

Agenda Item	4.
Report No	CC/07/19

HIGHLAND COUNCIL

Committee: Caithness Committee

Date: 15th May 2019

Report Title: Area Priorities - Caithness : The Energy County

Report By: Acting Head of Policy, Ward Management

Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 This report asks Members to consider and approve the draft Caithness Area Priorities as outlined in Appendix One.

Recommendations

1.2 Members are asked to:

- i. Consider and approve “Caithness : The Energy County”, the local strategic priorities for Caithness, including the stated priorities for the next 12 months
- ii. Agree to promote these with the wider Council membership and as part of the Council’s Programme 2017-22 Local Voices, Highland Choices.
- iii. Note that there will be opportunity through the Caithness Community Partnership and engagement with partner agencies, community bodies and communities to consider wider shared priorities over the Council’s term.
- iv. Note that further work will be done in 2019 to identify how the local priorities agreed can be supported by staff and any other Council resources. This will include considering how best to measure progress. Some priorities are already well aligned to the Council’s Programme.

2. Background

- 2.1 Building on the localism agenda and increased delegation of decision making to local committees, each local committee was asked by the Council Leader in 2016 to consider developing a set of strategic Council priorities for their area.

Although work was carried out by the Members in 2016 and a draft Caithness Vision was developed it was never formally agreed by the Caithness Committee at that time.

3. Updating the Vision for Caithness

- 3.1 Following the Highland Council Elections in 2017 and reduction in Wards from 3 to 2 within Caithness and the election of 5 new Members with 3 returning it was felt appropriate that the draft Caithness Vision be revisited. A discussion was held with the Council Leader in October 2017 on key issues in Caithness and the priorities have been revisited by the Members over the last 9 months and revised local priorities are attached at Appendix 1

- 3.2 The local priorities reflect the Highland Council's Programme: Local Voices, Highland Choices. It has themes around :-

- A place to live
- A place to learn
- A place to thrive
- A welcoming place
- A redesigned Council

The Caithness Committee can contribute to the development of Highland along these themes and take forward specific actions to improve the local area.

- 3.3 Some of the priorities focus on Council action and some will require engagement with others, including lobbying activity. There will be opportunity through the Caithness Community Partnership and engagement with partner agencies, community bodies and communities to consider wider shared priorities over the Council's term and the Caithness priorities can be updated to reflect these.

4. Implications

- 4.1

Legal - No immediate implications.

Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural) - Action to support these priorities will bring positive impacts such as through joint working to mitigate rent arrears, fuel poverty and close working relationships with our local schools.

Climate Change/Carbon Clever - Action to support these priorities will bring positive impacts such as support for the flow country UNESCO bid.

Risk – No immediate implications

Gaelic - No immediate implications

- 4.2 Resource – There are no additional resources to support the Caithness priorities however a number of the priorities will have resourcing impacts including staff time. In 2019 work will be done to understand how best to direct staff time and other resources to support Members' priorities and how to measure progress against them

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Date: 29th April 2019

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Background Papers: Appendix 1 – Caithness: The Energy County

Caithness: The Energy County

'The land of sky and sea', Caithness has built its economy on its incredible natural resources. From the booming days of the herring fishing trade to the modern renewables revolution, our relationship with the sea is fundamental to our identity. Meanwhile our vast open skies, flow country and rich archaeological heritage feed a growing tourism industry buoyed by the epic North Coast 500.

Caithness has recently welcomed record investment from the private and public sector, including major developments at both Wick and Scrabster Harbour, new educational and community facilities and two proposed new health hubs on either side of the county.

Today, Caithness people are harnessing that energy to reimagine life in the rural Highlands. Award-winning social enterprises are supporting the most vulnerable members of our community through outreach activities, free local transport and poverty alleviation schemes. New and established visitor centres celebrate our unique identity. Heritage bodies promote and protect our coastal walks, brochs, castles and biodiversity. Small groups of local volunteers dig new paths, create floral displays, refurbish monuments and greatly enhance our environment for locals and visitors alike.

We must now capitalise on that momentum. The regeneration of our county can only be achieved when private enterprise, public sector and community groups pull together. Council resources must be strategically directed towards protecting frontline services and supporting community enterprise wherever we find it. In these challenging financial times, partnership is more important than ever. Caithness' elected members undertake to work collegiately to deliver the Council's 'Local Voices, Highland Choices' programme in a way that benefits Caithness and its people.

1. A place to live

1.1 Transport

Working with key partners, lobby for faster and more reliable services by rail and bus. Support local providers in building capacity to provide community bus services including connections to shops, hospitals and medical services. Work to improve public transport for residents of our remote villages. Protect air services from Wick John O'Groats Airport and lobby for more frequent, convenient and economic flights to key destinations and hubs.

1.2 Regeneration

Facilitate and support the regeneration of our town and village centres by offering leadership and strategic advice as required to community-led development trusts. Work to create one overarching vision for Caithness whilst developing area-specific regeneration plans to drive forward individually. As part of this regeneration plan, develop a Derelict Buildings Strategy agreed at Area Committee and ratified by Highland Council. Lobby for the devolved financial and legislative powers necessary to make this Strategy effective.

1.3 Housing

Develop a housing strategy that responds to the unique challenges of our county, which are distinct to that of the wider Highland region. Work to mitigate the impact of rent arrears caused by Universal Credit and other factors, and continue to drive a rolling programme of heating replacements to lift tenants out of fuel poverty as early as possible. Explore the creative use of voids for development and regeneration. Give Council tenants a stronger voice and sense of empowerment and pride in their community.

1.4 Infrastructure

Target roads and community services spend to ensure that Caithness receives a fair share and that resources are concentrated on priority areas as identified by local engineers and elected members. Encourage greater flexibility by lobbying for more disaggregated budgets to be managed at a local level. Lobby national partners to improve the roads network with focus on road safety and accessibility. Fully consult the public on the proposals to charge for carparks and lobby for revenues to stay within the Ward to fund services such as traffic management and resurfacing of car parks. Work with community groups on potential asset transfer of Highland Council toilets identified for closure, and support them to develop sustainable plans. With Wick and Thurso now having access to superfast broadband and free public wifi, work with partners to address the 'not spots' of broadband and mobile signal provision in the remoter parts of the county.

1.5 Recreation

Recognise the contribution that arts, culture, sport and recreation make to quality of life, ensuring Caithness people have access to high quality events, clubs and outdoor pursuits. In particular, focus on activities for the high proportion of young people by ensuring the Youth Clubs have sustainable plans in place, and support services for older citizens. Develop an asset list of Caithness play parks and other recreational centres, and work to improve clarity around their management and funding to safeguard future provision. Continue to support the incredible efforts of the third sector, who are working to enhance Caithness life, including digging paths, clearing weeds, planting flowers and breathing new life into old buildings. Ensure that resources are targeted to support these efforts to improve Caithness' wellbeing.

2. A place to learn

2.1 Schools

Recognising the challenges presented by poverty and rurality, ensure that all education staff are adequately supported and empowered to deliver the best outcomes for Caithness pupils, regardless of their background. This includes recognising achievement beyond traditional academia and continuing to focus on their overall safety and wellbeing as a key element in their growth. Ensure that young people have a strong voice in guiding these developments. Work closely with the Education team to ensure that the Sustainable Education Programme is appropriate for Caithness, securing the long term future of our rural schools and delivering stability following a period of change. Identify a management structure that provides adequate strategic and operational support

to allow head teachers to continue as leaders of learning. Work to address longstanding recruitment issues by promoting Caithness as a place to live and work.

2.2 STEM and Newton Rooms

Capitalise on the opportunity presented by Caithness' Newton Room and continue to address the falling uptake of STEM subjects, taking a long-term view to the role of science and engineering specialties in the future job market.

2.3 Further and Higher Education

Recognising the high quality of existing provision, continue to work with Highland College and partners to develop opportunities for young people to pursue further and higher education closer to home. Encourage greater availability of local training opportunities and traditional and modern apprenticeships. Target sectors with specific recruitment challenges including teaching, health and emergency services and ensure that partner agencies are working collaboratively to address these issues, with Caithness Community Partnership playing a key role in facilitating these collaborations.

3. A place to thrive

3.1 Addiction and health inequalities

Urgently develop a strategy to tackle the serious and growing issue of alcohol and substance abuse in the county. This will involve close partnership working with Caithness Drug and Alcohol Forum, NHS Highland, Police Scotland, Citizens Advice Bureau and key third sector local providers to formulate an approach that prioritises recovery and treatment within Caithness. Recognising the overlapping issues of poverty, health inequality and addiction, target resources towards giving young people and their families the support they need, when they need it.

3.2 Local health services

Work with NHS Highland and the Scottish Ambulance Service to ensure that the community's voice is heard in any proposed service change. Ensure that the proposed Care Hubs maintain services locally and provide a sustainable long term solution. Press for further reduction in the volume of patients travelling to Inverness by encouraging key local clinics to be brought back to Caithness and the expansion of the NHS Near Me, for appropriate health conditions only. For those patients who do have to travel, work with partners to ease the financial, physical and logistical burden. Support partnership working to increase the local birth rate by enabling more women to give birth in Caithness safely and reducing the number travelling to Raigmore in labour. Ensure that SAS has adequate provision for Caithness and is not unduly burdened by excessive patient transfers to Inverness and beyond.

3.3 Economic growth

Work with partners at HIE, the Chamber of Commerce, Caithness and North Sutherland Regeneration Partnership and NDA to ensure economic diversification and improve local employment prospects. Maintain close links with private enterprises to enhance local benefit.

Actively promote Caithness' strengths as a destination for inward investment and business growth. Ensure that local businesses of all sizes can access business support and are not held back by inadequate mobile and broadband or inequitable delivery charges.

3.4 Caithness talent

Caithness is home to a huge variety of local talent. Our artists, crafters, athletes and performers punch well above their weight. Our local produce, from whisky and gin to bakes and meats, holds its own among the best in Scotland, and Caithness flagstone has become a high-end product in great demand internationally. World class events bring increased international profile and offer a key opportunity to showcase Caithness life and produce. It is vital that we support these individual talents and growing industries to flourish.

4. A welcoming place

4.1 Tourism

Capitalise on the opportunity presented by the NC500, working with partners, funders and businesses to develop the tourist infrastructure in the county, particularly accommodation and signage. Launch a marketing campaign to showcase the Caithness landscape and geography, including projects like the flow country UNESCO bid, Caithness Broch Project and the John O'Groats Trail. Support other key tourist attractions and events including the distilleries, heritage centres and local castles and monuments. Support the efforts of local development trusts to showcase their unique area and attract visitors.

4.2 Safety

Continue to support Safe Highlander and work with partners in emergency services and health and social care to ensure that Caithness remains an exceptionally safe and friendly place to live and visit. Work with the Police to ensure that local knowledge informs their approach to crime and enforcement, with particular attention on road safety and driver education as the NC500 grows in popularity. Help to disseminate information to keep the public informed of scams, internet dangers and ways to stay safe.

4.3 Pull factors

Identify the elements of Caithness life that attract people to live, work and visit in the county and use these as the basis for a more positive and ambitious approach to promoting the county. Facilitate joint working between public, private and third sector organisations to reduce duplication and deliver a coordinated approach to reversing population decline.

5. A redesigned Council

5.1 Caithness Committee

Under the banner of localism, develop Caithness Committee to become more relevant, public-facing and action-driven. Broaden the agenda to include any topics that are relevant to the Caithness Priorities strategic plan, and those that we know to be important to the public. Consider rotating venue of meetings around the county and encouraging a more open forum for the press and public. Highlight challenges, actions and progress by issuing press releases and social media statements as and when appropriate.

5.2 Local budgets

Lobby within Council for greater control over more disaggregated budgets and local commissioning structures to drive affordability and strengthen partnership working with suppliers in the area. Investigate the possibility of ring-fencing a percentage of revenues for use within the wards, contributing to a local benefit fund that will support the community's aspirations.

5.3 Community Councils

Strengthen the relationship with local community councils, Caithness Community Partnership, development trusts, community benefit funders and other community bodies to encourage local decision making. Support community councils to attract new members and to have greater influence on local developments.

5.4 Ward Business Meetings

Restructure Ward Business Meetings to facilitate monthly meetings between members and local managers, encouraging greater collaboration and more effective communication, with an action tracker to assess progress on key tasks. Aim to reduce duplication of work between members, resulting in a more joined up approach that better serves communities.

