

**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, 26 May 2015 at 11.15am.

**Present:**

Mr D Bremner	Mr H Morrison
Mr G Farlow	Mr N Macdonald
Mr B Fernie	Mr G Phillips
Mrs G Coghill	Mr M Reiss
Mr D Mackay	Mr J Rosie
Mr W MacKay	Ms G Ross
Mr J McGillivray (by telephone conference)	

**Officials in attendance:**

Mr D Haas, Inverness City Area Manager/Clerk , Chief Executive's Office  
Ms H Ross, Senior Ward Manager, Chief Executive's Office  
Mr D Cowie, Principal Planner, Development & Infrastructure Service  
Dr S Turnbull, Coastal Planning Officer, Development & Infrastructure Service  
Mr D Chisholm, Planner, Development & Infrastructure Service  
Mr B Mackinnon, Employability Team Leader, Development & Infrastructure Service  
Mr C Stewart, Area Community Services Manager, Community Services  
Ms M Ross, Principal Housing Officer, Community Services  
Mr B Northedge, Education Quality Improvement Manager, Care and Learning  
Ms S Tarrant, Public Relations Officer, Chief Executive's Office  
Ms A Macrae, Committee Administrator, Corporate Development Service  
Mrs F Anderson, Administrative Assistant, Finance Service  
Mr S Fyffe, Assistant Civic Officer, Finance Service  
Mr A Sutherland, Clerical Assistant, Finance Service

**Also in Attendance:**

Ms C Farquhar, North Highland Initiative (Item 4)

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

The Clerk 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 12 months thereafter.

**Appointment of Chair**

In the absence of Mrs D Mackay, Area Leader, who had submitted her apologies for the meeting, the Clerk sought nominations for the position of Chair for the meeting.

Mr G Farlow seconded by Mrs G Coghill, moved that Ms G Ross be appointed as Chair. On there being no other nominations, Ms Ross was duly appointed and took the Chair.

## **Preliminaries**

The Chair:-

- expressed her congratulations to Dr Paul Monaghan on his election as MP for the Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross constituency;
- welcomed the news that Caithness Horizons had received a further three years Museum accreditation status from Museum Galleries Scotland; the Museum was also accredited as a five star visitor attraction by Visit Scotland; and
- advised that the last entry date for the Caithness Flag competition was Friday, 29 May, 2015.

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

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mrs D Mackay, Mrs L Munro and Mr R Saxon.

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

Items 3, 4 and 5: Mr G Farlow (non-financial)  
Item 11: Ms G Ross (financial)

Ms G Ross indicated that having declared a financial interest in Item 11 she would leave the meeting for that item. She therefore invited Members to appoint a Chair for item 11.

Mr H Morrison seconded by Mr G Farlow, moved that Mr G Phillips be appointed as Chair for Item 11. There being no other nominations, Mr G Phillips was duly appointed as Chair in respect of Item 11.

### **3. North Highland Initiative Iomairt Turasachd a Tuath**

**Declaration of Interest – Mr G Farlow declared a non-financial interest as Chair of the North West Highlands Geopark, 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.**

Ms Claire Farquhar of North Highland Initiative gave a presentation providing an overview of the organisation’s work to develop tourism in the Northern Highlands with a particular focus on the North Coast 500 Route initiative. These activities supported the Council’s programme commitment “Working with the Scottish Government, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and private sector partners, the Council will maximise the tourism potential of the Highland area’. The presentation also provided an opportunity to consider how tourism growth could best be supported by the Area Committee, both directly and indirectly through the planning and delivery of other Council services.

During discussion, Members raised the following points:-

- that the North Coast 500 route and the international coverage it had received be welcomed; it was suggested that the project had great potential to be successful going forward and with the appropriate support and marketing would help promote and deliver economic benefits to the Area;
- it would also deliver benefits in terms of attracting visitors to travel north of Inverness and would encourage them to stay longer in the Area to enjoy its attractions;
- reference to criticisms which had been levelled in regard to single track roads on the North Coast 500 route and its use by cyclists, motorcyclists and caravans; in this regard it was noted that the Initiative was concerned not to exclude any forms of transport on the route;
- concern was expressed that the North Coast 500 route did not include the expanse of area in the middle of Caithness and Sutherland and clarification was sought on how visitors could be attracted to areas and communities off the main route;
- a query in regard to the level of information on the Initiative's social media sites in regard to the route;
- in regard to the above it was noted that the Initiative's website would go live on 18 June 2015 and would have suggested itineraries and interactive maps so that visitors could create their own journey plans; visitors would be encouraged to go off the route and explore other areas regardless of their proximity to the route;
- it was important that the City of Inverness did not become the focus of the North Coast 500 route, and that there was a need for the Initiative to work closely with local groups in the Area and also with Caithness and Sutherland Members; in this regard it was reported that the Initiative intended to set up workshops and establish a forum locally to engage with local Members and organisations and groups;
- it was suggested that consideration should be given to Dunnet Head being included on North Coast 500 route given that it was the most northerly point on the UK mainland;
- it was suggested that the potential closure of public conveniences and service points in rural areas could be a disadvantage to the Initiative on the basis that these Council services and its staff were helpful in promoting tourism in the Area;
- the importance of the Initiative engaging in dialogue with community councils along the route was highlighted, on the basis they would highlight any local issues to be taken into account;
- that the North West Highlands Geopark was working to encourage tourists to come off the main route, for example through the creation of 'pebble' routes; in this regard reference was also made to opportunities to work closely with the Initiative and to link in with its website to encourage visitors to explore the archaeology and geology in the area;
- it was suggested that the North Coast 500 route would be important in terms of the ability to market and encourage people to visit individual attractions along the route;
- it was important that all relevant agencies in the Area worked together to ensure the success of the Initiative and for its part that the Area Committee

would seek to help tourism growth in the Area through the planning and delivery of Council Services, as resources permitted and it was confirmed that the Initiative would be invited back to the Area Committee to provide progress reports; and

- it was requested that arrangements be made for Members and relevant officials to meet with representatives of the North Highland Initiative outwith the Area Committee.

In conclusion of this item the Chair thanked Ms Farquhar for her presentation.

Thereafter the Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the presentation;
- ii. **AGREED** to help tourism growth in the Area through the planning and delivery of Council Services as resources permit; and
- iii. **AGREED** that arrangements be made for Members and relevant officials to meet with representatives of the North Highland Initiative outwith the Area Committee.

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

**Declaration of Interest – Mr G Farlow declared a non-financial interest as Chair of the North West Highlands Geopark, 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 in Booklet A, Report No. CS/12/15 dated 14 May 2015 by the Director of Development and Infrastructure which presented a summary of matters raised in responses to the Main Issues Report (MIR) consultation for the Caithness and Sutherland Local Development Plan (CaSPlan), which ran from 30 October 2014 to 6 February 2015. It also presented a summary of matters raised in responses to the Additional Sites and Issues consultation that was undertaken from 13 March 2015 to 24 April 2015.

Members were advised that Officers had been giving initial consideration to the matters raised and the report included recommendations for the Council’s interim position on these for the Area Committee’s consideration. The Area Committee was asked to agree the Council’s interim position to guide the preparation of the Proposed Plan, to be referred to the Planning, Development and Infrastructure (PDI) Committee for consideration later in 2015 alongside ongoing environmental assessment and other actions to be undertaken.

In discussion, Members commended officers on the level of consultation which had been undertaken and on the quality and detail of the work carried out in relation to the Plan and on its vision and adaptability.

Thereafter, Members raised the following points:

Sutherland Area

- the removal of settlement development areas from small communities was welcomed, on the basis it was suggested that the targeting of these areas had been ineffective in crofting areas;
- that the thrust of the Plan which was in supporting and delivering economic development was particularly important in North and West Sutherland and it was encouraging that sustainable and appropriate development was being pursued in the area;
- that a more robust approach be taken to planning gain and developer contributions, specific reference being made to the serious undermining of infrastructure such as roads which had been caused by some developments;
- the scope for community groups and community woodland groups to erect temporary tourist pods was welcomed, and it was suggested that windfarm developers should be encouraged to consider providing similar facilities to cater for visitors to the area;
- that tourist corridors be welcomed, however it was suggested that the tourist route over the Struie should be given more emphasis in the Plan; reference was also made to the need for good roads infrastructure to support development along these corridors;
- that the principle of growing settlements be supported; however there was a need to consider how to encourage people back and into the area through initiatives to increase the provision of suitable housing;
- that in regard to strengthening and supporting communities the view was expressed that the Council could do better in terms of encouraging economic development particularly in fragile areas; it was noted that analysis by data zones did not identify all pockets of deprivation which did exist in some rural parts of Sutherland, where there were issues around demographic change and the ability to access essential services and housing which required to be addressed;
- in regard to the above the Council therefore required to focus more on the development side to address socio economic gaps and to encourage inward investment into fragile communities so that they could grow and flourish;
- in this regard it was important that the Plan reinforced the need to deliver the right communications in rural areas so that new businesses could evolve; it was also suggested that the Council's Rural Transport Plan and Green Transport Strategy should be reinforced through the Plan so that proposals for public transport in fragile areas were developed;
- it was suggested that care should be taken in the use of the term 'settlement' in the Plan given that areas not within the official settlement development areas may be considered settlements in the assessment of planning applications and therefore it was important to have clear definitions set out and to make this distinction within the Plan; and
- it was suggested that the terminology around demographics should change to that of 'demographic deprivation' to focus on the problem in Sutherland and other areas of the Highlands where there was an ageing population and a lack of younger people in communities due to the lack of employment opportunities and affordable housing.

### Caithness Area

- in terms of Main Issue 3, it was important that a strong and diverse economy should be considered the main priority in the Plan on the basis that this would create strong and sustainable settlements;
- in terms of Main Issue 6, it was suggested where possible the design of buildings should include to some degree the use of local materials such as Caithness Flagstone to help contribute to a sense of place and improve on the design of modern buildings; however a counter to this was the need to make housing affordable for young people to allow them to remain in the area and move onto the housing ladder;
- concern in regard to the suggestion in comments received that open space should be provided as increased housing plot sizes rather than as public open space, on the basis that the removal of communal areas could be detrimental to a sense of community in the long term;
- in terms of the Plan it had been stated that site WK30 was 'an area of blanket peat coverage' and in response the Planner confirmed that this was an error which would be corrected in the Environmental Report; clarification was also sought and was provided by the Planner in regard to reasons for the identification of WK30 as a 'non preferred site';
- clarification was also sought and was provided by the Principal Planner and Planner in regard to the reasons why Murkle Bay and a site at Janetstown, Milton, Wick were not proposed to be identified for development in the Plan;
- reference was made to the large number of vacant derelict buildings around Wick, mainly in private ownership and concern they would continue to remain derelict for some time to the overall detriment of the town; it was suggested there was a need for more focus through the planning process to consider a way forward for these buildings including the option of demolition; in this regard the Planner made reference to the potential opportunities through the Plan and the Highland-wide Local Development Plan to address these issues;
- that the Plan was a start but the Council should engage with partners to deliver a better connected transport system in the Area fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century;
- reference was made to the importance of developer contributions to provide a sustainable fund for services and facilities such as play areas and transport;
- that houses and services appropriate for the population required to be developed with specific reference to the construction of one bedroomed homes for the young and elderly;
- concern at the lack of surfing/sporting facilities in Thurso; there was also significant potential for Thurso river/harbour to be developed as a leading seawater sporting facility in the UK; the Principal Planner noted that a project to deliver sporting facilities at Viewfirth, Thurso had been identified in the main issues report and would be supported in the Plan, together with the principle of seawater/surfing facilities at Thurso harbour which had been raised during the charrette/consultation process;
- that the community woodlands proposal in Thurso had local support and should be encouraged; the Planner confirmed that the principle of the woodland was supported in the Plan but there were factors outwith the Council's control that may affect its delivery;
- whether there was a case for some retail developments to the west of Thurso; in response the Planner indicated that retail provision in Thurso had been raised as a topic of debate in the Main Issues Report but that there had not been much support for having retail in the Thurso West

expansion area and that, with the existing supermarkets provision and current state of the sector there was no clear rationale and therefore the Plan did not include proposals for retail developments in that area with the exception of a stand-alone petrol station;

- that the comments included in the summary of comments set out in the report in relation to a bypass for Thurso be welcomed; the Principal Planner clarified that the intention would be to refer to this issue in general terms as a potential scheme within the Plan in the context of the Thurso West expansion area as part of any long term strategy;
- it was suggested that the idea raised in comment that there was a need for a roundabout on the road from Scrabster to Thurso at the junction near the Weigh Inn Hotel had merit;
- that the Mart site, next to the existing High School in Thurso could be suitable for a replacement High School in the town; the Principal Planner advised Members that no requirement to identify a new site for such use within CaSPlan had been highlighted, so no site options specifically referred to such use, and undertook to speak to colleagues in the Care and Learning Service on this issue before the draft Plan was brought to the Planning Development and Infrastructure Committee in August 2015;
- presentations from Scottish and Southern Energy showed that as a result of the early closure of power stations in the central belt, security of energy supply would become more of a risk in Scotland; a view was expressed that a nuclear power station in Caithness would solve many problems and be to the benefit of the area; however a contrary view was also expressed that nuclear energy developments in Caithness would be to the detriment of the area and would not accord with the prevailing Scottish Government policy.

Thereafter, the Committee:-

- NOTED** the summary of matters raised in responses to the Main Issues Report consultation and to the Additional Sites and Issues consultation, as shown in Appendix A of the report;
- AGREED** the contents of Appendix B as the Council's interim position on the matters raised, for referral to the Planning, Development and Infrastructure Committee on 19 August 2015 for its consideration when agreeing the content of the Proposed Plan, noting that any recommendations require an appropriate justification;
- NOTED** that the report to PDI Committee with recommendations on the contents of the Proposed Plan will also be informed by the results of ongoing environmental and other assessment; and
- AGREED** actions leading up to the report to PDI Committee on the Proposed Plan, as set out in paragraph 3.2 of the report.

**In accordance with Standing Order 18, with the consent of the meeting, item 5 on the agenda was taken at this point.**

## **6. Deprived Area Fund Maoin Sgìre Bhoichd**

Members were advised that the Caithness and Sutherland Area Committee approved interim awards of Deprived Area Funding at its meeting in February 2015 and agreed to defer a final decision regarding the full allocation of Deprived Area Funding to allow Members to be provided with more detailed information. The additional information was available but in draft form only at present. As the interim

funding awarded was for the period April – June 2015 a decision was required before the end of June 2015.

To allow the decision to be made in the light of all required information but within this timescale, Members were invited to establish a short life Working Group (2 Members each from the Wick, Thurso and Landward Caithness Wards and Area Chair) to consider the applications and approaches for the future.

Members were also invited to delegate decisions over the allocation of the Deprived Area Fund 2015-16 to the Director of Development and Infrastructure in consultation with the Chair of the Area Committee and the Member Working Group.

During discussion, Members raised the following points:-

- the Chair advised that the Council was hoping to work with the District Partnerships to establish a working group comprising other relevant organisations and agencies to work together and develop a cohesive plan to address deprivation in the Area; on hearing from Mr B Fernie, Chair of the Caithness District Partnership, it was agreed to discuss the arrangements for taking this forward further with the Area Leader;
- it was suggested that there were also pockets of deprivation in rural Sutherland that required to be considered in more detail; in this regard the Chair suggested that issues around foodbanks, fuel poverty, and access poverty in these rural areas should be considered by the Council in conjunction with Highland and Islands Enterprise;
- in relation to unsuccessful applicants to the Deprived Area Fund, it was requested that given their limited resources that the Council provide them with appropriate assistance to access other potential sources of funding;
- it was suggested that the remit of the Working Group should also include to take an overview of the operation of the Deprived Area Fund to consider issues such as how applicants accessed the Fund, the assistance they received to complete application forms, and also application deadlines;
- disappointment was expressed at the length of time it had taken to provide Members with the further detailed information on which to make a final decision regarding the full allocation of the Deprived Area Fund; concern was also expressed that it was being proposed that the matter should now go to a working group whose discussions would not be in public and also that a further delay in considering the applications would be to the detriment of applicants, particularly in the case where match funding was dependent on the outcome of an application to the Fund;
- it was noted that the Council's internal audit section had carried out an audit in respect of the Deprived Area Fund and that the draft report would be made available to the Working Group; and
- that Members had no report in front of them on which to make a decision and therefore that the recommendation to establish a working group with the remit as outlined above should be supported.

Following further discussion, Mr B Fernie moved that the Area Committee approve the original recommendations for the Deprived Area Fund in 2015/16 as detailed in the report submitted to the Area Committee on 15 February 2015.

The Clerk advised that in the absence of a report Members did not have full information in front of them on which to make a decision and therefore the motion



put forward by Mr B Fernie was not competent. He indicated that there was a recommendation to establish a Working Group, which had a clear remit, and this Group would meet following the Committee to take a decision in regard to the applications for the Deprived Area Fund in 2015-16.

Thereafter, Mr B Fernie expressed the view that Members had received full information at the previous meeting on which to make a decision but confirmed that he would withdraw his motion.

Thereafter, the Committee **AGREED**:-

- i. to establish a short life Working Group to consider the applications and approaches for the future comprising the Area Leader and 2 Members each from the Wick, Thurso and Landward Caithness Wards;
- ii. that the membership of the Working Group be as follows:- Mrs D Mackay, Ms G Ross, Mr B Fernie, Mr D Mackay, Mr J Rosie, Mrs G Coghill and Mr W Mackay; and
- iii. to delegate decisions over the allocation of the Deprived Area Fund 2015-2016 to the Director of Development and Infrastructure in consultation with the Chair of the Area Committee and the Member Working Group.

**5. Pilot Pentland Firth and Orkney Waters Marine Spatial Plan  
Plana Pìolatach Farsaingeachd Mara a' Chaoil Arcaich agus Uisgeachan Arcaibh**

**Declaration of Interest – Mr G Farlow declared a non-financial interest as Chair of the North West Highlands Geopark, 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 in Booklet B, Report No. CS/13/15 dated 18 April 2015 by the Director of Development and Infrastructure which introduced the pre-consultation draft Pilot Pentland Firth and Orkney Waters (PFOW) Marine Spatial Plan for comment. It had been jointly prepared by Marine Scotland, Orkney Islands Council and Highland Council. This document was intended to have status as non-statutory Planning Guidance for making marine planning decisions to support environmentally, economically and socially sustainable development along the north Highland coast and in Orkney. The document also represented a pilot approach to developing statutory marine spatial plans around Scotland. As Highland contains three of the eleven Regional Marine Plan areas across Scotland, this work was particularly beneficial.

The Plan aimed to streamline the process of preparing and determining marine planning applications, consents and activities by ensuring information on the variety of marine activities and their potential interactions was available in one document. It also ensured greater integration of marine and terrestrial planning, as required by Scottish Government policies.

During discussion, Members raised the following points:-

- that the Coastal Planning Officer and her colleagues be commended on the development of the Plan and the quality of the work undertaken;
- that the emphasis given to geodiversity within the Plan, the integration of marine interests with planning policy, and the contribution of the Plan in relation to the

pressures created by the growth of economic activity in the Pentland Firth be welcomed;

- the opportunities to use the emergency tug vessel currently based at Kirkwall to research and monitor marine pollution in the PFOW area;
- the opportunities to secure more community benefit from agencies operating in the Pentland Firth;
- concern at the lack of consultation with the Area Committee and local Members in the preparation of the draft consultation document and in regard to developments within the Pentland Firth generally;
- a contrary view was expressed that Members had been invited to a consultation event held in Caithness at which the draft Plan had been launched and that subsequently Members had had the opportunity to be involved in the process through stakeholder events and email briefings;
- clarification was sought in regard to the funding of the pilot project and the methodology used and in regard to whether there would be a process whereby the Plan was continually reassessed to ensure it was up to date and as accurate as possible given its status as non-statutory planning guidance;
- that the Council was to appoint consultants to prepare a business plan/strategy for its entire harbours estate and that a key strand of that was to develop revenue from marine tourism; it was therefore important that the next draft of the Plan took into account and reflected this strategy particularly under General Policy 7: Integrating Coastal and Marine Development;
- it was noted that the dates of the consultation events to be held in Durness, Thurso and Stromness would be held from the week commencing 6 July 2015, the dates to be confirmed in early course.

The Committee **AGREED** to endorse the draft Pilot Pentland Firth and Orkney Waters Marine Spatial Plan for public consultation.

## **7. Maintenance Programme for Roads and Bridges Prògram Càraidh airson Rathaidean is Dhrochaidean**

There had been circulated Report No. CS/14/15 dated 12 May 2015 by the Director of Community Services on the Maintenance Programmes for Roads and Bridges for the Caithness and Sutherland Area for 2015/16.

During discussion, Members raised the following points:-

- clarification was sought in regard to the timescale for carrying out repairs to road surfacing works which had been funded by wind farm monies in the Lairg area, noting that Lairg Community Council had raised their concerns in this regard;
- the importance of road markings in North, West and Central Sutherland was emphasised particularly during the tourism season and clarification was sought on the proposals for white lining in the area over the summer and whether any works could be undertaken in house;
- in regard to the above whether there was a more local and cheaper solution to the current arrangement whereby external national firms were engaged to carry out white lining works, for example the opportunities for the Council to procure the required machinery or to share machinery with neighbouring local authorities;
- a point in regard to the status of traffic lights at Ardchronie Quarry;

- concern that Healthfield Road, Thurso had not been included in the Programme for 2015/16 on the basis that a previous commitment had been given that surfacing works would be carried out;
- it was noted there were vacancies in the Service's workforce and an update was sought in regard to whether it was the intention to fill these vacancies, concern being expressed at the impact of holding posts in regard to the ability to get necessary works done on the ground;
- it was suggested that the road to Cape Wrath was in poor condition and that there was a need to take a more robust approach to seeking community benefit from the Ministry of Defence to upgrade the road particularly given its importance to tourism in the area;
- that the opportunity for works to be undertaken on the road from the bridge at Achness, Rosehall extending to the war memorial be considered;
- that there was a need for more flexibility and delegated authority to be provided to community works officers to attend to small/medium works required on the ground;
- that an update be provided on the status of the Service Bridge, Wick and also to investigate if Members access to the condition report on bridges in Caithness and Sutherland could if possible be provided;
- concern at the ongoing reduction in expenditure on roads maintenance which had been experienced over the past twenty years and the acceleration in the decline of road conditions as a result;
- credit was due for the introduction of new working practices and techniques which had been introduced by the Service over the past few years and clarification was sought on whether any of these new techniques were to be used in the works for 2015/16;
- a request that arrangements be made for the road condition survey ragging map to be brought to ward business meetings in the Area; and
- an update was sought and provided on progress with the completion of the works to the Embo road.

The Committee:-

- APPROVED** the Maintenance Programmes for Roads and Bridges for the Caithness and Sutherland Area for 2015/16;
- AGREED** that arrangements be made for the road condition survey ragging map to be brought to ward business meetings in the Area; and
- AGREED** to investigate if Members access to the condition report on bridges in Caithness and Sutherland could be provided.

## **8. Landfill Communities Fund Maoin Choimhearsnachdan Tiodhlacaidh Sgudail**

There had been circulated Report No. CS/15/15 dated 30 April 2015 by the Director of Community Services on an application to the Highland Council Landfill Communities Fund.

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

## **9. Housing Performance Report – 1 April 2014 – 31 March 2015 Aithisg Dèanadais a thaobh Taigheadais – 1 Giblean 2014 – 31 Màrt 2015**

There had been circulated Report No. CS/16/15 dated 24 April 2015 by the Director of Community Services which provided information on housing performance indicators in 2014/15.

During discussion, Members raised the following points:-

- that staff within the Area Housing Team be thanked for their hard work and prompt and helpful response to enquiries from Members;
- the opportunities to encourage tenants to take up tenancies of void properties; in this regard a number of initiatives were suggested such as offering white goods, carpeting or short term tenancy packages to homeless people in other areas of Highland where there was a shortage of accommodation;
- discussion around how the choice based letting pilot which had been launched in February 2015 was working in practice;
- clarification was sought and provided in regard to whether the reduction in current rent arrears shown at section 4.3 of the Report was being managed down by staff and whether rent arrears would be more difficult to manage following the roll out of Universal Credit;
- concern at the time being taken to carry out works to void properties to make them suitable for re-let;
- that further information be provided in regard to the number of properties which had been void for more than a period of one year and confirmation was sought in regard to whether they were included in the list of void properties detailed in the report; and
- a query in regard to the reasons as to why in certain cases people who became homeless in Caithness had been re-housed outwith the area; the Area Community Services Manager advised that he would discuss the issues around this matter directly with Mr D Mackay outwith the meeting.

The Committee **NOTED** the information provided on housing performance in the period 1 April 2014 to 31 March 2015.

#### **10. Housing Affordable Warmth Blàths Neo-chosgail Taigheadais**

There had been circulated Report No. CS/17/15 dated 14 May 2015 by the Director of Community Services which provided an update on progress with the affordable warmth elements of Highland's Housing Strategy and recommended that Members note the priority actions for the next year in Caithness and Sutherland.

During discussion, Members raised the following points:-

- it would be helpful if a colour copy of the map appended to the report which showed the percentage of households in fuel poverty by data zone in Highland could be e-mailed to Members;
- that a further report be brought to a future meeting on potential solutions to improve ease of access to home insulation schemes;
- that the trend in North and West Sutherland was for the Council to remove solid fuel heating and install air source heating systems which it was suggested some tenants were finding unaffordable; therefore there was a need to enter into advance dialogue with tenants to ensure that the appropriate type of heating system was installed into their properties;

- there was also a need for more advice and assistance to be provided to tenants in regard to how to operate any new heating system being installed, and that it was also important to take into consideration the circumstances and lifestyles of householders when comparing the costs of operating different heating systems; and
- concern that some tenants in Durness had been left without heating for 3/4 weeks due to technical faults with air source heating systems and also in regard to delays in these faults being repaired;

The Committee:-

- NOTED** progress with 'affordable warmth' actions being undertaken to improve energy efficiency and tackle fuel poverty;
- NOTED** the priority actions set out in section 3 of the report; and
- AGREED** that a further report be brought to a future meeting on potential solutions to improve ease of access to home insulation schemes.

## **11. Associated School Group Overview** **Sealladh Coitcheann air Buidheann Sgoiltean Co-cheangailte**

**Declaration of Interest - Ms G Ross declared a financial interest in this item on the grounds that her husband was a Head of Faculty at Thurso High School, and left the room for the duration of this item.**

**Mr G Phillips took the Chair for this item.**

There had been circulated Report No. CS/18/15 dated 12 May 2015 by the Director of Care and Learning which provided an update of key information in relation to the schools within the Thurso School Associated School Group (ASG), and provided useful links to further information in relation to this school.

There were also tabled reports by the Education Quality Improvement Manager in regard to North Area Schools Attainment 2015, and on the subjects being taught across the curriculum in secondary schools in Caithness and Sutherland in the current school calendar year, and specifically SQA presentations in 2014 for secondary schools in Caithness and Sutherland.

During discussion, Members raised the following points:-

- that arrangements be made for the report on North Area Schools Attainment 2015 which had been tabled at the meeting to be considered at ward business meetings in the Area;
- in regard to buildings it was suggested that a new build was required for Thurso High School given that the current School was not fit for purpose for people with a disability; that a dangerous incident had recently occurred when a section of the roof had blown off; there were challenges with the cost of the heating system and also the fact there was no perimeter fence around the School and that the layout of the access to the School created road safety issues; the Education Quality Improvement Manager advised that he would raise these issues, including potential timescales for any new

build, with senior management in the Care and Learning Service and report back directly to Mr M Reiss on the matter;

- it was suggested that given that given the period of time which elapsed between Education Scotland reviews under the heading of 'Improving through Self Evaluation and Improving Services' that consideration be given to future ASG reports including information on the internal reviews which were carried out periodically in this regard; and
- issues around the ability to replace teachers particularly in rural areas and the importance of video conferencing to deliver a range of subjects across the curriculum; reference was also made to the opportunities to deliver earth sciences within the curriculum at secondary level in Ward 1: North, West and Central Sutherland.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the content of the report;
- ii. **AGREED** that the report on North Area Schools Attainment 2015 which had been tabled at the meeting be considered at ward business meetings in the Area; and
- iii. **AGREED** that consideration be given to future ASG reports including information on internal reviews which had been carried out under the heading of 'Improving through Self Evaluation and Improving Services'.

## 12. Minutes Geàrr-chunntas

There had been circulated and were **NOTED** the Minutes of the Caithness and Sutherland Area Committee held on 10 February 2015, which were approved by the Council on 12 March 2015.

## 13. Exclusion of Public Às-dùnadh a' Phobaill

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 the following items on the grounds that they involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraphs 6 and 9 of Part 1 of Schedule 7A of the Act.

## 14. Dornoch Common Good – Cancellation of Lease Math Choitcheann Dhòrnaich - Cuir às do Chòir Màil

There had been circulated to Members only Joint Report No CS/19/15 by the Director of Development and Infrastructure and Head of Policy and Reform in relation to the cancellation of a lease of Dornoch Common Good Land.

The Committee **AGREED** the recommendations as set out in the report

## 15. Dornoch Common Good – Assignment of Lease Math Choitcheann Dhòrnaich – Gluasad Còir Màil

There had been circulated to Members only Joint Report No CS/20/15 by the Director of Development and Infrastructure and Head of Policy and Reform in relation to the assignation of a lease of Dornoch Common Good Land.

The Committee **AGREED** the recommendations as set out in the report.

The meeting ended at 4.15pm.