbine developments which may be considered unacceptable on the grounds of their visual impact;
- there should be a gradual transition between the zones identified on the maps set out in the CVLA rather than the appearance of firm boundaries; and
- that the public consultation event to be held in Caithness should be in the format of a 'drop in session'.

Thereafter, the Committee:-

- NOTED** the finalised findings of the Cumulative Landscape and Visual Assessment of Wind Energy in Caithness;
- NOTED** the work to be undertaken on revision of the Onshore Wind Energy Interim Supplementary Guidance in response to Scottish Planning Policy 2014, which will take into account CLVA and be subject of public consultation, including a consultation event to be held in Caithness on the basis that consideration be given to this being in the form of a 'drop in' session;
- AGREED** that the CLVA will be referred to, where relevant, as a material consideration in development management; and
- AGREED** the proposed timing of a Member workshop to be held on the full range of issues for revision of the Interim Supplementary Guidance, including cumulative impact.

11. Communities Panel Development Leasachadh Pannal nan Coimhearsnachdan

There had been circulated Report No. CS/30/14 dated 4 September 2014 by the Head of Policy and Reform summarising the approach to developing the Council's new Communities Panel, with particular reference to the Caithness and Sutherland Area.

It was reported that the Council had agreed on 8 May 2014 that a Communities Panel would be created and that this would exist alongside the Citizens' Panel and be available for responding to survey based consultations. The intention was that the Panel would comprise of representative groups across the Highlands.

In discussion, Members welcomed the development of the Communities Panel and queried the process for including any additional groups in the draft invitation list provided at Appendix 1 to the report.

The Committee:-

- NOTED** the approach to developing the Communities Panel outlined at section 2 of the report; and
- AGREED** that Members advise the Head of Policy and Reform directly of any additional representative groups they wish to be included in the draft invitation list provided at Appendix 1 to the report.

**12. Winter Maintenance Plan 2014/15
Plana Cumail Suas a' Gheamhraidh 2014/15**

There had been circulated Report No. CS/31/14 dated 2 August 2014 by the Director of Community Services which provided information on winter maintenance preparations and arrangements for the 2014/15 winter period, and set out the Winter Maintenance Plans for the Caithness and Sutherland Area for 2014/15, which included the priority road maps presented in Appendix B to the report.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- it would be helpful if more information could be provided to Ward 1 Members on the Winter Maintenance decision making process for daily operations;
- it was noted that the Council's Winter Maintenance budget had been set at the same level as in 2013/14 and an explanation was sought on how any overspend on the budget would be managed in the event that colder conditions were experienced in comparison to the previous mild winter; and
- that the quality of pot holes repairs carried out by the JetPatcher equipment being trialled under the Roads Innovation Fund was of a high standard and reference was made to the opportunity for the Council to own/lease this type of machine in future.

Thereafter, the Committee:-

- i. **APPROVED** the Winter Maintenance Plans for the Caithness and Sutherland Area for 2014/15, which include the priority road maps presented in Appendix B to the report; and
- ii. **AGREED** that more information be provided to Ward 1 Members on the Winter Maintenance decision making process for daily operations.

**13. Grounds Maintenance Performance Monitoring Report – Mid-Season Update
Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Dèanadais a thaobh Cumail Suas Làraich – Fios às Ùr Meadhan-Ràithe**

There had been circulated Report No. CS/32/14 dated 9 September 2014 by the Director of Community Services which detailed performance management information for the Grounds Maintenance Service in Caithness and Sutherland from April to August 2014.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- that clarification be provided on the standard of grounds maintenance applied at Wick and Thurso cemeteries;
- it was suggested that the machinery being used by staff was not fit for purpose and that this impacted on standards;
- it was suggested that grass cutting should be undertaken only in dry conditions to reduce evidence of clippings;
- that a letter be sent by the Chair on behalf of the Committee congratulating the relevant staff on the excellent condition and presentation of the public garden areas in Thurso and Wick; and

- an explanation was sought in regard to the delay which had occurred in the recruitment of seasonal staff.

Thereafter, the Committee:-

- NOTED** the performance management and remedial action information on the grounds maintenance service, as set out in the report;
- NOTED** the management action taken to address the performance issues identified;
- AGREED** to review required service standards at future Ward Business meetings; and
- AGREED** that a letter be sent by the Area Leader on behalf of the Committee commending the relevant staff on the excellent condition and presentation of the public garden areas in Wick and Thurso.

14. Landfill Communities Fund Maoin Choimhearsnachdan Tiodhlacaidh Sgudail

Declaration of Interest - Mr G Farlow declared a financial interest in this item as Chair of the North West Highland Geopark Ltd which was a member of the Coigach and Assynt Living Landscape Partnership, and left the meeting for this item and the remaining items of business.

There had been circulated Report No. CS/33/14 dated 9 September 2014 by the Director of Community Services on an application to the Highland Council Landfill Communities Fund by the Coigach and Assynt Living Landscape Partnership for the sum of £10,000, as set out in the Appendix to the report.

It was confirmed that project would run over a period of five years and would involve communities, landowners, and community organisations across the area delivering in the region of thirty-five closely integrated, holistic and cross-cutting projects which would help to sustainably conserve, restore and enhance the natural, built and cultural heritage found in Coigach and Assynt.

The Committee **APPROVED** the application as detailed in the Appendix to the report.

15. Cycling, Walking and Safer Streets Programme Prògram Rothaireachd, Coiseachd agus Sràidean nas Sàbhailte

There had been circulated Report No. CS/34/14 dated 9 September 2014 by the Director of Community Services which invited Members to approve the projects delivered through the Scottish Government funding for Cycling, Walking and Safer Streets (CWSS) for the Caithness and Sutherland area, as set out in Appendix 1 to the report.

The report outlined the CWSS funding levels available in 2014-15, the grant award criteria and the application process, together with details of the specific applications. It explained that the costs detailed were estimated and, if the proposals were approved, the schemes would be put out to tender and implemented on a priority basis, to allocate the funding available. If funding in

2014/15 was insufficient, any schemes not delivered would be carried forward to the next financial year.

In discussion, Members welcomed the contribution the proposed projects to be delivered through the CWSS Programme would make to improving safety and facilities for pedestrians and cyclists at the various schools listed in Appendix 1.

The Committee:-

- i. **APPROVED** the Safer Routes to School (SRTS) Projects listed in Appendix 1 to the report; and
- ii. **NOTED** that the Road Safety Unit will continue to work with schools to develop further SRTS Projects for future years.

16. Housing Performance Report
Aithisg Dèanadais a thaobh Taigheadais

There had been circulated Report No. CS/35/14 dated 9 September 2014 by the Director of Community Services which provided information on how the Housing Section performed in relation to Scottish Social Housing Charter and other performance indicators during the first quarter of 2014/15. Statistics were provided on repairs, tenancy management, rent arrears and homelessness/homeless prevention

In discussion, Members commended the work of the Homeless Prevention Team on the reduction in the number of homeless presentations in Caithness and Sutherland over recent years.

The Committee **NOTED** the information provided on housing performance in the period 1 April to 30 June 2014.

17. Housing Allocations Policy: Special Letting Plan
Poileasaidh Riarachadh Taigheadais: Plana Leigeil air Mhà Sònraichte

There had been circulated Report No. CS/36/14 dated 5 September 2014 by the Director of Community Services which provided information on the supply and demand for social rented housing in Caithness and the issues involved in the allocation of housing in the area, and outlined proposals for a special letting plan that would operate within the Highland Housing Register allocations policy in order to reduce re-letting times.

In terms of the background to the report it was explained that the Community Services Committee had considered an annual monitoring report on the Highland Housing Register allocations policy on 21 August 2014. The Committee had agreed that a special letting plan be developed for Caithness and Sutherland and that this should be considered in more detail by the Caithness and Sutherland Area Committee.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- there was a need to improve on the length of time taken to complete repairs to empty properties with a view to reducing re-letting times;

- the Community Services Committee had recently agreed a new approach to the management of void properties which it was hoped would improve the timescale for repairs; and
- that consideration also be given to the potential for undertaking environmental improvements around properties which were proving harder to let.

The Committee:-

- NOTED** the proposals for a special letting plan for selected areas in Caithness and other initiatives to reduce empty homes;
- NOTED** that proposals will have to be agreed with the governing bodies of Highland Housing Register Partners prior to implementation; and
- AGREED** that consideration be given to the potential for undertaking environmental improvements around properties which proved harder to let.

18. Capital Projects – Investing in Caithness and Sutherland Pròiseactan Calpa - A' Tasgadh ann an Gallaibh agus Cataibh

There had been circulated Report No. CS/37/14 dated 21 August 2014 by the Director of Finance which listed the capital projects included in the Council's capital programme being delivered in the Caithness and Sutherland area in financial year 2014/15 and the in-year budgets for these projects.

The Chair advised of a correction to figures shown for the annual budget for project 'TD148: Dredging at Helmsdale Harbour', as detailed in the Appendix to the report advising that the actual cost was £11,000 and not £334,000 as listed.

The Committee **NOTED** the budgeted capital projects being delivered in the Caithness and Sutherland area in 2014/15 and the corrected figure for the project TD148: Dredging of Helmsdale Harbour, noting that the actual cost was £11,000..

19. Associated School Group Overviews Sealladh Coitcheann air Buidheann Sgoiltean Co-cheangailte

a) Farr High School Associated School Group Overview Sealladh Coitcheann air Buidheann Sgoiltean Co-cheangailte Àrd-sgoil Farr

There had been circulated Report No. CS/38/14 dated 27 August 2014 by the Director of Education, Culture and Sport, which provided an update of key information in relation to the schools within the Farr High School Associated School Group (ASG), and provided useful updated links to further information in relation to these schools.

Whilst appreciating the work being undertaken by the School, Members noted the action being taken at the School by the new Head Teacher, Senior Management Team, and through the Quality Improvement Team to improve on the attainment levels in English and Biology achieved in 2013 as detailed in the report.

The Committee **NOTED** the content of the report.

b) Kinlochbervie High School Associated School Group Overview
Sealladh Coitcheann air Buidheann Sgoiltean Co-cheangailte Àrd-sgoil
Cheann Loch Biorbhaidh

There had been circulated Report No. CS/39/14 dated 27 August 2014 by the Director of Education, Culture and Sport, which provided an update of key information in relation to the schools within the Kinlochbervie High School Associated School Group (ASG), and provided useful updated links to further information in relation to these schools.

The Committee **NOTED** the content of the report.

20. Education Scotland Report
Aithisg le Foghlam Alba

There had been circulated Report No. CS/40/14 dated 26 August 2014 by the Director of Education, Culture and Sport which provided details on Education Scotland's inspections in the Caithness and Sutherland area during the period 14 May to 21 August 2014. The report specifically related to Education Scotland's inspection of Halkirk Primary School, which had taken place on 26 August 2014.

The Committee **NOTED** the content of the report.

21. Dornoch Common Good Fund – Annual Report 2013/14, Annual Budget 2015/16 and Monitoring Report First Quarter 2014/15
Maoin Maith Choitcheann Dhòrnaich – Aithisg Bhliadhnail 2013/14, Buidseat Bhliadhnail 2015/16 agus Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Ciad Ràithe 2014/15

There had been circulated Report No. CS/41/14 dated 8 September 2014 by the Head of Policy and Reform providing information in relation to the Dornoch Common Good Fund. The report set out the Annual Report and Accounts for 2013/14, budget for 2015/16, and monitoring report for the first quarter of 2014/15.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the Annual Report and Accounts for 2013/14;
- ii. **APPROVED** the Dornoch Common Good Fund Annual Budget for 2015/16; and
- iii. **NOTED** the 2014/15 First Quarter Monitoring Report showing the status of the Fund as at 30 June 2014.

22. Minutes
Geàrr-chunntas

There had been circulated and were **NOTED** the Minutes of the Caithness and Sutherland Area Committee held on 27 May 2014, as previously approved by the Highland Council at its meeting on 26 June 2014.

The meeting ended at 3.30 pm, having adjourned for lunch between 12.47pm and 1.30pm.