

**The Highland Council
Caithness Committee**

Minutes of Meeting of the Caithness Committee held in Wick Town Hall, Bridge Street, Wick, on Tuesday, 20 November 2018 at 10.00am.

Present:

Mr R Bremner
Mr D Mackay
Mr W Mackay

Mr M Reiss
Mr A Sinclair
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 J Henderson, Housing Investment Officer, Community Services
Ms M Ross, Principal Housing Officer, Community Services
Mr D Cowie, Principal Planner, Development & Infrastructure Service
Ms J Sutherland, Senior Engineer, Community Services
Ms A Macrae, Committee Administrator, Chief Executive's Office

Also in Attendance:

Group Manager R Dibble, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

**1. Apologies for Absence
Liesgeulan**

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr S Mackie and Mr K Rosie.

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

Item 7: Mr M Reiss (non-financial)

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

There had been circulated Report No CC/15/18 dated 9 November 2018 by the Local Senior Officer for Highland.

In discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- the opportunity for the Service to share a joint facility with NHS Highland in Wick be welcomed;
- the figures contained in the Local Performance report showed that Caithness was one of the safest communities in Highland;
- Members were willing to engage with community councils and other community organisations to promote recruitment with specific reference to the station availability at Dunbeath;
- the potential for Hi-Fire type events for young people to be arranged in Caithness and also as a route to interest parents in joining the Service. The Group Manager reported that funding had been secured from TESCO towards the cost of running such courses. The Service was also seeking to address recruitment challenges through a new cadet scheme.

- an update was sought and provided on progress with the upgrading of Thurso Fire Station, and on the potential to share a joint facility with NHS Highland which was currently being explored; and
- clarification was sought and provided that there was flexibility in the Highlands in relation to the minimum response times from stations with each individual case being considered on its merits.

Thereafter information was sought on the practical measures being taken forward through the Transformation programme to boost recruitment. The Group Manager reported that a review of the Retained Duty System was currently being undertaken, including the potential to vary contracts to suit the skill sets and availability of recruits. In terms of improving community resilience, defibrillators had been provided in all appliances in the area, and there had been enhanced emergency medical response training for crews.

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

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

There had been circulated Report No CC/16/18 dated 15 November 2018 by the Director of Care and Learning.

In discussion, Members highlighted their concerns at the exclusion rates at Thurso High School. The Education Quality Manager advised that Head Teacher and Senior Management Team were focused on this issue and provided an update on the targeted interventions and support being undertaken to address this matter. She explained there was a particular issue with the S.2 year group and Members requested that they be provided with the details of the percentage of overall exclusions at Thurso High School which related to that particular year group.

Thereafter, reference was made to absence rates at some schools within the ASG which it was suggested was due to an absence problem with particular children rather than a generalised absence problem. An update was provided on the structured interventions and support put in place for individual pupils across the ASG, and an assurance was provided that rates were being monitored. The ASN Service was also reviewing the support network for schools. It was important to recognise the figures reflected the actual number of teaching hours and did not factor in the other non-core subject activities pupils may be involved in such as Rock Challenge.

Following on from the above, Members discussed progress with the sustainable schools review. There was a general willingness amongst the Stakeholder Group to move forward on from discussions around the process, and the Manager advised that it was intended to present options to the Group in January 2019. The level of information which had been provided to the Group in the sustainable schools information pack was welcomed. A key concern in relation to any proposed model was that Head Teachers had the appropriate level of support in respect of any cluster arrangement to ensure there was no impact on pupils progression, learning and attainment.

Further comments included:-

- while the school roll projections within the Thurso ASG seemed to tie up the school roll forecast showed Wick High School's trend curving upwards where as the primary school projections didn't correspond. The Education Quality Improvement Manager reported that she would report back to Members on this matter;
- The new Head Teacher and Depute Head Teachers at Thurso High School were now in post and would continue drive forward positive change over the next year;
- the upgrading of the Janitor's House in the grounds of Thurso High School to provide accommodation for two new teachers was welcomed. There was also a similar opportunity at Mount Pleasant Primary School; and
- in terms of the grading of the suitability and condition of Thurso High School, the Senior Management Team acknowledged the financial position of the Council and were driving forward prudent small scale improvements to the School, details of which were provided. This was an extremely helpful attitude in the current financial climate.

The Committee:-

- NOTED** following scrutiny, the content of the report; and;
- AGREED** that Members be provided with details of the percentage of overall exclusions at Thurso High School which related to the S.2 year group.

5. **Housing Revenue Account Capital Programme 2019-2021** **Prògram Calpa Taigheadais 2019–2021**

There had been circulated Report No CC/17/18 dated 1 November 2018 by the Director of Community Services.

Discussion followed on concerns which had been expressed over the reliability of air source heating systems and the on the consultation undertaken with tenants on the choice of heating system for their property. It was acknowledged there was a range of factors to be taken into account such as affordability, type and characteristics of the property and energy efficiency considerations. It was suggested that Members receive a presentation at a Ward Business Meeting on various heating systems available and the process for deciding the most appropriate system for a property.

The Committee:-

- NOTED** the allocation of resources to Caithness Area as set out in Appendix 1;
- NOTED** the investment priorities as set out in section 4.2 of the report;
- AGREED** the proposed two year HRA Capital Programme for Caithness for 2019-21 as set out in Appendix 2;
- NOTED** that updates on the Housing Revenue Account Capital Programme will continue to be provided through ward briefings and at Local Committees as requested by local Members, in addition to reporting to the Environment, Development and Infrastructure Committee; and
- AGREED** that Members receive a presentation at a Ward Business Meeting on the various heating systems available and the process for deciding the most appropriate system for a property.

6. Housing Performance Report - 1 April 2018 to 30 September 2018
Aithisg Dèanadais a thaobh Taigheadais - 1 Giblean 2018 to 30 An t-Sultainn 2018

There had been circulated Report No CC/18/18 dated 9 November 2018 by the Director of Community Services.

In discussion, Members raised the following key issues:-

- Members were well aware of the issues in respect of void properties and there was a need to consider the way forward to address the challenges in Caithness;
- the potential to convert void properties in the Pulteney area of Wick to provide nursing accommodation in the event the NHS Care Hub was located in Pulteney House;
- in terms of attracting teachers to the area, issues around the fact the current allocations policy did not allow advantage to be shown to Council employees and the potential for that aspect of the policy to be reviewed;
- extreme concern was expressed at the increase in rent arrears as a direct result of Universal Credit and at the increasing burden of debt being placed on the Council and the pressure this was placing on the budget and the need for further lobbying to be undertaken on this issue;
- there was a need to consider whether a property should continue to be held on the Council's stock if there was no demand for that property and it was considered to be surplus to requirements;
- an explanation was sought and provided on the level of evictions being pursued in the area and the process followed including support for those tenants once they had been evicted; and
- clarification was sought and provided around the system whereby tenants could apply for advanced payments and alternative payment arrangements. In respect of Universal Credit.

Thereafter, it was reported that the Head of Housing was to meet with Members to discuss the issues around void properties in Caithness.

The Committee following scrutiny, **NOTED** the information provided on housing performance in the period 1 April 2018 to 30 September 2018.

7. Caithness and Sutherland Local Development Plan: Action Programme
Prògram Gnìomha CaSPlan

Declaration of Interest: Mr M Reiss declared a non-financial interest in this item as a Trustee of the John O'Groats Trail and took no part in the discussion on this item in relation to the Trail.

There had been circulated Report No CC/19/18 dated 9 November 2018 by the Director of Development and Infrastructure.

The Principal Planner advised that Members approval was being sought to include the John O’Groats Trail in the Action Programme as an additional action prior to its publication. This was to acknowledge this project had moved on significantly since the preparation of CaSPlan. He advised that feedback would be sought from the Friends of John O’Groats Trail on this action.

In discussion, Members raised the following key issues:-

- the inclusion of the John O’Groats Trail in the Action Programme be welcomed;
- a significant amount of work had been undertaken in Wards 2 and 3 around town centre regeneration and the need to check there was no overlapping or duplication of that work in relation to the strategies to be developed following the town centre health checks; and
- the process for monitoring progress with actions and the potential to request periodic updates to the Action Programme from delivery partners, particularly in relation to long term projects.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the Local Development Plan that has been adopted;
- ii. **APPROVED** the Action Programme in Appendix 1 subject to the inclusion of the John O’Groats Trail as an additional action; and
- iii. **NOTED** the intended arrangements for ongoing monitoring and review of the Action Programme and that updates to the Action Programme will be made from time to time.

8. Winter Maintenance Plan 2018/19 Obair-gleidhidh Geamhraidh 2018/19

There had been circulated Report No CC/20/18 dated 17 October 2018 by the Director of Community Services.

In discussion, Members raised the following key issues:-

- the extent of the Council’s and BEAR Scotland’s responsibility for gritting the walk way on Francis Street, Wick and the need to ensure there was no gaps, reference being made to problems which had been experienced with a section of the walkway in the previous year. The Senior Engineer advised that she would ask the Roads Operation Manager to clarify this matter;
- comments had been received from Wick Community Council and members of the public about difficulties they had experienced in being provided with the information on the Winter Resilience scheme including after they had signed up to the scheme. The Senior Engineer confirmed she would feedback the comments on this matter to the Service’s Policy and Programme’s Manager;
- concern was expressed there may not be the resources within the Service to fill the grit/salt bins under the Winter Resilience scheme and that it may have to be left in piles in certain locations in communities which it was suggested was unfair on volunteers;
- the process communities should follow to monitor and request the salt/grit bins be replenished. The Senior Engineer recommended that communities

- should use the Council's CRM system for such requests to ensure the call was logged and could be tracked;
- the potential to achieve efficiencies in relation to the manual gritting of paths be investigated, specific reference being made to the potential to purchase trundle trollies and also for advice to be provided to communities on this matter.

The Committee:-

- i. **APPROVED** the 2018/19 Winter Maintenance Plan for Caithness;
- ii. **AGREED** that clarification be provided on responsibility for gritting the walk way on Francis Street, Wick;
- iii. **AGREED** to feedback Members comments in regard to the Winter Resilience scheme on the importance of community councils and members of the public being supplied with the information they required in relation to the scheme;
- iv. **AGREED** that clarification be provided in relation to the availability of resources to ensure grit/salt bins in communities would be filled; and
- v. **AGREED** that the potential to achieve efficiencies in relation to the manual gritting of paths be investigated.

9. Minutes Geàrr-chunntas

There were circulated and **NOTED** Minutes of the Caithness Committee held on 28 August 2018, which were approved by the Council on 6 September 2018.

The meeting ended at 12.35pm.
