

**The Highland Council  
Caithness Committee**

Minutes of Meeting of the Caithness Committee held in Thurso Library, Davidson's Lane, Thurso on Tuesday, 19 November 2019 at 10.00am.

**Present:**

Mr R Bremner  
Mr W Mackay  
Mr D Mackay

Mr S Mackie  
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  
Mrs H Flavell, Head Teacher, Thurso High School, Care and Learning Service  
Ms L MacKellaich, Road Safety Officer, Community Services (by TC)  
Mr J Gunn, Technician, Community Services  
Mr J Holden, Housing Manager (North), Community Services  
Ms A Macrae, Committee Administrator, Chief Executive's Office

**Also in Attendance:**

Station Commander J Donaldson, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service  
Watch Commander D MacFadden. Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

**Appointment of Chair of Meeting**

The Ward Manager reported that Mr M Reiss had intimated his apologies and therefore Members were required to appoint a Chair for the meeting.

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

On there being no further nominations, Mr S Mackie was appointed as Chair for the meeting.

**1. Apologies for Absence  
Liesgeulan**

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr M Reiss and Mr K Rosie.

**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 27 August 2019, which were approved by the Council on 5 September 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.

In discussion, it was suggested the Council facilitate a meeting of all community groups involved in Christmas lights and decorations in Caithness to resolve any issues and identify good practice well in advance of next year's festive season. The Ward Manager advised that as a starting point he would seek to refresh the report on this issue which had been submitted to the Committee in May 2019.

The Chair advised that at the last meeting of the Environment, Development and Infrastructure Committee it had been confirmed work was ongoing around a feasibility study in relation to the housing stock in Caithness and therefore this action was in progress. In addition, the Head of Housing would be invited to attend the next meeting.

Thereafter, it was suggested that discussion take place at a Ward Business Meeting on the information Members wished to be included in future ASG reports to the Committee.

The Committee:-

- i. **AGREED** the updates to the action tracker from the minutes of previous meetings;
- ii. **AGREED** that the report on Christmas lighting and decorations submitted to the Committee in May 2019 be refreshed as a starting point in identifying good practice and resolving any issues; and
- iii. **AGREED** to discuss the information that Members wished to be included in future ASG reports at a ward business meeting.

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

There had been circulated Report No CC/18/19 dated 6 November 2019 by the Local Senior Officer for Highland.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- the Service be commended on its work in the area to keep people safe;
- an explanation was sought and provided on the Fire Skills initiative which involved pupils from Thurso High School;
- the introduction of the national Youth Volunteer Scheme in six areas in 2020, one of which was Wick, was welcomed;
- an update was sought and provided on the preventative work being undertaken by the Service with older people in rural areas particularly over the winter months;
- the opportunities to update the Driving Ambitions initiative to make it more relevant for young people and the support Members could provide in this regard;
- an update was sought and provided on progress with the potential co-location of the fire stations with NHS Highland/Scottish Ambulance Service in Wick and Thurso. The Station Manager undertook to keep local Members informed of progress going forward; and

- the Service's plans to address issues of inequalities and improve community resilience in Caithness as the lead of the local community planning partnership.

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

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

There had been circulated Report No CC/19/19 dated 1 November 2019 by the Head of Education.

Mrs H Flavell, Head Teacher, Thurso High School, reported on the range of work and initiatives being undertaken in relation to the four main aims of the School which were that all pupils feel included, supported and valued; to set high expectations for attainment, behaviour, attendance and punctuality; to provide quality learning and teaching experiences to all; and to provide an engaging and challenging curriculum for all learners including preparing pupils for life after school. She advised the figure for positive destinations at Thurso High School was 97.5%, and it was anticipated this figure would increase in 2018/19. She explained the carry forward shown on the budget had been due to staffing issues. In relation to buildings, she advised of the need to improve disabled access at Thurso High School with the provision of stairlifts being considered. There were also challenges with developing a lock down policy for the School given there was no automatic door locking systems or perimeter fence.

The Education Quality Improvement Manager advised that the data provided in ASG reports on exclusions had been incorrect, specific reference being made to Newton Park Primary School. The Business Intelligence Officer had provided an assurance that the data would be accurate going forward.

Thereafter, Members congratulated the School on an excellent report and on the positive destinations achieved and on the low number of pupils going on to be unemployed. The fact that both Thurso High School and Wick High School were performing above the Highland and Scotland average on positive destinations was a good news story and the Head Teachers and staff be commended on this achievement. The focus on the individual wellbeing of the child through Thurso High School's programmes and initiatives was also welcomed.

During further discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- the need for flexibility in future reporting to recognise that some pupils from Bower Primary School which was included within the Wick ASG, went on to attend Thurso High School;
- the potential to increase the level of professional mental health support for pupils;
- an explanation was sought and provided on the Care Inspectorate's and HMle's inspection regime for nurseries and a request that future reports include commentary on the Council's RAG status for early years settings;
- concern at the impact of any further reduction of PSA support for teachers who were already under significant pressure;

- the need to identify any gaps in supporting teachers to deal with the social and emotional disruptive behaviours of pupils in the classroom which may not be assessed to be ASN need particularly in smaller schools;
- there was a difference in how the Council understood ASN provision as opposed to the expectation of parents and the need for this to be highlighted in the ASN review;
- the Service's plans for the transition of Gaelic medium primary pupils in Thurso to high school education at the end of the school year be welcomed;
- information be included in future reports on the number of Gaelic medium pupils at Mount Pleasant Primary School;
- the potential challenges around recruiting a secondary Gaelic teacher to work across both Thurso and Farr High Schools; and
- a request that the information on Caithness Educational Trusts be re-circulated.

The Committee

- NOTED** following scrutiny, the content of the report; and
- AGREED** that future reports include commentary on the Council's RAG status for early years settings and information on the number of Gaelic medium pupils at Mount Pleasant Primary School.

**7. Safer Routes to School - Pennyland Primary School  
Slighean nas Sàbhailte dhan Sgoil – Bun-Sgoil Pennyland**

There had been circulated Report No CC/20/19 dated 1 November 2019 by the Executive Chief Officer - Customer and Communities.

In discussion, Members welcomed the proposal and raised the following main points:-

- details of the hotel development at Ormilie Brae, Thurso be passed to the Roads Safety Officer to allow her to consider the implications for safer routes to schools; and
- confirmation was sought and provided that the next stage of the safer routes to school work in respect of Pennyland Primary School would focus on the route from Burnside through the Pennyland Estate.

The Committee **APPROVED** the:-

- raised table traffic calming feature proposed for Trostan Road, Thurso; and
- raised table traffic calming feature proposed for Castlegreen Road, Thurso.

**8. Winter Maintenance Plan 2019/20  
Plana Obair-gleidhidh Geamhraidh 2019/20**

There had been circulated Report No CC/21/19 dated 28 October 2019 by the Executive Chief Officer Customer and Communities.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- the potential to raise public awareness through community councils on the routes BEAR Scotland and the Council were responsibility for treating;
- an explanation was sought and provided on the timescales involved in completing the gritting cycle on priority one routes in the morning. The Technician confirmed these routes were normally treated by 0700hrs;
- clarification was sought and provided on the period salt remained effective on routes depending on the temperature and road conditions and how this was monitored;
- there was a separate priority list for the gritting of footpaths a copy of which could be made available for Members, and that in general schools treated their own campus;
- clarification was sought and provided on the arrangements for filling salt bins including requests from communities in this regard;
- the staff be thanked for their hard work in providing this essential winter maintenance service and on dealing with the recent exceptional conditions experienced;
- a briefing paper be prepared and circulated to community councils on the winter resilience scheme, and the uptake by communities to date was welcomed;
- the potential for a press release to be issued on the winter maintenance plan for the area including details of the parameters the Service had to operate within to manage community expectations; and
- progress with a number of ongoing traffic orders in Caithness be discussed at a ward business meeting.

Thereafter, concern was expressed that the commencement of operations at 0600hrs was on some routes not early enough for the morning traffic on these roads and the potential for there to be flexibility within the policy to commence operations earlier than 0600hours. The Technician confirmed there was flexibility in this regard, and that this had been exercised once over the past two years as a result gritter breakdowns. He explained that an earlier start may also have implications for staff later in the day in relation to the requirements for a period of continued rest.

Following a short adjournment, it was proposed that the Winter Maintenance Plan be approved on the basis that at the discretion of the duty officer operations on selected routes could commence at 0500hrs. The routes covered on a weekend may also be extended during snow conditions.

The Committee **APPROVED** the Winter Maintenance Plan for the Caithness Area, which included the priority road lists and maps presented in Appendices B & C, on the basis operations begin at 0600hrs and can continue to 2100hrs. At the discretion of the duty officer operations on selected routes can commence at 0500hrs. The routes covered on a weekend may be extended during snow conditions.

## **9. Housing Performance Report - 1 April 2019 to 30 September 2019 Aithisg Dèanadais a thaobh Taigheadais - 1 Giblean 2019 to 30 An t-Sultainn 2019**

There had been circulated Report No CC/22/19 dated 7 November 2019 by the Executive Chief Officer Customer and Communities.

In discussion, Members queried progress with developing a localised policy to address the unique housing issues in Caithness. It was suggested there was a need for a joined-up approach with partners including those involved in economic development to consider all the options and to ensure the best decisions were made to meet housing needs in future. The Council should therefore take the lead in arranging a meeting involving Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Caithness and North Sutherland Regeneration Partnership, and the social housing providers in Caithness. Items for discussion should include potential regeneration opportunities, forecast housing demand, the use of technology to enable people to remain in their houses for longer, and the funding opportunities in this regard. To add weight to this request, it would be helpful if this initial summit was endorsed by the Chief Executive.

Further points raised by Members included:-

- concerns raised by a tenant that his current heating system was to be replaced by electric heating rather than being repaired The Housing Manager confirmed he would investigate this specific case;
- within the Council's obligations to reduce carbon and improve energy efficiency, it was important tenants were offered proper choices in relation to affordable heating systems that were sustainable and proven to work;
- the need to continue to push for pilot schemes in Caithness in relation to new innovative heating systems; and
- an explanation was sought and provided on the potential to improve sheltered housing provision in the area and the increased focus on delivering more personal solutions to enable tenants to remain in their own homes.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** following scrutiny, the information provided on housing performance in the period 1 April 2019 to 30 September 2019; and
- ii. **AGREED** to seek a joint meeting with Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Caithness and North Sutherland Regeneration Partnership, and the social housing providers in Caithness to discuss housing issues in Caithness.

The meeting ended at 1.00pm.

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