

**The Highland Council
Caithness Committee**

Minutes of Meeting of the Caithness Committee held in Wick Town Hall, Bridge Street, Wick, on Friday, 16 June 2017 at 10.00am.

Present:

Mr D Mackay
Mr W Mackay
Mr S Mackie
Mr M Reiss

Mr K Rosie
Mr A Sinclair
Ms N Sinclair

Officials in attendance:

Mr A Macmanus, Ward Manager, Corporate Development Service
Mr B Northedge, Education Quality Improvement Manager, Care and Learning Service
Ms M Ross, Principal Housing Officer, Community Services
Mrs S Tarrant, Public Relations Officer, Chief Executive's Office
Mr M Dent, Access Officer, Development & Infrastructure Service
Ms A Macrae, Committee Administrator, Corporate Development Service

Also in Attendance:

Item 6: Group Manager M Loynd and Station Manager A Dick, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

The Ward Manager took the Chair pending the appointment of the Chair of the Committee at item 3 below.

**1. Apologies for Absence
Liesgeulan**

An apology for absence was intimated on behalf of Mr R Bremner.

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

Item 5v – Mr W Mackay and Mr M Reiss (non-financial)

**3. Appointment of Chair of Caithness Committee
Cur Cathraiche Chomataidh Ghallaibh an Dreuchd**

The Ward Manager invited nominations for the position of Chair of the Committee.

Mr W Mackay seconded by Ms N Sinclair proposed that Mr D Mackay be appointed as Chair.

On there being no other nominations, the Committee **AGREED** to appoint Mr D Mackay to the position of Chair of the Caithness Committee.

At this point of the meeting, the Committee observed one minute's silence in tribute to the victims of the fire at Grenfell Tower, London.

**4. Caithness Civic Leader
Cur Ceannard Catharra Ghallaibh an Dreuchd**

The Chair invited nominations for the position of Civic Leader for Caithness.

Mr M Reiss seconded by Mr D Mackay proposed that Mr W Mackay be appointed as Civic Leader.

On there being no other nominations, the Committee **AGREED** to appoint Mr W Mackay to the position of Civic Leader for Caithness.

**5. Member Appointments
Cur Bhall an Dreuchd**

**i. Caithness and North Sutherland Regeneration Partnership – Advisory Board
Com-pàirteachas Ath-bheothachaidh Ghallaibh agus Chataibh a Tuath – Bòrd Comhairleachaidh**

The Committee was asked to appoint 3 Members to serve on the Caithness and North Sutherland Regeneration Partnership Advisory Board. In this regard, it was confirmed that 2 Members should come from the Caithness Wards and 1 Member from the North West Sutherland Ward.

Mr M Reiss seconded by Mr W Mackay moved that Mr D Mackay be appointed.

Mr W Mackay seconded by Mr S Mackie moved that Mr A Sinclair be appointed.

On there being no other nominations, the Committee **AGREED** to appoint Mr D Mackay and Mr A Sinclair to the Advisory Board of the Caithness and North Sutherland Regeneration Partnership.

**ii. Dounreay Stakeholders Group
Buidheann Luchd-ùidh Dhùnraath**

Members were advised that the primary purpose of the Dounreay Stakeholders Group was to be the main interface between the community, the site operator at Dounreay and the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority (NDA) in areas such as programme delivery, safety, environment and security and to play an important role in the economic regeneration of the area. It was part of a network of site stakeholder groups across the United Kingdom with each site group represented at meetings of a national stakeholder group set up by the NDA.

The Council was required to appoint 4 Members to the Dounreay Stakeholders Group comprising 3 Members from the Caithness area and 1 Member from the Sutherland area.

Mr M Reiss seconded by Mr D Mackay moved that Mr W Mackay be appointed.

Mr W Mackay seconded by Mr D Mackay moved that Mr M Reiss be appointed.

Mr A Sinclair seconded by Mr W Mackay moved that Mr S Mackie be appointed.

On there being no other nominations, the Committee **AGREED** to appoint Mr W Mackay, Mr S Mackie and Mr M Reiss to the Dounreay Stakeholders Group.

**iii. Caithness Horizons
Fàirean Ghallaibh**

Members were advised that Caithness Horizons was a company limited by guarantee with membership drawn from Highland Council, the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority and the Thurso Heritage Society.

Ms N Sinclair seconded by Mr S Mackie moved that Mr W Mackay be appointed.

Mr M Reiss seconded by Mr S Mackie moved that Mr K Rosie be appointed.

On there being no other nominations, the Committee **AGREED** to appoint Mr W Mackay and Mr K Rosie to Caithness Horizons.

**iv. Caithness & North Sutherland Fund
Maoin Ghallaibh & Chataibh a Tuath**

Members were advised that the Caithness & North Sutherland Fund was established by the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority and Dounreay Site Restoration Ltd to distribute funding to community organisations for projects that would increase the attractiveness of Caithness and North Sutherland as a place to live, work and invest with particular emphasis on achieving environment, social, culture and infrastructure improvements.

The Fund required 3 Members to be appointed – 2 Members from the Caithness Wards and 1 Member from the North West & Central Sutherland Ward.

Mr M Reiss seconded by Mr D Mackay moved that Ms N Sinclair be appointed.

Mr W Mackay seconded by Mr S Mackie moved that Mr D Mackay be appointed.

On there being no other nominations, the Committee **AGREED** to appoint Mr D Mackay and Ms N Sinclair to the Caithness and North Sutherland Fund.

v. Caithness Citizen's Advice Bureau – Board

Biùro Comhairleachaidh Pobail Ghallaibh – Bòrd

Declarations of Interest – Mr W Mackay as a Director of Caithness CAB on behalf of the Caithness branch of Enable, and Mr M Reiss as a Director of Caithness CAB on behalf of Caithness Mental Health Support Group both declared a non-financial interest in this item, and took no part in the determination of this item.

The Committee was asked to appoint 1 Member to serve as a Director of Caithness Citizens' Advice Bureau.

Ms N Sinclair seconded by Mr S Mackie moved that Mr D Mackay be appointed.

On there being no other nominations, the Committee **AGREED** to appoint Mr D Mackay to the Caithness Citizen's Advice Bureau.

vi. Caithness Local Access Forum Fòram Cothrom Ionadail Ghallaibh

Members were advised that the Council had a statutory duty under Section 25 of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 to establish Local Access Forums for its area. There were currently six Local Access Forums in the Highland area which advised on matters in relation to the exercise of access rights, the existence of delineation of rights of way or the drawing up and adoption of the Core Path Plan. In addition, they also offered and gave assistance to parties in terms of the resolution of any disputes in this respect.

Mr M Reiss seconded by Mr D Mackay moved that Mr R Bremner be appointed.

Mr W Mackay seconded by Mr D Mackay moved that Mr K Rosie be appointed.

On there being no other nominations, the Committee **AGREED** to appoint Mr R Bremner and Mr K Rosie to the Caithness Local Access Forum.

6. Scottish Fire and Rescue Local Performance Report 2016-17 Aithisg Dèanadais Sgìreil na Seirbheis Smàlaidh is Teasairginn 2016-17

There had been circulated Report No CC/08/17 dated 28 May 2017 by the Local Senior Officer for Highland.

During discussion, Members welcomed the positive figures and trends set out in the report and raised the following issues:-

- an explanation was sought and provided in regard to the causes of accidental fires within domestic households in Caithness over the reporting period;
- the introduction of new local arrangements in respect of the Retained Duty System recruitment process and the positive impact it was having in terms of recruitment levels was welcomed; in addition Members offered any support they could give for more of this type of local control in Caithness;

- a point in regard to whether a Hi-Fires event would be arranged in 2017, reference being made to the success of the event in 2016;
- clarification was sought and provided that the Thurso appliance had not been required to cover any call outs in the Bettyhill and Tongue areas over the reporting period and in this regard an update was also provided on progress with recruitment at both of the above stations in Sutherland;
- in regard to issues around control rooms, it was the view of the Council's Administration that the best solution would be to have one joint control room for the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service, Police Scotland and Scottish Ambulance Service located in Inverness;
- the downward trajectory in terms of deliberate fires was welcomed and clarification was sought and provided around the main causes and the action being taken to target all possible audiences including householders, schools and a wide range of local groups as a preventative measure;
- clarification was sought and provided on the timescale for the Multi-Agency Case Conference in relation to the incident which had led to a Fatal Fire Casualty in Caithness, it being confirmed this would be held on 3 July 2017; an update was also provided on the Service's investigations into the incident to date; and
- the Chair queried whether in view of the number of new Members arrangements could be made for the Committee to have a tour of Thurso Fire Station; Station Manager A Dick welcomed the proposal and confirmed that he would take forward the necessary arrangements; in addition, Group Manager M Loynd advised that an event for new Members was being arranged at Inverness Fire Station and that he would confirm the details to the Ward Manager for circulation to Members.

Thereafter, Members expressed their appreciation of the Service and the courage demonstrated by its firefighters involved in the fire at Grenfell Tower, London, reference being made to the extreme danger they had faced in dealing with this incident. Members sought clarification as to whether there were any issues arising in terms of the construction of buildings in Scotland and more locally in Caithness. The Public Relations Officer advised that the Council had received media questions on this matter, and that following discussions with Head of Property, it had been confirmed the Council was confident all of its buildings and schools complied with the correct building standards, and that officers were not aware of any Council building having a similar cladding to Grenfell Tower. The Property Section was currently undertaking an audit of all Council buildings, and the outcome of the investigation into the Grenfell Tower fire was now awaited. The Group Manager reported that following a Scotland wide review, the Service had recently reviewed its response to high rise buildings in Highland. and advised there was no concern that the incident in London could be replicated, reference being made to the fact there were no buildings of a similar height or construction in the area.

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

7. Caithness and Sutherland Amended Core Paths Plan Ath-sgrùdadh air Plana Phrìomh Cheuman

There had been circulated Report No CC/09/17 dated 1 June 2017 by the Director of Development and Infrastructure.

Discussion focused on the potential to upgrade and promote the coastal path at John O’Groats towards Ness of Duncansby, reference being made to the concerns of Dunnet and Canisbay Community Council on this matter. It was suggested this was an extremely important and prominent route in Caithness given its location, the views it provided and its links with the North Coast 500 route and the John O’Groat trail. It was acknowledged there were considerable difficulties in respect of this path but it was important that every effort was made to find a sustainable solution.

The Access Officer explained that the above coastal route had been washed away on two occasions over recent years, was rough underfoot and seasonally was covered in kelp which raised health and safety and liability concerns given that it was likely to be well used in view of its close proximity to John O’Groats. In addition, the Council had funded the costs of reinstating the path on two occasions after it had been washed away and was not prepared to fund a further upgrade. Therefore the proposal in the short term was to promote a safer route in the area. If a solution was found in respect of the coastal path in future then it would be possible to amend the route of the core path in the Plan.

Members then discussed the potential opportunities to secure external funding to upgrade the coastal path, for example through Natural Retreats and Highlands and Islands Enterprise. In this regard, it was noted there were wider issues of coastal protection works to be considered in this location and it was not only a case of protecting the coastal path.

During further discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- clarification was sought and provided in regard to the development of the John O’Groats trail which it was explained would extend to Inverness and the progress being made on this project;
- clarification was sought and provided on liability and land management issues once a path was included as a core path in the Plan and particularly where this resulted in an increase in access users;
- reference to the opportunities to link the core paths at Mey, in response to which it explained there was a focus was on keeping core paths off public roads;
- the opportunities for the core paths to be better promoted online, through social media and by the provision of more physical signage across Caithness including information being placed on collective noticeboards in communities; reference was also made to opportunities to advertise on websites such as Venture North;
- in regard to the above, it was suggested that tourists using the North Coast 500 were actively seeking points of interest along the route and that signage on the A9 and A99 would be extremely effective in encouraging them to stop and explore the area further;
- the potential to link in to the North Coast 500 website to provide information on core paths in the area; and
- clarification was sought and provided on the legal position in respect of rights of way, specific reference being made to potential issues once the John O’Groats trail was established.

The Committee **APPROVED** the Caithness area of the Caithness and Sutherland Amended Core Paths Plan to be published for formal consultation.

8. Thurso Associated School Group Overview Sealladh Coitcheann air Buidheann Sgoiltean Co-cheangailte

There had been circulated Report No CC/10/17 dated 2 June 2017 by the Director of Care and Learning.

In presenting the report, the Education Quality Improvement Manager advised that both Miller Academy and Mount Pleasant Primary School had been inspected by HMle, and that positive reports had been received in respect of both. He also provided updated figures in terms of the additional staffing in respect of ASN teachers and PSA staff and the identified level of need within the ASG.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- an assurance was sought and provided that the process in respect of free school meals was discrete to ensure there were no barriers in relation to uptake;
- a point that at a recent meeting of the Thurso High School Parent Council it had been reported that following recent heavy rain a number of new leaks had developed; it was noted this had been brought to the attention of the relevant officials within the Care and Learning Service;
- in addition to the above there were issues with external panels at the School which were being investigated; in response to the Chair, the Education Quality Improvement Manager, confirmed that he would arrange for the final report on the panels at the School to be circulated to local Members as soon as it was available; and
- in relation to the condition and suitability of the buildings at Thurso High School which were both graded as 'C', reference was made to the role of Members in terms of lobbying as the trigger point in raising the priority of the School within the Council's capital programme.

Thereafter, the Manager provided an update on the new Wick Campus, during which he advised that the facilities had been open and functioning for a period of time and that issues around snagging were ongoing. He was holding regular meetings with both Head Teachers and Parent Councils to discuss any ongoing issues. Mr W Mackay as Chair of the Wick Campus Stakeholder's Group reported that the Group considered and reviewed the snagging list on a regular basis and that a meeting of all stakeholders and interested parties was due to be held on 29 June 2017 to consider all ongoing issues in relation to the Campus.

The Education Quality Manager also provided an update on the second phase of the Management of Schools Programme which was due to commence in August 2018. In this regard, he reported on the position at Reay and Halkirk Primary Schools, and advised that it was proposed that a cluster arrangement would be put in place by August 2017, to avoid a temporary arrangement being implemented for one year. He confirmed that in relation to the vacant Head Teacher post at Pennyland Primary School, the position had been offered to and accepted by an existing Head Teacher, noting this would not leave a gap in staffing provision elsewhere.

During further discussion, support was expressed for the proposed arrangements in respect of Reay and Halkirk Primary Schools. Thereafter, a point was raised in

regard to the new Ward boundaries and the implications for the associated school group boundaries going forward. The Chair advised that he had made arrangements to discuss this matter with the Head of Education.

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

9. Housing Performance Report - 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017
Aithisg Dèanadais a thaobh Taigheadais – 1 Giblean 2016 gu 31 Màrt 2017

There had been circulated Report No CC/11/17 dated 26 May 2017 by the Director of Community Services.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- clarification was sought and provided in relation to the choice based letting system which it was explained had been designed in response to the number of void properties in Caithness;
- in response to a question it was explained that void properties were spread across the area and reference was made to the difficulties in establishing the reasons for those voids in some cases;
- clarification was also sought and provided in regard to rent arrears and the process which had to be followed in respect of legal action being pursued against a tenant;
- a point in regard to the number on the waiting list for a Council house in Caithness in response to which the Principal Housing Officer clarified there was approximately 200 applicants on the list although this number was subject to constant change; and
- it would be helpful if Members received information on the available properties and number of applicants on the waiting list in each settlement in Caithness; the Principal Housing Officer explained that this information was available on the Council's website and confirmed she would provide Members with the relevant link.

Thereafter, the Chair reported that he had discussed with the Council Leader the need for local control and decision making in respect of the Housing function to be returned to Caithness, and in response Members expressed their unanimous support for this position.

The Committee **NOTED** the information provided on housing performance in the period 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017.

10. Minutes
Geàrr-chunntas

There were circulated and **NOTED** the Minutes of the Caithness Committee held on 17 February 2017, which were approved by the Council on 9 March 2017.

The meeting ended at 12.05pm.
