

**The Highland Council
Caithness Committee**

Minutes of Meeting of the Caithness Committee held in Wick Town Hall, Bridge Street, Wick, on Tuesday, 27 August 2019 at 10.00am.

Present:

Mr R Bremner
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, Chief Executive's Office
Ms A Donald, Education Quality Improvement Manager, Care and Learning Service
Dr F Grant, Head Teacher, Wick High School, Care and Learning Service
Ms M Ross, Principal Housing Officer, Community Services
Ms A Macrae, Committee Administrator, Chief Executive's Office

Also in Attendance:

Chief Inspector J Wilson, Police Scotland

Mr M Reiss in the Chair

**1. Apologies for Absence
Liesgeulan**

An apology for absence was intimated on behalf of Mr D Mackay.

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

There were no declarations of interest.

**3. Minutes
Geàrr-chunntas**

There were circulated and **NOTED** Minutes of the Caithness Committee held on 15 May 2019 and 30 May 2019, which were approved by the Council on 27 June 2019.

4. Matters Arising from the Minutes

The Ward Manager provided Members with an update on the status of the individual actions set out in the Committee's action tracker. The Roads Safety Officer had confirmed the new 20mph speed limit in Wick would go live on 2 September 2019 and that after speed counts would be carried out for six months. If after that period there was an issue with compliance, then evidence would be provided to the safety camera van team. He would also invite the Roads Safety Officer to attend a Ward Business Meeting to discuss with local Members traffic management issues in Ward 2: Thurso and North West Caithness.

The Chair requested that the action relating to the opportunities for LED street lighting on the trunk road in Caithness being fitted with connections for Christmas lights, be extended to include responsibility for insurance cover at Forss.

Following on from the above, it was suggested that meetings of the Caithness Committee should alternate between Wards 2 and 3 and that further discussion on the arrangements and any cost implications be held at the next Ward Business Meeting.

Discussion then followed on a specific comment contained in the minutes supporting the conversion of vacant shops in town centres for residential use, concern being expressed this was at odds with the significant town centre regeneration work which was ongoing in the area. In response, Members supported the view that town centres should essentially be for businesses.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the updates to the action tracker from the minutes of meetings of 15 May 2019 and 30 May 2019;
- ii. **AGREED** that the Roads Safety Officer be invited to attend a Ward Business Meeting to discuss with local Members traffic management issues in Ward 2; and
- iii. **AGREED** that meetings of the Caithness Committee should alternate between Wards 2 and 3 and that further discussion on the arrangements be held at the next Ward Business Meeting.

5. Police – Area Performance Summary

Poileas – Geàrr-chunntas air Coileanadh Sgìreil

There had been circulated Report No CC/14/19 dated 14 August 2019 by the North Area Commander.

Members welcomed the roll out of the new mobile working in the Highlands and Islands Division and queried whether there would be a media campaign to raise public awareness of the new system, and the potential for the Council's Corporate Communications to issue a news release. The Chief Inspector confirmed he would contact Police Scotland's media department on this matter and liaise with the Ward Manager with a view to the Council issuing a news release.

In discussion, Members raised the following main issues:-

- the work being undertaken to improve road safety and reduce the number of fatalities in the area through the Road Casualty Reduction Group was welcomed;
- the need also to target slow moving traffic which led to driver frustration and increased risk of accidents;
- concern at the figures for mobile phone offences in the area and potential initiatives involving employers to tackle this issue in respect of heavy good vehicles and delivery vans;
- the need to consider the underlying trends and better anticipate road safety issues in the area, particularly with the significant increase in tourist traffic being observed;
- the Council had for a number of years supported the need for the camera van team to be given more flexibility to operate in locations which reflected local priorities;

- the potential for the Highlands and Islands Roads Casualty Group to feed into the local community partnerships;
- the potential to reduce the length of road closures where there was no diversion following fatal road traffic accidents, the public perception being the delays were becoming longer. The Chief Inspector detailed the work involved in accident investigations and the critical importance of the scene not being contaminated and all evidence and measurements being recorded accurately;
- the need for more initiatives to target young drivers, and for the Driving Ambitions video to be updated to make it more relevant for young people;
- it was accepted the introduction of cycling lanes on main routes such as the North Coast 500 would significantly reduce the risk of road traffic accidents, recognising there were resource implications involved;
- concern at the increase in the number of common assaults in the area, albeit it was known many offences were isolated to certain groups in the community;
- further information was sought and provided in regard to Operation Portrait which sought in partnership to target potential sexual offences involving young people with a focus on social media;
- the plan to increase the number of licensed premises checks was welcomed, specific reference being made to issues of anti-social behaviour at a licensed premises in Thurso;
- the need to achieve a balance in respect of licensed premises checks on the basis that an increased Police presence could also cause alarm in communities;
- a further clamp down on untaxed and abandoned vehicles in the area, would be well received in communities; and
- confirmation was sought and provided that the Police would apply a local approach in the enforcement of the new 20mph speed limit for Wick.

The Committee:-

- NOTED** progress made against the objectives set within the Highland and Islands Local Policing Plan 2017-2020 Year 2 and first quarter of Year 3, attached as Annex A to the report, for the period covering 1 April 2018 - 30 June 2019; and
- AGREED** to liaise with the Council's Corporate Communications section with a view to a news release being issued on Police Scotland's new mobile working system.

6. Wick Associated School Group Overview Sealladh Coitcheann air Buidheann Sgoiltean Co-cheangailte

There had been circulated Report No CC/15/19 dated 19 August 2019 by the Interim Director of Care and Learning.

The Education Quality Improvement Manager reported it was intended to provide more up to date figures in future reports, and that she was aware the Chief Executive also intended to consult Members on the type of the data they would wish to have reported for scrutiny purposes. She also was working to bring more information to Members in relation to the refurbishment of janitor's houses as requested at the previous meeting.

Dr F Grant, Head Teacher, Wick High School, provided an update on the school roll figures, advising that the current roll was 680. The prediction was that by 2022

the school roll would be over the capacity of 760 pupils. She advised that Newton Park Primary School also had capacity issues in accommodating the number of pupils within its catchment area.

Dr F Grant then reported on the recruitment challenges at Wick High School and the need to be more creative in recruiting teachers to the area. In terms of the budget, the bulk of the carry forwards shown in the report was a result of the recruitment freeze which had been implemented. She expressed concern at the additional demands and pressure placed on staff as a result which was not evident from the report. She also provided an update on the progress being made on attendances and the challenges in this regard.

During further discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- concern that Members could not rely on the data in the report being up to date which impacted on their scrutiny role, specific reference being made to the information on school rolls and the suitability and condition of buildings;
- concern at the investment of significant sums of money in building new campuses which were then over capacity within a short period of opening.
- the Head Teacher and staff at Wick High School be commended on the high level of positive destinations achieved in recent years. The high number of pupils going on to employment was a particular success story;
- the need for a discussion at a Council wide level around developing local solutions to the recruitment challenges in Caithness, for example the ability to offer similar packages as island authorities and suitable accommodation;
- Members be kept informed of progress with the review of the Council's system of generic interviews for permanent teaching posts. This included the opportunity for local Members to feed into the process given issues which had arisen in some primary schools recently of which Members had no prior knowledge;
- the Budget Leader be asked if an impact analysis was undertaken in relation to a recruitment freeze being imposed on schools in the area;
- an update was sought and provided in relation to progress with the proposed clustering arrangements for the primary schools in the area. The Manager advised it was anticipated a decision on this matter would be taken in the near future;
- clarification was sought and provided on the trends around pupils remaining in Caithness for their higher/further education; and
- it would be helpful if an overview and more context could be provided on the exclusion rates at Newton Park Primary School.

Thereafter, reference was made to the action point from the last meeting that an update be brought back to the Committee in relation to the provision of and preparation for Gaelic medium education at Thurso High School. There was a need to have immediate action to ensure there was a strategy going forward to give assurance to those parents with children in Gaelic medium education at primary level.

The Education Quality Improvement Manager undertook to continue to take this forward with the relevant officers as a priority. It was requested this matter be considered at the next Ward Business Meeting.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** following scrutiny, the content of the report;
- ii. **AGREED** that an update be brought back to the next Ward Business Meeting on the plan for the provision of Gaelic medium education at Thurso High School;
- iii. **AGREED** that confirmation be sought from the Budget Leader as to whether an impact analysis was carried out in relation to any decision to introduce a recruitment freeze on schools in the area;
- iv. **AGREED** that Members be kept informed of progress with the review of the generic interview system for permanent teaching posts; and
- v. **AGREED** that an overview be provided on the exclusion rates at Newton Park Primary School.

7. Annual Area Capital Report Cunntas às Ùr mu Chalpa Sgìre

There had been circulated Report No CC/16/19 dated 9 August 2019 by the Head of Corporate Finance and Commercialism.

In discussion, it was suggested the Seater landfill site was of strategic importance and there was a need for a wider conversation around waste management given the opportunities that may exist for Caithness in this regard.

Thereafter, Members expressed the view that the level of capital spend in Caithness was low and it was disappointing that the Coghill Bridge, Wick was not included in the report. Discussion followed on the process for allocating the capital budget across the Council and the most effective means of lobbying to secure a larger share of capital expenditure for Caithness. It was suggested that Members develop a priority list of projects in the area which were ready to be progressed and could be presented in budget meetings and negotiations. This would provide for a more proactive local approach.

The Committee **NOTED** the:-

- i. expenditure on each project in this Council area in 2018/19;
- ii. budget for each project in this Council area in 2019/20; and
- iii. cumulative spend for each project in this Council area for 2018/19 and 2019/20 to the end of June.

8. Housing Performance Report - 1 April 2019 to 30 June 2019 Aithisg Dèanadais a thaobh Taigheadais - 1 Giblean 2019 to 30 An t-Og Mhios 2019

There had been circulated Report No CC/17/19 dated 15 August 2019 by the Interim Chief Officer (Resources) Community Services.

Members discussed a range of issues around the number of void properties in Caithness. It was noted that a feasibility study had been commissioned in relation to bedsit properties on Ormlie Road, Thurso and it was requested this be extended to cover the difficult to let stock across Caithness. Reference was also made to the issues around the reduction in tenancy sustainment rates being observed and the costs involved. It was suggested there was a need to have a local allocations policy for Caithness given the challenges unique to the area, the crux of the issue being the surplus housing stock.

Thereafter, Members raised the potential to have a more localised format of the report which contained other relevant information in addition to that required by the Scottish Housing Regulator. Members requested that further discussions be held at a Ward Business Meeting on the appropriate additional information to be included in future reports. In addition, it was requested that the Head of Housing be invited to attend the next meeting of the Committee.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED**, following scrutiny the information provided on housing performance in the period 1 April 2019 to 30 June 2019;
- ii. **AGREED** to request that a feasibility study be undertaken in relation to difficult to let housing stock in Caithness;
- iii. **AGREED** that discussions be held at a Ward Business Meeting on the appropriate additional information to be included in future housing performance reports to the Committee; and
- iv. **AGREED** to invite the Head of Housing to the next meeting of the Committee.

The meeting ended at 1.25pm.
