

## The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Easter Ross Area Committee** held remotely on Thursday, 20 August 2020 at 10 am.

### **Present:**

Mr M Finlayson  
Mr D Louden  
Ms P Munro  
Mr A Rhind

Ms F Robertson (**in the Chair**)  
Ms M Smith  
Mrs C Wilson

### **Officials in Attendance:**

Alison Clark, Head of Policy  
Nicky Grant, Head of Education Services  
Derek Martin, Education and Learning Manager  
Fiona MacBain, Committee Administrator  
Andy McCann, Economy & Regeneration Manager  
Carron McDiarmid, ECO Communities and Place  
John Mackay, Amenities Services Manager  
Iain Moncreiff, Roads Operation Manager  
Helen Ross Senior Ward Manager, CSER

### **Also in Attendance:**

Maria Dickson, NHS Highland  
Rhona Fraser, Head of Strengthening Communities and Regional Development, HIE  
Alex McKinley, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service  
Maureen Ross, Seaboard Memorial Hall  
Inspector Joanne Thomson, Police Scotland

**An asterisk in the margin denotes a recommendation to the Council.  
All decisions with no marking in the margin are delegated to Committee.**

#### **1. Apologies for Absence Leisgeulan**

There were none.

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

There were none.

#### **3. Highland Council and Local Community COVID-19 Response Comhairle na Gàidhealtachd agus Freagairt COVID-19 na Coimhearsnachd Ionadail**

The Chair summarised the tremendous and timely response to the Covid crisis from Highland Council staff, local community groups and individuals, NHS and

Highlands and Island Enterprise staff, businesses and other groups, and volunteers. Gratitude was expressed to all on behalf of the Committee.

Presentations were provided as follows:

**Helen Ross, Highland Council**

The set up of humanitarian assistance centres to support key groups within the community who would be vulnerable to Covid was explained. A summary was provided of the various Covid response activities and types of support that had been and continued to be offered. Key areas of learning were outlined, as were funding issues and next steps.

**Andy McCann, Economy and Regeneration Manager**

Information was provided on business grants and the economy.

During discussion, the following issues were considered:

- Members praised the outstanding work of the business grants team which had performed well within a national context;
- some Covid-related support such as the helpline, remained in place, but the focus was moving back towards the usual work of the service such as business gateway and employability;
- information was sought on when further business support funds might be available to help the tourism and other businesses that would struggle during the coming winter months. While detail on further funding was awaited, it was explained that work was being undertaken to ensure a multi-agency approach to coordinate responses, and a business support workshop was intended for all partners to help facilitate this;
- it was pointed out that the business grants of £10k for smaller organisations and £25k for larger ones were not always equitable as sometimes the smaller organisations employed more staff than larger ones, and that there had been inconsistencies in evidence requirements for grants. It was explained that in an evolving situation different schemes had employed different criteria and the associated evidence requirements had become more scheme specific as time went on;
- information was sought on UK and Scottish government loan schemes, and it was hoped the forthcoming multi-agency workshop that was planned would help to bring information and initiatives together to ensure businesses were able to source the help that was available; and
- with Covid and Brexit affecting the economy, it was important to both support business start-ups and growing businesses.

**Maureen Ross, Seaboard Memorial Hall**

Full details were provided on the activities and support provided to the local community by volunteers, funding agencies and local businesses, with the organisation having become a hub for wider collaboration. Key activities had been support for foodbanks and the provision of meals on wheels

The Chair thanked Maureen Ross for her presentation and all the volunteers for their considerable efforts to help vulnerable people during lockdown.

### **Cllr Pauline Munro on the Cromarty Firth ward community response**

Full details were provided on the provision of meals to vulnerable members of the community during lockdown, including information on funding sources and expenditure, and plans for the future.

Members thanked all the local volunteers who had helped with food preparation and distribution.

### **Rhona Fraser, HIE, on the support offered to community groups**

Information was provided in relation to the Scottish Community Grant Fund, with examples of positive joint work which had been undertaken with various anchor organisations throughout the area (with four being in the Easter Ross area), and work being undertaken with the Scottish Government on possible funds for the future. Details of the work surrounding the Pivotal Enterprise Fund were also provided.

### **Maria Dickson, Area Manager, NHS Highland**

A summary was provided of Covid activity in Easter Ross, particularly at Invergordon Hospital, and the importance of avoiding complacency in relation to preventative measures. NHS staff were praised for their work during the crisis although staff absence rates, due to shielding or symptomatic staff, had been challenging. Issues in care homes had also been challenging, especially for example, reduced visiting. Public Health work was ongoing.

During discussion, the following issues were considered:

- information was sought on the number of tests being undertaken and while that was not available at the meeting, it was explained that testing for staff was being undertaken regularly, especially in care homes, and that the Highlands were performing well compared to other areas of the UK;
- it was hoped that visitors from outwith the area did not bring the virus with them and it was acknowledged that although track and trace was being undertaken, it was open to abuse with people leaving false contact details;
- NHS was thanked on behalf of the Highland Council for their response to the crisis;
- some older people would emerge from the crisis healthier and safer, having come to the attention of public bodies or community groups able to help them; and
- food security and mental health were key learning points for any future pandemic.

The Committee thanked the presenters and **NOTED** the presentations.

#### **4. Police – Area Performance Summary Report Poileas – Geàrr Aithisg Coileanadh Sgìreil**

There had been circulated Report No ERA/07/20 dated 10 August 2020 by the Chief Inspector Jamie Wilson, Area Commander.

During discussion, information was sought on changes to regulations and procedures in recent months and it was explained that although the day to day

business was similar, there were higher levels of calls on environmental health type issues related to visitors, for example camping in appropriate places or leaving litter behind. Members thanked police officers for their efforts during the Covid crisis, and also for recent successful drug seizures.

The Committee **NOTED**:

- i. the full reporting year Apr 19 - March 20 for Ross and Cromarty with Easter Ross where available; and
- ii. Q1 of 20/21 with Easter Ross where available.

## **5. Fire – Area Performance Summary Report Smàladh – Geàrr Aithisg Coileanadh Sgìreil**

There had been circulated Report No ERA/08/20 by the Group Commander – Service Delivery, Highland North, Scottish Fire & Rescue Service.

Attention was drawn to the reduction in dwelling fires in the area to nil, which went against the general Covid trend, with more people at home for longer periods of time than normal, and to the reduction in road traffic collisions, which was likely as a result of travel restrictions.

There had been a reduction in staffing levels in Balintore station, although it was explained there was no fixed volunteer rate and that availability rates for existing volunteers was good. Support from Members for volunteer recruitment efforts was sought, when talking to communities or through social media or other means of publicity, noting that both male and female volunteers were sought.

The Committee **NOTED** the Area Performance report for quarter one 2020-21.

## **6. The Phased Reopening of Schools and ELC Settings Fosgladh Sgoiltean Mean air Mhean agus Suidheachaidhean Tràth- ionnsachaidh is Cùraim-chloinne**

There was a verbal update from the Head of Education Services and the Area Education and Learning Manager on the plans and preparations for schools reopening.

The following issues were covered during the update:

- Schools had reopened fully from 18 August 2020, with a focus on health and wellbeing, and plans were in place for children with special needs;
- Transport, cleaning and catering issues were summarised;
- Schools were meeting the statutory requirement to provide free drinking water, when many water fountains were out of use due to Covid;
- SQA results were summarised, with early indications that the three secondary schools in the area had performed well compared to the previous year;
- A community health and safety survey was planned on 24 August 2020 with a two week completion window;
- Details were provided of positive lessons learned during the reopening of schools for pupils, parents and teachers; and

- Challenges for the future were summarised, with communication and building authentic relationships being key.

During discussion, the following issues were considered:

- Members thanked Education staff for resolving promptly any issues that had arisen following the reopening of schools;
- concern was expressed about possible overcrowding on public buses used by school pupils and the Education and Learning Manager would check this with the Transport Manager then inform Mike Finlayson;
- concern had been expressed by a parent group about the possible lack of free drinking water in school and it was clarified that all schools would meet their statutory requirement to provide free drinking water, although this was being undertaken by different means in different schools, the usual water fountains being out of use due to Covid-related hygiene concerns; and
- information was sought and provided on work being undertaken to improve and expand the playground at Invergordon Academy.

The Committee **NOTED** the update and **AGREED** the Education and Learning Manager would provide Mike Finlayson with any information about issues relating to the use of public buses by school children.

## **7. Road Maintenance Up-Date - April to July 2020 Cunntas às Ùr mu Chàradh Rathaidean – Giblean gu Iuchar 2020**

There had been circulated Report No ERA/09/20 dated 7 August 2020 by Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure and Environment.

During discussion, information was sought on current pothole repair activity and concern was expressed at the lack of manpower to undertake work such as filling potholes, emptying gullies, and verge cutting. It was felt that Easter Ross had suffered disproportionately from staff absence as a result of Covid shielding requirements and attention was drawn to other Areas of the Council which appeared to have more human resources and therefore less of a problem with outstanding work. Volunteers were assisting with some work but it was felt unfair to ask more of them. It was acknowledged that the budget situation was challenging with little prospect of increased resources, and that some communities benefited from external funds, such as community benefit from windfarms. Members also suggested that the problem was not lack of funds but the use to which the budget was put and further information was sought on the allocation of the roads budget across the Highlands. The ECO Communities and Place summarised the difficult budget situation and explained the Council had agreed the allocation method, which was a political decision, not one that officers could amend. Creative solutions were required to make the best use of the budget available and in relation to grounds maintenance, work was planned to engage more volunteers through a new programme of support to be developed. It was suggested that a monthly meeting with operational managers and Members would help to understand pressures better and to identify new potential solutions. The Chair offered to discuss the possibility of the roads budget allocation review with the Council leadership. It was pointed out that other Areas also felt they did not receive a fair allocation of the roads budget. In relation to

workforce resources, which might be affected by historic patterns and impacts of the Voluntary Redundancy Scheme, attention was drawn to a review currently being undertaken by the ECOs to map staff resources, this being due for completion by the end of September 2020, as part of the workforce planning agreed as part of the Council's Recovery Plan. Further information would be shared with Members when it was available.

The Committee **NOTED** the report and **AGREED** a summary of the responses from the Roads Operation Manager would be emailed to Members outwith the meeting due to technical difficulties with his connection to the meeting.

## **8. Amenities Update Cunntas às Ùr mu Ghoireasan**

There had been circulated Report No ERA/10/20 dated 4 August 2020 by the Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place.

Members welcomed the work that had been undertaken to date and praised the Service's communication with Members and the community. Concern was expressed about illegal dumping of waste and who to contact about this, and about other Service issues.

The Committee **NOTED**:

- i. the information provided in this report on the Amenity Service update on the response to the Covid-19 Pandemic Lockdown;
- ii. that disruption to the service would continue for the rest of the season;

and **AGREED** that a list of Service contacts be provided to Members.

## **9. Invergordon Common Good Fund Maoin Math Coitcheann Inbhir Ghòrdain**

There had been circulated Report No ERA/11/20 dated 31 July 2020 by the Executive Chief Officer, Resources and Finance and Executive Chief Officer, Community and Place.

The Committee **NOTED**:

- i. the Quarter 1 monitoring statement for the Invergordon Common Good Fund; and
- ii. the current position in relation to the Invergordon Town Hall.

## **10. Tain Common Good Fund Maoin Math Coitcheann Bhaile Dhubhthaich**

There had been circulated Report No ERA/12/20 dated 4 August 2020 by the Executive Chief Officer, Resources and Finance, and Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place.

The Committee **NOTED** the Quarter 1 monitoring statement for the Tain Common Good Fund.

**11. Minutes**  
**Geàrr-chunntas**

There had been circulated and were **NOTED** Minutes of Meeting of the Easter Ross Area Committee held on 20 February 2020.

The meeting ended at 1.26pm