

**The Highland Council  
Caithness Committee**

Minutes of Meeting of the Caithness Committee held in Wick Town Hall, Bridge Street, Wick, on Tuesday, 22 November 2016 at 10.30am.

**Present:**

Mr D Bremner	Mr W MacKay
Mrs G Coghill	Mr M Reiss
Mr B Fernie	Mr J Rosie
Mr N Macdonald	Mr R Saxon
Mr D Mackay	

**Officials in attendance:**

Ms H Ross, Senior Ward Manager, Corporate Development Service  
Mr A Macmanus, Ward Manager, Corporate Development Service  
Mr G Mackenzie, Roads Operations Manager, Community Services  
Mr B Northedge, Education Quality Improvement Manager, Care and Learning Service  
Ms M Ross, Principal Housing Officer, Community Services  
Ms A Macrae, Committee Administrator, Corporate Development Service

**Item 5:** Group Manager M Loynd, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

**Mr R Saxon in the Chair**

**1. Apologies for Absence  
Liesgeulan**

An apology for absence was intimated on behalf of Ms G Ross.

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

**Item 3:** Mr B Fernie, Mrs G Coghill, Mr N Macdonald, Mr D Mackay, Mr W Mackay, Mr M Reiss, Mr R Saxon (non-financial).

**3. Additional Urgent Item  
Caithness General Hospital – Maternity Services**

**Declarations of Interest:- Mr B Fernie as Chair of the Caithness Health Action Team (CHAT); Mrs G Goghill, Mr N Macdonald, Mr D Mackay and Mr W Mackay as members of CHAT, and Mr M Reiss and Mr R Saxon, having taken part in a recent protest march organised by CHAT all declared non-financial interests in this item but, having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct, concluded that their interests did not preclude them from taking part in the discussion.**

The Chair **AGREED** to consider the following item as an urgent item in view of the level of concerns expressed by the local community and Members in response to the publication of NHS Highland's report 'The Safe Provision of Maternal and Neonatal

Services at Caithness General Hospital' and to allow the Committee to discuss the report prior to it being considered by the NHS Highland Board on 29 November 2016.

In discussion, it was suggested that NHS Highland had over a number of years sought to downgrade services at Caithness General Hospital and reference was made to previous campaigns which had opposed such changes. It was important therefore that Members demonstrated their support for the campaign by the Caithness Health Action Team (CHAT) to oppose the removal of some maternity services at the Hospital, which it was suggested had a high level of support in Caithness.

Thereafter, concern was expressed that if NHS Highland's proposals were approved this would have a knock on effect on jobs and health provision throughout the Hospital, and on the local economy. Accordingly NHS Highland should be requested to arrange for an independent review to be carried out looking at the maternity care changes proposed and the wider impact such changes were likely to have on the wider health provision and the socio-economic impact on the north of Scotland.

During further discussion, Members commented as follows:-

- it was suggested the downgrading of services at Caithness General Hospital could also have reputational consequences for the County which in turn may impact on the ability to attract people to live and work in the area;
- reference was made to the fact that Wick and Thurso were substantial towns and together with communities in the north of Scotland formed the second largest population in the Highlands; it was therefore important to grow these towns and protect services in the area;
- concern that experience showed the centralisation of public sector services generally did not work in favour of people in the north of Scotland;
- concern was expressed at the lack of consultation by NHS Highland with local people or a willingness to listen to their views;
- it was suggested that the report did not address potential alternatives, patient choice, or the socio-economic impact on families of having to travel to and stay in Inverness;
- there was also a need to discuss with NHS Highland the issues around patient transport, such as the availability of neonatal transport and transferring people in severe weather conditions;
- concern in regard to whether Raigmore had the capacity and staff resources to accommodate patients from Caithness;
- it was suggested that the proposals may affect the skills set of midwives in Caithness which would impact further on maternity services at the Hospital;
- the opportunity for Members to receive a briefing from NHS Highland in regard to the proposals, noting that due to time constraints it had not been possible to arrange this for the Committee;
- a point that further clarification was required from Ms G Ross, MSP in regard to her position in respect of NHS Highland's proposals it being suggested this was not clear from a recent press release;
- a point that if the proposed model was about centralisation, saving money, or an inability and unwillingness to staff the hospital properly then it was suggested this was fundamentally wrong; however it was important to have a model that was the safest and best for those cases where special circumstances determined specialist healthcare;

- a point that mother and baby safety should be the paramount issue to be considered in terms of the delivery of maternity services in Caithness going forward; and
- the Committee's request for an independent review to be carried out be submitted to the Leader of the Council for her endorsement and to the NHS Board.

Thereafter, the Committee **AGREED** that:-

- i. in the light of community concerns to request that an independent review be carried out looking at the maternity care changes proposed and the wider impact such changes are likely to have on the wider health provision and the socio-economic impact on the north of Scotland; and
- ii. this request be submitted to the Leader of the Council for her endorsement and to the NHS Board.

#### **4. Twinning – Wick- Klaksvik Baile Càirdeis – Inbhir Ùige – Klaksvik**

The Chair advised that he written to the Mayor of Klaksvik on 10 September 2016 and followed this up with an e-mail on 21 October 2016 but to date had received no reply. He confirmed that in the absence of a response he considered the matter closed and confirmed that the twinning arrangement remained in place. He indicated that if a reply was received from the Mayor then he would report back to Members on the matter.

In response to a question, the Chair confirmed that he would circulate a copy of his letter to Members. He also confirmed the letter had been agreed by and sent on behalf of both himself as Chair and the Civic Leader.

The Committee **NOTED** the update and that the twinning arrangement remained in place.

#### **5. Scottish Fire and Rescue Local Performance Report 2015-16 Aithisg Dèanadais Sgìreil 2015-16 na Seirbheis Smàlaidh is Teasairginn**

There had been circulated Report No CC/20/16 dated 11 November 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 Local Committees.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- the challenges associated with reducing special service incidents as a result of road traffic collisions in Caithness and particularly the need to change the speeding culture which it was suggested was prevalent on main routes, and through towns and villages;
- reference to the success of the fire prevention work undertaken by the Service in Caithness in terms of reducing the number of fires, injuries and fatalities, and the opportunity to undertake further publicity and home fire safety visits in the run up to Christmas;

- the importance of targeting young people in secondary schools in terms of recruitment and in this regard the Service was commended on the success of the recent Hi Fires event held in Thurso;
- the potential for a similar event to be held in Wick; the Local Senior Officer advised that he would seek to take this matter forward;
- the potential for the Driving Ambitions scheme to be revamped and also to target car clubs in the area to reinforce the message to young people about the dangers of speeding;
- in regard to Driving Ambitions it was suggested that the main priority should be to refresh the DVD albeit it was recognised this would involve significant cost implications;
- the opportunities for firefighters to be trained locally as far as possible and to reduce the time they required to take off work as part of their training;
- concern at the safety issues arising from fire tender availability on the basis that if for example either the Bettyhill or Wick appliances could not be deployed to a serious incident due to crewing issues, then the Thurso unit would be required to attend which then may cause delays in dealing with that incident;
- in regard to the above, it would be helpful if information could be provided on the number of incidents where it had not been possible to deploy a fire tender to attend an incident due to crewing issues; the Local Senior Officer advised that he would seek to provide this information in future reports;
- the Committee's thanks be conveyed to the Station Officer at Thurso Fire Station, on the occasion of his retirement in recognition of the considerable support he had provided to the local community; and
- it was important consideration was given to the type of tyres fitted to the Service's vehicles, given that black ice was a hazard in Caithness throughout the winter;

The Committee **NOTED** the Area Performance Report.

## **6. Associated School Group Overviews Seallaidhean Coitcheann air Buidhnean Sgoiltean Co-cheangailte**

There had been circulated Report No CC/21/16 dated 10 November 2016 by the Director of Care and Learning which provided an update of key information in relation to the schools within the Thurso Associated School Group (ASG), and provided useful updated links to further information in relation to these schools.

Arising from the report, the Education Quality Improvement Manager reported that Miller Academy had been inspected and a positive report would be received from HMIE, with no requirement for a follow up visit. He also indicated that it was his intention to attend a ward business meeting to provide an update on the management of schools programme.

In discussion, Members welcomed the positive report to be received from the HMIE following its inspection of Miller Academy, Thurso and the opportunity to discuss the management of schools programme at a ward business meeting.

During further discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- a point in regard to the action being taken to improve the figures for the destinations of pupils recorded as 'unknown' on the basis the figure of 2.3% in 2014/15 was above the Scotland and Highland average;
- the proactive measures that could be taken to improve the uptake of free school meals in the area by families on low incomes, with particular reference to Pennyland Primary School for example through better promotion and publicity of the type of meals available; the Education Quality Improvement Manager referred to the challenges around increasing take up, and advised he would discuss this matter further with the School;
- concern there was a need to consider the impact of the rising school roll at Thurso High School in terms of future staffing levels and recruitment;
- with reference to the recruitment difficulties being experienced at Reay Primary School it was suggested that the advertising of posts through social media such as Facebook continue to be explored, and also taking into account the cost implications associated with some of the more traditional forms of advertising; and
- it was important to recognise that predictions around schools rolls going forward could not always be relied on, reference being made to new schools in the Highlands which were at capacity.

Thereafter, concern was expressed that the current model for determining an appropriate level of Additional Support Needs (ASN) cover for schools was not adequate for assessing the needs of children and having those assessments verified and there was need for a fairer and more consistent allocation system based on the individual needs of a child. In this regard it was suggested that under the current model the area was significantly underfunded in terms of the number of children who required support.

In response, the Education Quality Improvement Manager reported that a review was being undertaken by the Service on the process for ASN allocations and advised that he would feed Members comments back to the relevant officers in respect of the need for additional resources.

Thereafter, the Education Quality Improvement Manager provided an update on Wick High School during which he advised that the School was due to be handed over to the Council on 2 December 2016, with the formal opening scheduled for 12 January 2017.

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

## **7. Roads Winter Maintenance Plan for 2016/17 Plana Obair-gleidhidh Geamhraidh airson 2016/17**

There had been circulated Report No CC/22/16 dated 7 November 2016 by the Director of Community Services which provided Members with information on winter maintenance preparations and arrangements for the 2016/17 winter period.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- concern that Bank Court, Thurso had not been treated in the recent icy conditions creating difficulties for local residents; the Roads Operations Manager confirmed he would investigate this matter further, noting that limited labour resources as a result of voluntary redundancy and staff

sickness was currently impacting on the timescales for footpath maintenance;

- it was suggested that in winter conditions, street sweepers should be re-deployed to treat footpaths; the Roads Operation Manager undertook to investigate the potential in this regard;
- it was suggested the lack of resources being made available to the Council for winter maintenance was placing additional pressure on NHS Highland as a result of accidents and injuries caused by winter conditions; therefore there was a need to lobby the Scottish Government for additional funding to better service the roads in the area and needs of local people;
- an assurance was sought that the best use was being made in terms of the available resources to treat as many routes as possible across the network hierarchy;
- in regard to the above it was suggested that the Service was making the very best use of the limited resources and time available and also taking the safety of crews into account;
- clarification was sought and provided on how the Dounreay gritting service interlinked with the Council's service particularly on the route to Melvich; the Roads Operations Manager advised that he would report back to Mr M Reiss on this matter;
- the potential for the Thurso High School and bus turning area to be treated given that number of people had fallen in the icy conditions the previous day; the Roads Operations Manager confirmed he would investigate this matter further;
- the potential for the Council's community self-help scheme to continue to be promoted to improve take up, on the basis it would deliver an enhanced service for the benefit of communities; and
- it was reported that in discussions on the budget going forward, the Council Leader had indicated the budget for roads and winter maintenance should be retained at as high a level possible; reference was made to the challenges associated with this and impact on other services given the continued pressures on the Council arising from current and future significant budget reductions, and loss of staff through the voluntary redundancy,

Thereafter, the Committee **APPROVED** the Winter Maintenance Plan for the Caithness Area, which includes the priority road lists and maps presented in Appendices B & C.

## **8. Housing Performance Report - 1 April 2016 to 30 September 2016 Aithisg Dèanadais a thaobh Taigheadais – 1 Giblean 2016 gu 30 Sultain 2016**

There had been circulated Report No CC/23/16 dated 9 November 2016 by the Director of Community Services which provided information on how the Housing Section performed in relation to the Scottish Social Housing Charter and other performance indicators up to 30 September 2016.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- concern at the loss of rent caused by the time taken to re-let some properties; the Principal Housing Officer referred to the ongoing action being taken to deliver improvements in respect of voids and confirmed she would discuss any issues around specific properties directly with Mr D Mackay;

- in terms of the SPIs for 2015/16 it was queried why the repairs appointments kept in Caithness had a ragging status of red; the Principal Housing Officer indicated that she would seek clarify this matter and thereafter respond directly to Mrs G Coghill;
- issues around the percentage of new tenancies sustained for more than a year in Caithness which currently had a ragging status of red and the challenges around improving performance on this SPI;
- it was noted that currently new tenants received a six monthly visit, usually by a Housing Management Officer and Housing Maintenance Officer; however reference was made to the value of a yearly inspection of properties being undertaken as a preventative measure and spend to save initiative and the need to review the policy in this regard;
- in regard to the above it would be helpful if a short summary of the benefits of a yearly inspection regime could be prepared which Members could then feed into the budget and redesign process; the Principal Housing Officer confirmed she would arrange for a paper to be prepared in this regard;
- the concentrated effort undertaken by the Service to re-let some of the most difficult to let properties in the area be welcomed; and
- an explanation was sought and provided in regard to the different sale prices of the properties which had been declared surplus to requirements in Wick, and the process for requesting viewings.

The Committee **NOTED** the information provided on housing performance in the period 1 April 2016 to 30 September 2016.

## 9. **Cycling, Walking and Safer Streets Update** **Fios Às Ùr air Rothaireachd, Coiseachd is Sràidean nas Sàbhailte**

There had been circulated Report No SCC/24/16 dated 25 October 2016 by the Director of Development and Infrastructure which invited Members to approve the projects delivered through the Scottish Government funding for Cycling, Walking and Safer Streets for the Caithness Committee, as set out in Appendix 1 which related to a project to install cycle storage at Pennyland Primary School at a cost of £9,800.

The Committee:-

- i. **APPROVED** the CWSS/SRTS project detailed in Appendix 1; and
- ii. **NOTED** that the Road Safety Unit will continue to work with schools to develop further SRTS Projects for future years.

## 10. **Minutes** **Geàrr-chunntas**

There were circulated Minutes of the Caithness Committee held on 31 August 2016, which were approved by the Council on 8 September 2016, the terms of which were **NOTED**.

The meeting ended at 12.30pm.