

**The Highland Council  
Caithness Committee**

Minutes of Meeting of the Caithness Committee held in Wick Town Hall, Bridge Street, Wick, on Wednesday, 16 May 2018 at 10.00am.

**Present:**

Mr R Bremner  
Mr D Mackay  
Mr W Mackay  
Mr S Mackie

Mr M Reiss  
Mr K Rosie  
Ms N Sinclair

**Officials in attendance:**

Mr A Macmanus, Ward Manager, Chief Executive's Office  
Ms A Donald, Education Quality Improvement Manager, Care and Learning Service  
Mr G Mackenzie, Roads Operations Manager, Community Services  
Mr J Holden, Housing Manager (North), Community Services  
Ms A Macrae, Committee Administrator, Chief Executive's Office

**Also in Attendance:**

Mr S Sheridan, Skills Planning Manager, Skills Development Scotland  
Group Manager M Loynd, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

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

The Ward Manager reported that Councillor D Mackay had intimated he wished to stand down as Chair of the Caithness Committee. Nominations were therefore invited for the position of Chair.

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

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

The Chair thanked Members for his appointment and Mr D Mackay for his fairness and courtesy during his time as Chair. He referred to both the challenges and opportunities for Caithness now and into the future, and advised he would seek to do his best for the area in his role as Chair going forward.

**2. Apology for Absence  
Liesgeulan**

An apology for absence was intimated on behalf of Mr A Sinclair.

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

There were no declarations of interest.

**4. Caithness and North Sutherland Skills Investment Plan – Presentation by Skills Development Scotland**  
**Plana Tasgadh Sgilean Ghallaibh agus Chataibh a Tuath – Taisbeanadh le Leasachadh Sgilean na h-Alba**

Mr Stephen Sheridan, Skills Planning Manager, Skills Development Scotland was in attendance to give a presentation on the development of the Caithness and North Sutherland Investment Plan. He reported on the rationale for developing the Plan, the research objectives and aims and the method and findings of the study work undertaken by EKOS, which included survey work, workshops and consultation with pupils and students, parent/guardians, employers, strategic partners and stakeholders. He also provided details of the action plan which had been developed and provided a summary of the five key themes contained therein and proposed governance structure. Thereafter, he outlined the next steps in terms of taking the implementation plan forward.

During discussion, Members raised the following key issues:-

- there was a need to create more apprenticeships for school leavers in the traditional skills and clarity was sought on whether there were cash incentives available to support small employers to engage and retain apprentices. The Manager confirmed that he would provide Members with details of the different types of funding support available;
- a point in relation to the role of the Construction Scotland Innovation Centre. The Manager confirmed he would provide Members with further information in this regard;
- the potential for a joined up approach and incentives to encourage young people into higher education but thereafter to return to Caithness to take up skilled jobs;
- there should also be a focus on educating young people to graduate level locally on the basis it was more likely they would then remain in the area;
- information was sought and provided on the programmes and initiatives being taken forward by SDS and in partnership to solidify the base for graduate opportunities in the area;
- there were also issues around attracting and retaining recruits to public sector posts in the area, and therefore it was important to create courses for example through the UHI by which to 'grow your own' skills;
- a specific point in regard to the extent SDS was involved with NHS Highland and the Council in regard to the health and social care sector;
- there was also an important role for educational establishments outwith the Highlands and reference was made to the opportunities to do a combination of residential and remote learning;
- a point as to whether the public sector employment numbers referred to in the presentation included Dounreay. The Manager advised he would seek to clarify this point;
- more detailed information was sought on the Highland Economic and Recovery Development Plan referred to in the presentation. The Manager confirmed he would provide Members further details in relation to the Plan;
- the potential to organise a seminar for businesses in Caithness with a focus on specific sectors such as the energy, renewables, tourism, and micro business sectors, to improve the awareness of employers and young people of the opportunities across these areas. The Manager advised that he would be keen to work with Members to take this forward; and

- in terms of attracting and retaining people in the area, the fact that survey results showed that a high proportion of people felt safe living in the area and other factors such as the natural environment should be used to better promote and market the area.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the presentation and **AGREED** that a copy be circulated to Members.

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

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

Cllr Donnie Mackay who was appointed by Members on 16 June 2017 now wished to relinquish this appointment. The Committee was therefore asked to appoint 1 Member as detailed as his replacement.

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

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

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

The Caithness and 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.

Cllr Nicola Sinclair who was appointed by Members on 16 June 2017 now wished to relinquish this appointment. The Committee was therefore asked to appoint 1 Member as detailed as her replacement.

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

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

**7. Scottish Fire and Rescue Local Performance Report  
Aithisg Dèanadais Sgireil na Seirbheis Smàlaidh is Teasairginn**

There had been circulated Report No CC/05/18 dated 26 April 2018 by the Local Senior Officer for Highland.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- concern was expressed at the number of residential properties which had no smoke detection equipment. The Local Senior Officer advised that in addition to this being a condition of the current building regulations, the Scottish Government was considering how this could be enforced for all premises;
- a query in relation to the number of false alarms from commercial premises over the reporting period. The Local Senior Officer confirmed that the Services was working with premises and as a result of a reduction in the number was being observed;
- it was important that fire stations were suitable to accommodate female fire fighters; and
- the need in particular for Thurso Fire Station to be upgraded and the fact this issue had been raised repeatedly by Members. The Local Senior Officer advised that the Service was actively working with NHS Highland and the Council to provide a joint facility in Wick and Thurso, incorporating a fire station.

Thereafter, the Local Senior Officer also provided an update on the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service Transformation. As a result of the decentralisation of resources from the central belt, the Service would be introducing additional full time high value posts to support retained fire stations, the intention being to recruit locally from existing retained staff. More work would also be undertaken in communities, including with schools, elderly people, and through fire cadet schemes. In addition, a new type of fire appliance and fire-fighting technology was to be introduced details of which he provided. This would reduce the minimum crewing levels and therefore increase availability across the area. The Service also proposed to offer more medical support to the Scottish Ambulance Service, in a first responder role.

Members welcomed the update and the decentralisation of resources from the central belt and investment in the north on the basis it represented good news for Caithness. The new type of fire appliance was more suited to rural areas and single track roads. The prospect of joined up working with the Scottish Ambulance Service was also welcomed as a pragmatic approach and good use of fire fighter skills. The Service and its staff should also be commended on its commitment to the Highlands and on how the transformation process had been taken forward.

The Committee **NOTED** following scrutiny, the Area Performance Report.

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

There had been circulated Report No CC/06/18 dated 4 May 2018 by the Director of Care and Learning.

Arising from the report, the Education Quality Improvement Manager provided an update on the actions being taken by the Service in response to the challenges around recruitment within the ASG. This included the interviewing and placing of probationary teachers and recruitment of a number of teachers from Canada through TimePlan. She advised that there had been a positive response to adverts for vacant posts within the ASG, and provided further details in this regard. In

addition, there was also work ongoing to ensure that Gaelic medium education was sustainable through secondary school, including the deployment of a Gaelic probation teacher.

The Education Quality Improvement Manager also provided of a summary on the initial consultation meetings held on the management of schools review. The next steps would be to establish a structure which would include appointing a chair with the appropriate skills, terms of reference, parameters, and timescales.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- a query in relation to the area of Canada which had been chosen to identify potential recruits and the reasons for that choice; the Manager confirmed that she would respond directly to Mr K Rosie on this matter;
- it was recognised that the work around the management of schools was challenging, however the Service be commended on the approach and consultation undertaken to date;
- the outcome of the assessments in respect of early years centres within the ASG be welcomed;
- information was sought and provided in relation to the number of unique applicants applying for the vacant posts across the ASG;
- a request that clarification be provided in regard to the relevance of the cost per pupil statistic detailed under the 'funding' section of the report and how this information was used in financial planning; and
- it was confirmed that the definitions in relation to 'buildings' had changed and further details were provided in this regard.

Thereafter, discussion followed on the issues associated around the transition of Gaelic medium education from primary school to secondary school within the ASG and how this was to be funded. In this regard, reference was made to the need for the Council to have a planned strategy for Gaelic medium education and to consider how this would be resourced. It had been requested that this matter be considered through the Council's Gaelic Strategy and Implementation Group. It was confirmed that Mr R Bremner and Mr S Mackie would have a more detailed discussion on this matter outwith the meeting.

The Chair reported on a recent visit by the Council's Chief Executive to Thurso High School during which had had commented positively on the behaviour and diligence of the pupils the fact that the buildings had been well looked after and maintained which was a credit to the staff. Thereafter, an update was provided on progress with improving road safety at the school, with particular reference to the transfer of ownership of the adjacent land at the old mart site. Further issues related to the need for a lift in one block which did not benefit from disabled access and measures to improve security, including entrance doors and provision of a perimeter fence.

The Chair also confirmed that he would write to Ms K Mackay, the outgoing Head of Thurso High School, extending the Committee's thanks for her hard work and exceptional contribution to the School over the period of her long service.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** following scrutiny, the content of the report; and

- ii. **AGREED** that further information be provided in regard to the relevance of the cost per pupil statistic detailed under the 'funding' section of the report and how this information was used in financial planning.

## **9. Road Structural Maintenance 2018-19 Càradh Structarail Rathaidean 2018-19**

There had been circulated Report No CC/07/18 dated 26 April 2018 by the Director of Community Services.

The Roads Operations Manager tabled a revised version of the Road Structural Maintenance Programme for 2018-19, which also included outstanding schemes from the previous year. He indicated that as a result of the winter conditions a large number of pot hole repairs were required, and that capital monies would be used to supplement the revenue budget to carry out those repairs which would in turn have an impact on the Programme for 2018/19. It was not possible at this stage to quantify the total cost of the pot hole repairs required, although it was hoped this could be provided later in the year. In addition, some roads had deteriorated more significantly than others and therefore the following projects had been identified as the top four priorities within the programme: (i) A836 – Reay School; (ii) C1006 – Wester Bridge to Greenland at Reaster Farm; (iii) U3618 – Newton Road from Kenneth Street junction to the new High School; and (iv) C1093 – Keiss Harbour Road from junction to Hall

The Manager explained that this was a 'live' list of works and was subject to change throughout the year and therefore the intention was to provide quarterly progress reports to Members on all roads matters in Caithness.

The Chair recorded the Committee's support and thanks to the Manager and his staff on doing their best in extremely challenging circumstances.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- concern that Healthfield Road, Thurso had not been included in the programme. The Manager explained that the priority list had been determined on the basis of the engineering analysis of the road conditions;
- It was important for Members to trust the roads engineering analysis carried out and support officers in identifying priorities on this basis;
- a request that the quarterly updates to be provided to Members on progress with the programme include details of the capital monies being used to repair pot holes and the impact this would have on the rest of the programme;
- an assurance was sought and provided that the quarterly update would include information on the quantity of materials used over the quarter and the estimated cost of lay as against actual costs;
- it was requested that Members be circulated with the programmes for the Jetpatcher and extruded white lining;
- in relation to the priority capital works to be undertaken the A836 at Reay School, the potential also to prioritise repairs to pot holes in the vicinity as part of a joined up approach. The Manager confirmed this type approach was to be considered going forward;

- it was noted that local Members would have further discussions with the Manager outwith the meeting in relation to a specific wind farm in Caithness and the issues around a road being returned to grass;
- the need for white lining to be undertaken at the give way at TESCO's in Wick. The Manager confirmed this work was scheduled to be undertaken; and
- it was noted that ultra violet light had a detrimental effect on road surfaces, and that was a particular source of wear and tear in northern areas with such as Caithness.

The Committee:-

- I. **APPROVED** the tabled prioritised programme of Maintenance for Roads for the Caithness Local Committee Area commencing in 2018/19;
- II. **AGREED** that the quarterly updates to be provided to Members on progress with the programme include details of the capital monies being used to repair pot holes; and
- III. **AGREED** that Members be circulated with the programmes for the Jetpatcher and extruded white lining.

**10. Housing Performance Report - 1 April 2017 to 31 March 2018**  
**Aithisg Dèanadais a thaobh Taigheadais - 1 Giblean 2017 to 31 Am Mart 2018**

There had been circulated Report No CC/08/18 dated 16 May 2018 by the Director of Community Services.

The Housing Manager (North) advised that the Committee had previously requested a briefing on the impacts of universal credit. He confirmed that he would circulate Members with an update provided to the Poverty and Inequalities Working Group in February 2018 on this issue, together with subsequent reports to the Care, Learning and Housing Committee (formerly the People Committee).

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- the progress being made in meeting the target for non-emergency repairs was welcomed, and an update was sought and provided on the reasons for the improving trend;
- concern at the continuing impact of universal credit on rent arrears and on longer term trends as it continued to be rolled out;
- a point that local Members were keen for the former Janitor's house at Thurso High School to be let as low or no cost accommodation to attract teaching staff to the area.. The Housing Manager confirmed that he was meeting with the Head Teacher to discuss the opportunities and challenges with letting the property;
- in regard to the above, it was suggested there may also be other Council properties in the area which potentially could be used for the same purpose; and
- information was sought and provided in relation to the processes and funding available for adaptations to both private and Council properties, and ongoing discussions with NHS Highland on this matter.

The Committee **NOTED** following scrutiny, the information provided on housing performance in the period 1 April 2017 to 31 March 2018.

**11. Minutes**  
**Geàrr-chunntas**

There were circulated and **NOTED** Minutes of the Caithness Committee held on 21 February 2018, which were approved by the Council on 8 March 2018.

The meeting ended at 12.40pm.

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