

**The Highland Council
Caithness Committee**

Minutes of Meeting of the **Caithness Committee** held **REMOTELY** on **Thursday, 22 October 2020** 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
Mr D MacKay

Officials in attendance:

Ms N Grant, Executive Chief Officer, Education & Learning
Mrs H Ross, Senior Ward Manager, Communities and Place
Mr A Macmanus, Ward Manager, Communities and Place
Ms M Ross, Principal Housing Officer
Mr J Henderson, Housing Investment Officer
Ms A Donald, EQI Manager, North
Ms S Murdoch, Common Good Officer
Miss J MacLennan, Democratic Services Manager
Ms J MacLennan, Principal Administrator
Ms M Murray, Committee Administrator
Ms F McBain, Committee Administrator
Ms M Zavarella, Administrative Assistant

Also in Attendance:

Mr S Parsons, Simec Atlantis
Mr J Donaldson, Scottish Fire & Rescue Service
Mr M Thomsen, Highlands & Islands Enterprise
Mr E Sinclair, Highlands & Islands Enterprise
Mr A Tait, Caithness Voluntary Group

1. Apologies for Absence

There were no apologies for absence.

2. Declarations of Interest

Item 8: Mr R Bremner (non-financial)
Item 12: Ms N Sinclair (non-financial)

3. Minutes of Previous Meetings – 19 February 2020 and 6 July 2020

There had been circulated Minutes of the previous Meetings held on 19 February and 6 July 2020 (which had been approved by the Council on 12 March and 30 July 2020 respectively) which were **NOTED**.

4. Matters Arising – Action Tracker

There had been circulated an Action Tracker which detailed the actions arising from previous meetings.

In this regard, and with specific reference to the actions arising from the meeting held on 6 July 2020, the following proposals were presented for consideration in relation to Roles and Responsibilities and Recognition of Community Achievement:-

Roles and Responsibilities:-

Role Description – Vice-Chair and Provost of Thurso

- To act as deputy to the Chair of Caithness Area Committee as required
- To help develop and maintain effective relationships with partner organisations and agencies as appropriate
- To provide strategic advice and input to the Chair relating to Caithness strategy and specifically to Thurso and North West Caithness
- To raise and help manage issues and opportunities with the Chair relating to Thurso and North West Caithness
- To represent Thurso and Caithness on civic and ceremonial occasions to the Provost of Thurso, including on the occasion of visits by Ambassadors and Consul Generals
- To promote Thurso and Caithness by hosting civic events and raising the profile of Thurso and Caithness including through public appearances and the media
- To maintain the highest standards of conduct and ensure public confidence in the functions of the Provostship
- This role is voluntary and will not be remunerated.

Role Description – Vice-Chair and Provost of Wick

- To act as deputy to the Chair of Caithness Area Committee as required
- To help develop and maintain effective relationships with partner organisations and agencies as appropriate
- To provide strategic advice and input to the Chair relating to Caithness strategy and specifically to Wick and East Caithness
- To raise and help manage issues and opportunities with the Chair relating to Wick and East Caithness
- To represent Wick and Caithness on civic and ceremonial occasions to the Provost of Wick, including on the occasion of visits by Ambassadors and Consul Generals
- To promote Wick and Caithness by hosting civic events and raising the profile of Wick and Caithness including through public appearances and the media
- To maintain the highest standards of conduct and ensure public confidence in the functions of the Provostship
- This role is voluntary and will not be remunerated.

Recognition of Community Achievement:-

Caithness was fortunate to have an effective and inspirational voluntary sector and it was suggested that the Area Committee could formalise a process that recognised the outstanding efforts and contributions by voluntary organisations and individuals to the community.

As such, the establishment of a Caithness Community Awards scheme was proposed (on the basis that a similar scheme had been successful in the areas of Skye and Nairn).

Nominations could be made in the following categories - Arts and Sports, Environment, Health, Education, Community, Enterprise and Young People – and in terms of the criteria to be followed all nominees would have to be resident in Caithness, demonstrate that their actions or activities had resulted in a significant benefit to the population of Caithness and as such would be eligible for civic recognition from the Ward and/or be nominated for voluntary effort. Nominations for the award in respect of paid members of staff would not be eligible.

Nomination forms would be considered by Caithness Elected Members, the Ward Manager and Community Representatives for each of the categories listed. The successful nominee would be contacted ahead of a Caithness Area Committee meeting and invited to attend to receive their award. The awards would be presented at the beginning of each meeting of the Committee and winners would be presented with a signed certificate. Each year, one individual would be recognised with a commemorative plaque for their outstanding contribution to Caithness community life.

Thereafter, the Committee **AGREED** the proposals in relation to Roles and Responsibilities and Community Achievement as detailed.

It was also **AGREED** that further discussion would be undertaken at a future (separate) meeting in relation to the Community Achievement proposals.

Further, and with specific reference to the current Action Tracker, it was **AGREED** that the actions which had already been completed/superseded could now be removed.

5. Notice of Motion

The following Notice of Motion had been received by the Head of Corporate Governance:-

‘Caithness Area Committee recognises the fundamental strategic importance of Wick John O’Groats Airport to the economy of the region, and the energy, business and tourism sectors in particular.

Caithness Members confirm their full support for the Public Service Obligation and their commitment to working with stakeholders and partners to deliver this as a matter of urgency.

Caithness Area Committee further calls on Highland Council to identify financial support to secure the onward sustainability of the Airport.’

Signed: Ms N Sinclair Mr S Mackie

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- Wick Airport had always been important nationally and not least at present in light of the circumstances around the current pandemic;
- it was important to acknowledge the previous work which had been undertaken on the Business Case in respect of the Public Service Obligation (PSO) which meant that it was now ready to be released;
- issues in relation to the PSO, including the annual subsidy, passenger numbers and potential economic gain for the Caithness area, were highlighted;

- this had to be viewed as a catalyst for future local jobs and as such the importance of recruiting to (and retaining) such jobs in Caithness was stressed;
- in relation to renewable and emerging technologies, investment in the Airport represented an investment in decarbonisation;
- the unanimous support and commitment from all Members of the Committee in respect of the Motion was welcomed;
- it had to be recognised that the Airport was an integral asset for the area in terms of rebuilding and taking advantage of future opportunities where issues around connectivity would be key;
- the value and importance of regular, scheduled and on-time flights for the area in future could not be underestimated;
- considerable work had been undertaken and it was now time to present the business case to those who could fund it;
- this could be a key part of the recovery process from Covid-19 and it was obvious that geographically Caithness was now best placed to take this forward in line with what had already happened in other areas;
- the funding required represented a relatively small sum compared to other projects and not least in light of the potential economic return for Caithness and the Highlands as a whole;
- the appreciation and thanks of all Committee Members were conveyed to the Officers concerned for the extensive work which had been undertaken with a view to establishing a sustainable air route for the area;
- it had to be acknowledged that a number of challenges had already been tackled by the Caithness Transport Forum, including issues in regard to connectivity with larger hubs in other areas;
- all Members of the Committee were in full agreement that lobbying of the full Council needed to be undertaken now in terms of the support required; and
- it was a matter of pride that Wick was the only town in Scotland which could be reached by road, rail, sea and air.

*Thereafter, the Committee unanimously **AGREED to RECOMMEND** the terms of the Notice of Motion as detailed.

6. Scottish Fire & Rescue Local Performance Report

There had been circulated Report No CC/07/20 dated 9 October 2020 by the Local Senior Officer for Highland.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- an update on recruitment was sought, and provided, particularly in relation to Stations in the more outlying areas and it was confirmed that advertisements were continuing to be placed across all platforms;
- disappointment was expressed at the continued delay to replace/refurbish Thurso Fire Station and it was confirmed that there was widespread support for this project to be accelerated. In this regard, it was noted that progress had been impacted by Covid-19 over recent months;
- the contribution that the Fire Service gave to local communities was commended and in particular reference was made to recent charitable events which had been well supported by Fire Service personnel; and

- information about the increase in deliberate fires was sought and provided. In this respect, it was suspected that this could have been due to the burning of rubbish/waste but further information would be provided in due course.

Thereafter, the Committee:-

- NOTED** the terms of the Local Performance Report as circulated; and
- AGREED** to continue to support the refurbishment of Thurso Fire Station by including it on the Action Tracker in order to monitor future progress.

7. Presentation - SIMEC Atlantis

A Presentation was undertaken at the meeting by Mr Sean Parsons, Simec Atlantis, during which he provided an update on recent activity at Nigg where delivery of the world's first subsea hub had been completed on time by an incredible team and would allow multiple tidal turbines to be connected to a single power export cable.

As such, this was now being shipped to Japan and it was expected to be installed by the end of the year. It was hoped that more orders would follow and in this respect the Members of the Committee were thanked for their interest and for visiting the site in person to view the project and talk to the team which had been greatly appreciated by all concerned.

Meygen was the largest tidal stream project in the world but those who had worked on it now wanted to take it further and it was envisaged that this could be accomplished through a Phase 2 project. However, there had been barriers to this in that the UK Government had withdrawn funding for tidal stream projects and as such lobbying was currently being undertaken to enable Meygen Phase 2 to be 'unlocked' in order that the benefits for local areas could be achieved.

Overall, it was vital to now take forward digital infrastructure projects which represented an area of huge opportunity and potential expansion for local communities in the future. Also, and whilst acknowledging that these projects could often be 'energy hungry' at present, it was highlighted that identification of renewable links in this regard was currently being investigated in order to alleviate such issues.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- the enthusiasm which had been relayed during the presentation was warmly welcomed as was the potential for investment in the Caithness area in future;
- it was noted that whilst many projects were classed as the 'technology of tomorrow' that was not true for this project. Further, it was envisaged that a project such as 'Meygen 2' could deliver now for the Caithness area;
- it was essential to keep jobs in the UK wherever and whenever possible and as such Nigg was ready now to undertake and complete further projects;
- details of the many opportunities and also challenges faced in developing this type of technology were requested and provided;
- tidal energy had enormous potential to generate jobs locally and this was in contrast to the situation with wind farms;
- there was disappointment at the news which had been received earlier in relation to the BiFab Yard;

- it would be important to take every opportunity to change the perception that tidal energy was expensive as the industry had identified economies of scale and successfully reduced costs;
- it had to be highlighted that tidal energy was much easier to control and predict than either wind or solar power;
- in outlining the environmental approach undertaken by Simec Atlantis, it was understood that perhaps only one type of bird could dive deep enough to be affected by this type of project (black guillemots). In view of the number of tourists who visited Caithness to see its rich birdlife, it was therefore agreed that this would be investigated and further information provided in due course as to whether this was accurate;
- it had to be recognised that the impact of good energy production had a direct and beneficial impact on local communities;
- it was not acceptable to have local people in fuel poverty when such a valuable resource was available close by;
- the Data Centre proposal would help to diversify the Caithness economy and develop local skills and as such was strongly supported;
- the Motion which was to be put forward from the Committee was vitally important and especially in terms of lobbying the UK Government for a 100MW minima for tidal energy in the next CFD auction round; and
- the benefits from these projects would have a direct impact on local communities and as such it was vital that this was widely publicised

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the terms of the presentation as detailed.

*It was also unanimously **AGREED TO RECOMMEND** the terms of the following Notice of Motion:-

“Caithness Area Committee recognises that the MeyGen project has positioned Caithness and Scotland as a world leader in the development and deployment of marine energy. The award winning and pioneering project has already produced more tidal stream power than anywhere else in the world, creating highly skilled jobs both direct and throughout the supply chain.

Caithness Members confirm their full support for the development of the project to realise its full potential in terms of tidal energy generating capacity and the establishment of the McCloud Data Centre creating an integrated subsea, terrestrial, data centre and renewables project to provide Scotland with world class digital infrastructure and the necessary tools to attract Hyperscale availability zone requirements.

Caithness Area Committee further calls on Highland Council to lobby the support of the UK Government for a 100MW minima for tidal energy in the next CFD auction round”.

8. Covid-19 Response Update – Caithness Voluntary Group/Caithness Community Partnership

Declaration of Interest - Mr R Bremner declared a non-financial interest in this item as Chair of Thrumster Community Development Association but, having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors’ Code of Conduct, concluded that his interest did not preclude his involvement in the discussion.

Mr Allan Tait, Caithness Voluntary Group (CVG), provided an update on this item during which it was explained that, over the summer, there had been a reduction in support provision by community groups in comparison with the spring. Many groups had been working on a one-to-one basis to help people become more independent. However, much of that work had now stalled due to the reintroduction of restrictions as infection rates increased. There were also indications that people were becoming more anxious, especially those who had been in isolation earlier in the year.

Discussions had taken place with the groups that had been involved during lockdown and everyone was willing to support their communities over the winter. Groups were better prepared than they had been in March and systems were in place but that did not mean it would be straightforward and work had taken place to increase knowledge and contacts and address issues identified by the volunteers. Some issues could be resolved by better communications and networking, such as facilitating access to social care, organising access to food for groups via Community Food Initiatives North East, checking on school meal provision for the families that relied on it and supporting village halls to reopen so support groups could resume. The major issues which had been identified included mental health and wellbeing, food and fuel poverty and poor digital connectivity.

CVG was fortunate in that, with support from Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE), more Aspiring Communities funding had been secured for 21 months from July 2020. A part-time co-ordinator and two full-time officers had also been appointed to work on projects to tackle inequalities in the area and much of the work taking place centred around mental health and wellbeing. An action group had also been established with input from a range of partners including NHS Highland, Police Scotland, Elected Members, practitioners and relevant community groups. In addition, a focus group of people with lived experience had been set up to sense-check the working taking place. Initial findings from a survey that had been carried out were that crisis support was lacking, there were long waiting lists, specialist treatment was not available in Caithness and there was a lack of information on what services were available. Significant progress had however already been made by the action group which was looking at two initiatives, namely a listening project and an interactive resource hub, further information on which would be provided in the next few months.

Mr Eann Sinclair and Mr Martin Thomsen, both HIE, provided an update on behalf of Caithness Community Partnership during which tribute was paid to CVG for the way in which it had organised a group of responsible and accountable organisations at short notice to deliver a range of vital services. Some support had been provided via the Scottish Government grant scheme administered by HIE and there was now a further grant programme which was open until March 2021.

The thematic issues raised, such as mental health provision, digital and physical connectivity and fuel poverty, had already existed but the pandemic had brought them to the fore and it was now even more vital that they be taken forward. In relation to the Community Planning Partnership structure, there had previously been a disconnect between the work taking place locally and at a strategic level. However, a new structure had been put in place that was now beginning to work and, over the winter months, the issues raised would be developed at ground level and then taken up through the CPP in the knowledge that they would be addressed. There was an opportunity to reinvent community planning on the ground in a productive way and the community-led efforts needed to be the springboard for the work that would take place over the next six

months. It was added that, due to the great work of CVG and the many community groups in Caithness, the Community Partnership now had a closer connection with the people who were experiencing inequalities.

During discussion, the following main issues were raised:-

- Members commended CVG and Caithness Community Partnership, not only for the work carried out during the initial lockdown and over the summer but for the strategic approach now being taken. It was wonderful to be part of a resilient community like Caithness and that resilience had been recognised in other areas of Highland;
- better networks had been established as a result of the resilience work that had taken place and the CVG had played a pivotal role;
- it was important to note how quickly community groups had become organised and had then been able to move on and begin discussing many of the issues raised during the updates. Times of adversity tested communities and Caithness had passed with flying colours, community groups having been determined to work together to minimise the effects of the pandemic;
- mental health was a topical issue in Caithness at present and it was encouraging that issues had been identified and work was taking place. In that regard, it was confirmed that NHS Highland would be visiting each Community Partnership area to do a specific piece of work on mental health provision and it was suggested that there should be a joint Caithness and Sutherland approach as the issues being experienced were almost exactly the same. NHS Highland representatives would be attending the Sutherland Community Partnership meeting in December and it was suggested that it would be useful if the Caithness Community Partnership was also part of that conversation;
- the resilience programme had been a learning process as well as a delivery process and, as highlighted during the updates, had improved connections between the Community Partnership and the people who were experiencing the issues it was there to address;
- Covid-19 had caused, and continued to cause, many families huge distress and funding had been essential. In that regard, thanks were expressed to Martin Thomsen for his work in facilitating help which had been hugely welcomed by communities;
- concern was expressed regarding the potential for more lockdowns and volunteer fatigue;
- it was not known what the next few months would hold but the winter would provide different challenges to the summer months and it was important to manage them so that an effective resilience programme could still be delivered in the future;
- it was important that agencies were made aware of the people who had been identified as having particular needs and that there was continuation of provision;
- fuel poverty would become more of an issue during the winter and it was expected that the winter flu bug and Covid-19 would be more prevalent. If people could not visit each other's houses, loneliness/social isolation could be a significant issue, especially in rural communities;
- it was hoped that the Community Partnership could be consolidated and strengthened going forward;
- after a difficult start, this had been a transformational year and Members were proud to see Caithness being held up as an example of best practice and what could be achieved when everyone worked together; and

- there was a vibrant and successful third sector in Caithness and the Community Partnership was working well alongside it. The Caithness Committee wanted to work more closely with the Community Partnership going forward and the Chair sought views as to how that might best be achieved. In this regard, it was suggested that there should be a standing item on the Committee agenda with a different focus for discussion each time – this should be a practical discussion as to how the Committee was helping the Community Partnership and taking actions forward. The Chair also confirmed that she had had a discussion with Martin Thomsen as to whether she (or another Committee Member) could meet with Community Partnership leads to keep informed on the work taking place.

Thereafter, the Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the updates which had been provided as detailed; and
- ii. **AGREED** that there should be a standing Community Partnership item on future agendas.

9. Thurso Associated School Group Overview

There had been circulated Report No CC/08/20 dated 6 October 2020 by the Executive Chief Officer, Education and Learning.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- there was a need to highlight the considerable improvements at Wick and Thurso Secondary Schools in recent years and also to thank the senior management teams and teachers in this respect;
- the recent attendance at a Committee meeting by Secondary School Head Teachers had been welcomed and it was hoped that Primary School Head Teachers would also attend in future;
- information was sought and received on possible mitigation required in relation to the impact of lockdown on attainment standards. In this respect, attention was drawn to the considerable benefits of Chromebooks during this period and the excellent levels of ICT support which had been provided. It was also noted that teachers were assessing the requirements of pupils in order to identify any gaps in provision and that National 5 exams had been cancelled for 2021;
- teachers were also thanked for the additional out of hours work which they had undertaken during lockdown to try to keep in touch with pupils and for 'small touches' such as displays of bunting to welcome children back into schools;
- information was sought and received in relation to the ability of the ASN Programme in Caithness to meet requirements and it was confirmed that there had been no change in the current year to staffing support, with Workshops planned for Members on allocation and resources;
- in relation to 'positive destinations' and direct employment, Caithness was performing well against the Highland and Scottish averages and all staff, pupils and families were thanked for their efforts;
- the advantages of Members attending Parent Council meetings were highlighted;
- in response to concerns about mental health issues, attention was drawn to plans to introduce a Mental Health SQA Qualification for all S3 pupils and it was suggested that something similar should be considered for adults;

- the commitment to Gaelic Medium Education was emphasised;
- attention was drawn to the figures in the report on the provision of different levels of ASN provision and because it was difficult to know how this related to levels of need, an improved presentation of the data in the report to reflect this was requested, including general staffing unfilled vacancies (particularly long term) and whether there were gaps in ASN provision. An ASN-specific report, which cut across both Associated School Groups, was requested for a future meeting; and
- it was suggested that the Caithness Executive Chief Officer should consider attending a Caithness resilience meeting and/or a Thurso High School Parent Council meeting.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the terms of the report as circulated.

It was also **AGREED** that an ASN-specific report, which cut across both Associated School Groups, be presented to a future meeting.

10. Caithness HRA Capital Programme 2021/22

There had been circulated Report No CC/09/20 dated 7 October 2020 by the Executive Chief Officer, Housing and Property.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- the updated content and approach in the report was welcomed and reference was made to the value of localism, tenant consultation and joint working at all levels;
- both Officers and Members were thanked for their work on the programme; and
- with particular reference to renewable energy, the benefits of bringing together expertise for a project from a range of sources was highlighted.

Thereafter, the Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the allocation of resources to the Caithness Area as set out in Section 5.7 of the report;
- ii. **NOTED** the guideline investment priorities as set out in Sections 5.2 and 5.3 of the report;
- iii. **AGREED** the proposed one-year HRA Capital Programme for Caithness 2021-22 as set out in Appendix 1;
- iv. **NOTED** the position relating to the current year HRA Capital Programme; and
- v. **NOTED** that updates on the Housing Revenue Account Capital Programme would continue to be provided through Ward Briefings and at future Local Committee meetings as requested by Local Members, in addition to reporting to the Housing and Property Committee.

11. Housing Performance Report – 1 April to 30 June 2020

There had been circulated Report No CC/10/20 dated 8 October 2020 by the Executive Chief Officer, Housing and Property.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- the team was commended for their hard work and dedication with respect to repair times and it was commented that this was an impressive result, particularly during the Covid-19 crisis;
- it was recognized that this was a challenging time for all housing teams and the housing service in Caithness was applauded for their efforts in adapting and delivering services effectively in such difficult circumstances;
- with respect to revenues, this situation was not reflective of a Caithness issue but rather a Highland-wide and national issue; and
- it was an obligation and statutory duty for the Council to provide housing for people who presented as homeless and housing units were required by necessity and this was important for the community to understand.

Thereafter, the Committee otherwise **NOTED** the information provided on housing performance in the period from 1 April to 30 June 2020 as detailed.

12. Wick Common Good Fund – Asset Register

Declaration of Interest - Ms N Sinclair declared a non-financial interest in this item as a Director of Wick Development Trust (also known as ‘Wick’s Heart’) but, having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors’ Code of Conduct, concluded that her interest did not preclude her from taking part in the discussion.

There had been circulated Joint Report No CC/11/20 dated 12 October 2020 by the Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place and the Executive Chief Officer, Resources and Finance.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- the work undertaken to investigate and compile a list of Common Good assets in Wick was warmly welcomed and gratitude was expressed in relation to the dedication and effort by the team in this regard;
- this was the beginning of the process and the public would now have an opportunity to engage;
- it was queried as to how income generation would be taken forward once the process reached conclusion. In response, it was advised that once the consultation process had reached a conclusion (and there was a list of Common Good assets) there would have to be a decision made (potentially through Strategic Workshops) to determine how best these assets could start generating income for the fund;
- it was noted that it was intended to undertake a similar investigation for Thurso as time and resources permitted; and
- it was incumbent upon the Council to ensure that the process was structured effectively and undertaken in close consultation with the public. In this regard, it was suggested that Officers consider an opportunity for a virtual public meeting to be held, alongside compilation of a ‘Frequently Asked Questions’ document.

Thereafter, the Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the contents of the list of property proposed to be included in the Common Good Asset Register for Wick as detailed in Appendix 1 to the report; and
- ii. **AGREED** the commencement of the public consultation on the list of proposed property in accordance with the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 as detailed.

The meeting ended at 1:35pm.

**The Highland Council
Caithness Committee**

Minutes of **Special Meeting of the Caithness Committee** held REMOTELY on Friday,
11 December 2020 at 10.30 am.

Present:

Mr R Bremner (am only)	Mr M Reiss
Mr D MacKay	Mr K Rosie
Mr W Mackay (am only)	Mr A Sinclair
Mr S Mackie	Ms N Sinclair

Non Members in attendance

Mr A Jarvie
Mrs D Mackay

Officials in attendance:

Mrs D Manson, Chief Executive
Ms N Grant, Interim Executive Chief Officer, Education & Learning
Mrs K Lackie, Executive Chief Officer Performance and Governance
Mrs F Malcolm, Interim Executive Chief Officer, Health and Social Care
Mrs H Ross, Senior Ward Manager, Communities and Place
Mr A Macmanus, Ward Manager, Communities and Place
Mr I Kyle, Head of Improvement and Performance
Mr A MacInnes, Administrative Assistant

Also in Attendance:

Ms P Dudek, Chief Executive, NHS Highland
Chief Superintendent, C Trickett, Police Scotland
Mr D Wilson, Scottish Fire & Rescue Service

Ms N Sinclair in the Chair

1. Apologies for Absence

There were no apologies for absence.

2. Declarations of Interest

Item 3: – Mr W Mackay, Mr K Rosie, Mr M Reiss – Non financial

3. Caithness Mental Wellbeing Pathfinder Project

Declaration of Interest - Mr W Mackay declared a non-financial interest in this item as Chairman, Caithness Learning Disabled Group ENABLE and Director, Caithness Mental Health Support Group but, having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct, concluded that his interest did not preclude his involvement in the discussion.

Mr K Rosie, declared a non financial interest in this item as Chairman of Caithness Drug and Alcohol Forum but, having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct, concluded that his interest did not preclude his involvement in the discussion.

Mr M Reiss, declared a non financial interest in this item as Director of Caithness Mental Health Support Group but, having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct, concluded that his interest did not preclude his involvement in the discussion.

The Chair advised that this special meeting had been called as an emergency response to the escalating mental health issues in the Caithness area. The aim of the meeting was to consider a series of positive and immediate steps under the pathfinder programme, funded by the Scottish Government and agreed at the recent meeting of the Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Committee.

A wide range of guests had been invited to the meeting, highlighting the strategic importance of the Caithness challenge and the commitment of all statutory service providers.

A series of presentations were made by statutory service providers.

Presentations

The Highland Council – Mrs D Manson, Chief Executive, The Highland Council

Honesty, Courage, Understanding, and Empathy were themes highlighted in association with mental health issues. In recent months, it had been inspiring to hear the honesty that had come forward in conversations and this was intergenerational in Caithness and people wanted to open up and talk about their experiences with mental health issues that perhaps they had not shared before.

Everyone needed courage in the months ahead and many people had shown this. Courage to be able to open up and to be honest. Courage to say what is not working and what we need to do better and the need to provide the services that are required for the people of Caithness so that they can be supported with some of these issues.

There was a need to understand what was happening and whether this was just a Caithness issue. In this respect, the pathfinder project would be important for the rest of Highland and Scotland.

There was an empathy and commitment to make sure that everyone learned together. The Lead partners needed to work in a different way to provide services and consider what Caithness could offer as a community in helping to understand the issue. The Lead Partners would work together to make a difference to people's lives and regular updates on progress would be made to the Caithness Committee and the Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Committee.

Police Scotland – Chief Superintendent, C Trickett, Police Scotland

There were challenges facing Police Officers in Caithness on a daily basis. There had been a significant increase in suicides and drug related deaths in 2020. There had been an increase in violence, violent custodies in Police stations; murders; attempted murders; increases in weapon crime; increases in assaults against emergency workers. There was also a complicated drug problem with a variety of drugs in the area that were causing some of the reactions that Police Officers were experiencing.

The way to tackle some of these issues was by a collaborative approach by Lead agencies. Some of the approaches being taken by Police Scotland were highlighted and in particular Operation Ruling launched in December, 2020 following public engagement, to target crime and improve public confidence in policing.

NHS Highland – Ms P Dudek, Chief Executive, NHS Highland

There was an opportunity for Lead Partners to do something meaningful in tackling mental health issues in Caithness and other areas in Highland and to take forward the ambitions of the Christie Commission in 2011 on the future delivery of public services.

The trauma that Caithness had experienced recently with suicides and drug related deaths was devastating. The pathfinder project offered a significant opportunity to consider how we tackle inequality, poverty and bring hope to people.

Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (SFRS) – Mr D Wilson

The Scottish Fire and Rescue had a proud history of working in partnership across Scotland, Highland and in Caithness to achieve best outcomes. They worked to deliver positive community outcomes and its staff, who were positive and strong role models, were willing to be involved in any initiative to improve matters for the community.

The SFRS had some positive projects that had taken place and were due to take place in Caithness through the Fire Service Skills Employability Awards and the Prince's Trust that worked with partners and young people who were identified as at greatest risk to help them build social, team working skills and confidence. Further, a Youth Volunteer Scheme was to be developed in Wick, for young people to learn skills and be given guidance and support.

SFRS community advocates had undertaken training in identifying adverse childhood experiences and this role was key to link in with the different projects referred to in Caithness and Highland.

Thereafter, the Executive Chief Officer Education and Learning gave an introduction to the circulated Report No CC/12/20 dated 6 December 2020 in relation to the Caithness Mental Wellbeing Pathfinder project.

At this point, the Chair sought the approval of the Committee, as provided for under Standing Order 24, to adjourn the meeting for a period of 1 hour. This would allow the Committee to discuss the report and the presentations with all of the community and partner representatives present and help to inform the Committee Members consideration of the matter.

The Committee **AGREED** to adjourn the meeting and the meeting reconvened at 12 noon.

The Chair highlighted the very useful discussion that had taken place involving community and partner representatives as it was important for everyone to talk about this very important issue. There was a commitment to work together going forward and hopefully this pathfinder project would be a turning point and it could eventually be rolled out across Highland and build hope and resilience in our communities.

Following consideration of the recommendations contained in the report, the Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the five key workstreams identified through the workshops and community engagement that took place on Monday 30 November virtually in Caithness as detailed in Appendix 1 to the report;
- ii. **AGREED** to the development of the Project Action Plan as set out in Appendix 2, and that the Action Plan will make clear how the grant funding will be allocated to the Third Sector Groups operating locally to enhance the provision that is already in place;
- iii. **AGREED** to recognise the role that “lived experience” must play as an embedded part of the Action Plan;
- iv. **AGREED** to the immediate recruitment of a Strategic Lead to oversee the Pathfinder and ensure the pathfinder work and good practice is shared and developed across other Highland Communities;
- v. **AGREED** that a follow up workshop will take place early in 2021 when the strategic lead is in place to commit to the delivery of the action plan; and
- vi. **NOTED** the excellent contribution made by the elected Members, Community and many young people during the workshops sessions.

The meeting ended at 12.05 p.m.