

**The Highland Council
Caithness Committee**

Minutes of Meeting of the Caithness Committee held in Wick Town Hall, Bridge Street, Wick, on Monday, 25 April 2016 at 10.30am.

Present:

Mr B Fernie
Mrs G Coghill
Mr D Mackay
Mr W MacKay

Mr M Reiss
Mr J Rosie
Ms G Ross
Mr R Saxon

Officials in attendance:

Mr D Sutherland, Ward Manager, Corporate Development Service
Mr A Macmanus, Assistant Ward Manager, Corporate Development Service
Mr A Webster, Regeneration Adviser, Development & Infrastructure Service
Mr D Goldie, Head of Housing, Community Services
Mr C Stewart, Area Community Services Manager, Community Services
Mr J Holden, Interim Housing Manager (North), Community Services
Mr I Moncrieff, Assistant Area Manager, Community Services
Ms M Ross, Principal Housing Officer, Community Services
Ms A Macrae, Committee Administrator, Corporate Development Service

Also in Attendance:

Item 4: Group Manager M Loynd, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

Mr D Mackay, Vice Chair took the Chair pending the appointment of the Chair of the Caithness Committee at item 3 below.

**1. Apologies for Absence
Liesgeulan**

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr D Bremner and Mr N Macdonald.

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

Item 5: Mr R Saxon (non-financial)

**3. Appointment of Chair of Caithness Committee
Suidheachadh de Chathraiche de Chomataidh Ghallaibh**

Prior to nominations being invited the Vice Chair expressed the view that the Chair of the Committee and the position of Civic Leader should be a combined post. He advised that Caithness was the only area in Highland where this was not the case.

The Ward Manager advised that it was not competent to consider the position of Civic Leader at this meeting on the basis the post had been created prior to the establishment of the Caithness Committee and under a previous scheme of delegation. If a vacancy arose in respect of the position then that would be the appropriate time for the Caithness Committee to consider the post and also to decide if it wished to combine the roles. By way of clarification the Ward Manger

also confirmed that the Civic Leader had been appointed by local Members at a ward business meeting.

During further discussion points raised included that it would make sense to combine the roles on the basis difficulties arose with the posts being held by different Members and that the local elected Members should have the power to make that decision. A separate point was made that if Members wished to consider an appointment to the post of Civic Leader then the appropriate route would be for an item to that effect to be included on the agenda for a future meeting of the Committee. In the meantime the advice from officials should be accepted and the Committee proceed to appoint a Chair.

Thereafter, Mr D Mackay seconded by Mr J Rosie moved that Mr R Saxon be appointed as Chair of the Committee.

Mr W Mackay moved that Mrs G Coghill be appointed as Chair of the Committee, however in response Mrs Coghill confirmed she wished to decline the nomination

On their being no other nominations, Mr R Saxon was duly appointed as Chair of the Caithness Committee.

4. Fire and Rescue Service – Area Performance Summary Seirbheis Smàlaidh is Teasairginn - Geàrr-chunntas Dèanadais Sgìreil

There had been circulated Report No CC/07/16 dated 15 April 2016 by the Local Senior Officer which provided an update to the Caithness Committee Members on progress against the priorities outlined in the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service Area Committee Plan for Caithness and Sutherland 2015-2016. The report also contained previously agreed information and performance as requested by Area Committees.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- that Members be provided with the opportunity to scrutinise the Plan for 2016-17;
- it was suggested that initiatives such as Safe Highlander and Driving Ambitions were crucial in getting the message out to young people in regard to road safety and the potentially serious consequences of road traffic collisions and were having a positive impact in this regard;
- in regard to the above it would be beneficial if the seatbelt convincer could be made available for events in Caithness on the basis it was a powerful tool in demonstrating the reasons why it was important to wear a seatbelt;
- concern at the lack of progress in regard to the upgrading of Thurso Fire Station particularly given the number of female firefighters deployed at the station and the fact that Members had been raising this issue for a considerable period of time;
- in regard to the above it was requested that the Group Manager advise his colleagues of the Committee's concern that Thurso Fire Station should be considered as a priority within the Service's ongoing strategic property review;
- confirmation was sought and provided that the Service was committed to extending the permitted distance and travel time from the fire station in those areas in Caithness where it was difficult to recruit retained duty staff; it was reported that this extension of the recruitment area had been

- implemented in other difficult to recruit areas in Highland such as Lochinver and had resulted in a significant improvement in the number of recruits;
- further information was sought and provided in regard to the reasons for unwanted false alarms which had occurred in commercial/business premises and the liaison undertaken by the Service in this regard;
 - issues around the difficulties the public may have in distinguishing between a wild fire and controlled muir-burning in considering whether to raise the alarm with the Fire and Rescue Service; and
 - in regard to the above it was important that Land Managers and Factors advise the Service when they were undertaking muir-burning and it was suggested that to assist the public there be more local publicity in regard to the dates this was permitted, which was generally between 1 October and 15 April, and also with a view to prevention by highlighting the causes and dangers associated with wild fires.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the Area Performance Report.

5. Deprived Area Funds 2016-17 Maoin Sgìre Bhoichd

Declaration of Interest - Mr R Saxon declared a non-financial interest in this item as a member of Ormlie Community Association, 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 CC/08/16 dated 15 April 2016 by the Director of Development and Infrastructure which set out proposals for allocation of the Deprived Area Funds (DAF) for 2016-17. It set out the background to the Fund, together with a summary of proposals, the assessments and recommendations. A statement was also included summarising the outturn of the 2015-16 funding.

In discussion a point was raised that Audit Scotland be asked to investigate whether the Deprived Area Funds allocated to the Pultneytown People's Project (PPP) in previous years had been spent appropriately and in accordance with the relevant funding criteria. In this regard it was suggested that DAF may have been used by PPP for other activities not strictly in accordance with the aims and criteria of the Fund which were set nationally and this may have been at the expense of other deprived areas in Caithness which could have benefited from these funds.

Following on from the above a contrary view was expressed that in response to concerns raised by Members around the funding allocated to PPP a Deprived Area Fund Working Group had been established to consider the matter in detail and in parallel a full internal audit conducted which had raised no concerns. Members could therefore be confident that due process had been followed with no concerns identified and as such it would therefore not be appropriate to seek a national audit of the organisation.

- it was noted that those groups in receipt of DAF would be required to submit quarterly evaluation reports detailing where the funding was being spent;
- it was important that groups which had not previously benefited from Deprived Area Funding had the opportunity to apply for the balance of the funding in 2016/17 to ensure that funding was spread across the County;

- a point that the Pulteneytown People's Project were delivering services across Caithness and not only in Wick;
- clarification was sought and provided on the process whereby potential groups could be identified and to ensure there was equal opportunity in terms of accessing the funding;
- it was important that appropriate support be provided to those groups who had not been through the application process before and also for Members to have the opportunity to feed into that process;
- it was noted that it had been a decision of the full Council in February 2016 to continue DAF in 2016-17 but that due to the continuing budget reductions being faced by the Council, this was likely to be the last year that DAF would be available;
- issues around concern in regard to the capacity of some of smaller groups to deliver projects within the required timescales and available funding;
- a point in regard to whether the proposed deadline of 31 May 2016 for applications should be extended; however it was suggested that this deadline should remain on the basis that organisations were required to spend DAF by the end of the financial year.

Thereafter Mr J Rosie moved that the Audit Scotland be requested to undertake an audit of the Pulteneytown People's Project in respect of the use of Deprived Area Funds but on failing to find a seconder the amendment fell.

The Committee:-

- i. **APPROVED** funding from DAF 2016-17 to:
 - Pulteneytown People's Project - £48,840
 - Ormlie Community Association - £13,000
- ii. **AGREED** to invite applications for the balance of the fund (£38,160) by 31 May 2016; and
- iii. **AGREED** to delegate authority to the Director of Development and Infrastructure, in consultation with the Chair of the Caithness Committee, to make decisions, if required, on the allocation of the remaining Deprived Area Fund 2016/17 ahead of the August 2016 Caithness Committee.

6. **Maintenance Programme for Roads and Bridges** **Prògram Càradh Rathaidean Ionadail Ghallaibh**

There had been circulated Report No CC/09/16 dated 13 April 2016 by the Director of Community Services in connection with the Maintenance Programmes for Roads and Bridges for the Caithness Area for 2016/17.

In presenting the report, the Assistant Area Manager advised that the 2016/17 budget for roads maintenance operations and its distribution between the eight new Local Committee areas, was due to be presented to the Community Services Committee on 28 April 2016. The report therefore outlined the proposal for road maintenance in accordance with the current draft budget which may be subject to change at that meeting.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- an update was sought and provided in regard to the concerns expressed by local Members about a range of issues associated with damage caused by contractors engaged in Scottish Southern Energy (SSE) projects to the local road network in the Watten area and the response of SSE in ensuring repairs and temporary repairs were undertaken promptly;
- in regard to the above it was important to ensure that any damage which created ruts on road verges was repaired promptly on the basis of the serious risk they posed in terms of road safety, reference being made to a recent local incident involving a heavy goods vehicle in this regard;
- reference was made to a road safety issue associated with the closure of the B874 south of Reiss associated with the signage which had been erected in the area; the Assistant Area Manager confirmed that he would arrange for the signage in this location to be checked;
- concern at the poor condition of and number of pot holes in the roads in Caithness while acknowledging the Programme sought to make the best use of resources within the available budget;
- going forward there was a need to identify the most critical points in the roads network in Caithness and to deal with those areas as a priority;
- it was suggested that piecemeal cold tar patching was not effective and should cease given that it provided only a short term solution to repair potholes and did not represent the best use of resources;
- the main issue was the lack of available monies to invest in the road network and that this was unlikely to change until such time as the Council was allocated more funding for roads;
- that the condition of the roads in Highland was consistently identified by the public as one of their top priorities and in response additional capital investment had been agreed by the Council; it was noted this would enable the Service to purchase jet patchers although it was noted these would require to be shared between areas across the Highlands;
- an update was sought on the status of surface dressing works at Heathfield Road, Thurso within the Programme; the Assistant Area Manager reported that it was not in the current year's programme but that consideration would be given to its inclusion in next year's programme.

Following on from the above, Members raised a number of specific points in response to which the Assistant Area Manager confirmed he would investigate each item and report back to the individual Member concerned. These items included the following:-

- it was requested location of a new path at Mount Pleasant Brae, Thurso be checked to ensure it was in the correct location;
- it was reported that the barrier at Mount Pleasant Primary School, Thurso had been in need of repair for a number of months; and
- a query as to why the grass at Reay Old Cemetery had not been cut for a period of years.

Thereafter, the Committee **APPROVED** the Maintenance Programmes for Roads and Bridges for the Caithness Area for 2016/17.

**7. Carbon CLEVER Community Grant Fund
Sgeama Thabhartasan Coimhearsnachd Càrboin CIALLAICH**

There had been circulated Report No CC/10/16 dated 22 March 2016 by the Head of Policy and Reform which set out an application received for the Carbon CLEVER community grant fund in Caithness for 2015-16 which had been approved by Local Members and was presented for homologation.

The Committee **HOMOLOGATED** the decision to fund the application as follows:-

Ref. No.	Applicant Organisation	Recommended Award
12149	Harbour Mission Baptist Church	£13,494.65

**8. Housing Performance Report - 1 April 2015 to 31 December 2015
Aithisg Dèanadais a thaobh Taigheadais – 1 Giblean 2015 gu 31 Dùbhlachd 2015**

There had been circulated Report No CC/11/16 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 up to 31 December 2015.

In discussion, concern was expressed that the level of voids and particularly the most difficult to let properties were having a significant negative impact on the statistics throughout the report and giving a misleading impression that the Service was underperforming in Caithness when this was not the case. It was suggested there was a need to be more proactive in considering how these properties could be utilised in a different way and to develop initiatives in this regard so that they were removed from the statistics, and the financial impact on the Council mitigated.

Further comments on this issue included the following:-

- the potential for the Council's Redesign Board to consider the issue;
- the potential for difficult to let properties to be demolished, or for environmental improvements to be made to the surrounding area to make those properties more attractive to tenants;
- that consideration be given to attracting tenants into properties by offering incentives, for example white goods;
- reference was also made to the Beatrice offshore wind farm development and the likelihood for there to be significant demand from workers employed in the project for accommodation in Wick and therefore the potential for void properties to be utilised for this purpose; and
- it was also important to note that measures to reduce the level of voids may require the Council to incur additional expenditure.

During further discussion, Members raised the following additional points:-

- it was noted the choice based letting scheme had evidenced some success in terms of voids and that this be welcomed;
- the reduction in rent arrears over the period also be welcomed particularly given concerns about the impact of welfare reform and the introduction of universal credit on levels of rent arrears;

- caution that welfare reforms may have a negative impact on trends going forward into the future; and
- in regard to the high turnover of properties it would be helpful to understand the reasons why tenancies were being relinquished; the Interim Housing Manager (North) confirmed that he would provide further information to Members in this regard.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the information provided on housing performance in the period 1 April 2015 to 31 December 2015;
- ii. **AGREED** that further information be provided to Members on the reasons underlying the high turnover of tenancies as detailed in the report; and
- iii. **AGREED** that initiatives to reduce the level of voids be further explored and developed and that a report be brought back to a future meeting of the Committee on this item.

9. Minutes Geàrr-chunntas

There were circulated for noting Minutes of the Caithness Committee held on 13 January 2016, which were approved by the Council on 10 March 2016.

The meeting ended at 12.35pm.