

**The Highland Council
Caithness Committee**

Minutes of Meeting of the **Caithness Committee** held **REMOTELY** on **Thursday, 21 January 2021** at 10.00am.

Present:

Mr R Bremner
Mr W Mackay
Mr S Mackie
Mr M Reiss

Mr K Rosie
Ms N Sinclair
Mr D MacKay

Officials in attendance:

Ms N Grant, Executive Chief Officer, Education & Learning
Mr A Macmanus, Ward Manager, Communities and Place
Ms A Donald, North Area Manager, Education & Learning
Mr S Sandecki, Head Teacher, Wick High School, Education & Learning
Mr A Webster, Principal Regeneration Officer, Development & Infrastructure
Mr T Murdison, Property Manager, Education & Learning
Mr A Puls, Planning Team Leader, Education & Learning
Ms S James-Gaukroger, Townscape Heritage Assistant, Education & Learning
Mr N Young, Senior Engineer, Education & Learning
Ms A Macrae, Committee Administrator

Also in Attendance:

Inspector A Goskirk, Police Scotland
Mr A Tait, Caithness Voluntary Group
Mr E Sinclair, Highlands & Islands Enterprise
Mr M Thomsen, Highlands & Islands Enterprise
Mr J West, Head of Culture, High Life Highland
Ms V Trelfer, HiTRANS

1. Apologies for Absence

An apology for absence was intimated on behalf of Mr A Sinclair.

2. Declarations of Interest

Item 6: Mrs N Sinclair (non-financial)

Item 8: Mr R Bremner (non-financial)

Items 7, 8 and 10: Mr K Rosie and Mrs N Sinclair (non-financial)

3. Minutes of Previous Meetings – 22 October and 11 December 2020

There had been circulated Minutes of the previous Meetings held on 22 October 2020 and 11 December 2020 (which had been approved by the Council on 17 December 2020 and 7 January 2021 respectively) which were **NOTED**.

4. Matters Arising – Action Tracker

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

The Ward Manager provided the following updates:-

- an item had been included on the agenda of the Ward Business Meeting on 15 February 2021 in relation to the information that Members wished to be included in future ASG reports;
- a meeting would be held with the Chair to discuss arrangements for a meeting of Caithness Members to consider the issues within Wards 2 and 3, and those affecting the whole area with a view to an action plan being developed as soon as possible;
- there would be consideration at the next Ward Business Meeting of the opportunity for the Council to facilitate the continuation and expansion of Thurso Community Development Trust's lunch club service throughout the area; and
- the Chair would have discussions with the Ward 2 Members in relation to the continuing support for the refurbishment of Thurso Fire Station.

The Committee **AGREED** the updates to the action tracker.

In accordance with Standing Order 9, the Committee AGREED to take item 11 on the agenda at this point.

11. Caithness Horizons Update Fios às Ùr mu Horizons Ghallaibh

There had been circulated Report No CC/06/21 dated 11 January 2021 by the Executive Chief Officer Education and Learning.

In discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- the re-branding of Caithness Horizons, and improvements being undertaken to the premises to support its reopening as outlined in the report was welcomed as a positive step forward, and thanks were conveyed to all partners involved;
- regular updates be provided to Members on the basis the Committee was the appropriate public forum for this information to be provided;
- the need to get the message out to the public through a press release and social media channels as to why the rebranding and other changes to this Caithness facility were being made to ensure it was commercially successful, and going forward the importance of information on programming and local involvement being in the public domain;
- it was important the physical signage to the premises was in place as soon as possible, and the need to liaise with BEAR Scotland in early course on this issue; and
- a key issue was that the support and involvement of the wider Caithness community would be crucial in determining the success and sustainability of the facility which would continue to showcase Caithness.

The Committee **NOTED** the:-

- i. positive progress made regarding building and other preparatory works to support the re-opening of Caithness Horizons, Thurso; and

- ii. ongoing support from Highland Council, High Life Highland and Dounreay Site Restoration Limited, on a partnership basis, with the intent to re-open the facility as soon as circumstances under the current Covid 19 pandemic and lockdown allow.

5. Police – Area Performance Summary Poileas – Geàrr-chunntas air Coileanadh Sgìreil

There had been circulated Report No CC/01/20 dated 30 December 2020 by the North Area Commander.

In discussion, Members expressed their appreciation of the hard work being undertaken behind the scenes by Police Scotland and in partnership to tackle often challenging issues in the community, and their involvement in a range of multi-agency forums. The presence of Police Scotland within the community also provided reassurance to the public.

Thereafter, Members raised the following issues:-

- Police Scotland be commended on the increased number of drink driving detections over the period, and concern was experienced in relation to the need to build on long term campaigns and continue to reinforce the message about the risks associated with this behaviour;
- in addition to local initiatives the opportunity for more national advertising campaigns in relation to drug/drink driving;
- the potential to reduce the volume of paperwork officers had to deal with in relation to vehicle thefts; and
- an update was sought and provided in relation to the impact of the restrictions imposed due to the Covid-19 pandemic on anti-social behaviour in the area, and an assurance was provided that Police Scotland had and would use their powers to take action where necessary.

The Committee **NOTED** progress made against the objectives set within the Highland and Islands Local Policing Plan 2020 – 23, Year 1.

6. Wick Area School Group Overview Foir-shealladh Buidheann Sgoiltean Co-cheangailte Sgìre Inbhir Ùige

Declaration of Interest: Ms N Sinclair declared a non-financial interest in this item on the grounds that family members attended Newton Park Primary School and Nursery in Wick, 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 Report No CC/02/21 dated 22 December 2020 by the Executive Chief Officer Care and Learning.

The North Area Manager provided a verbal update on the arrangements for remote Learning and Childcare in Caithness during the current Covid-19 lockdown period. Key points included that a number of schools remained open to provide childcare for key workers and vulnerable pupils, overseen by a skeleton staff. Those pupils identified by

schools and partners as vulnerable were prioritised for in school support. Lunch and transport arrangements continued as required and direct payments and supermarket vouchers were being provided to families who were eligible for free school meals and for accessing online learning. She also provided a summary of the remote learning being delivered, advising that clear guidance had been shared with all Headteachers and parents and carers. A balance of live learning and independent activity was being delivered, with regular live engagement each week for every learner and staff were monitoring the health and wellbeing of pupils. Expectations on the amount of remote learning and how it was presented had to be manageable for pupils, parents and staff. She also outlined the support being provided to those who required help with devices or connectivity. Positive feedback was being received from Head Teachers during the second lockdown period, staff were more confident with the technology, engagement was good, and those who were not engaging had regular communication and support from staff in their schools.

The Head Teacher, Wick High School, reported that 37 key worker and vulnerable pupils were attending the School within the Covid-19 risk assessment procedures and supported by a skeleton staff. Attendance and engagement with remote learning was good, and a priority was the health and wellbeing of pupils, families and staff. In relation to SQA qualifications, the advice was that information for assessments could not be collected by remote learning as it was not possible to replicate exam conditions. In addition, there were pupils who were entitled to additional support needs that could not be provided remotely at home, raising questions about equity for all and quality assurance procedures. At present the School was continuing with the essential coursework and further communication was awaited from the SQA. On return from lockdown, the focus would be on recovery and the attainment gap, developing strategies to support those pupils most affected by the lockdown and collecting evidence for SQA qualifications.

The Executive Chief Officer Education & Learning reported that the latest position nationally was the potential for some young people at key transitions stages to return after the February break and discussion around the mass testing for school staff and how this would be rolled out. In terms of the quality assurance of remote learning, HMIE were keen to engage with schools in the area in relation to good practice, the experience of parents, and areas of potential improvement, and reports would be brought back to the Education Committee on this matter. The Executive Chief Officer also provided a detailed update on the Additional Support Needs (ASN) Transformation, including the stage intervention approach, progress with engagement activities, and the review of PSA pathways.

In discussion, Members raised the following points:-

- clarification was sought and provided on the impact of lockdown on attainment and specifically the level of information that would be available to measure attainment following the return to school;
- pride was expressed at the improvements which had been achieved and sustained in attainment in Wick High School and the pupils and staff were commended for their hard work which was exemplified in the positive destination figures detailed in the report;
- an explanation was sought and provided on the figures shown for unknown destinations. There had been a reduction in the figures over the period 2016/17 to 2018/19 due to the action taken to better track leaver destinations. The ECO,

Education and Learning confirmed the format of future reports would be reviewed so that Members were provided with more up to date information;

- clarification was sought and provided as to how the additional ASN/PSA resource referred to in the report had been determined and an update was provided on the ongoing review of the assessment of need as part of the ASN improvement strategy;
- clarification was sought and provided on the level of provision of chrome books across all schools in the area and for vulnerable pupils and on supporting active learning in the lower primaries;
- the potential to reduce bureaucracy and volume of paperwork to free up officer and staff time and to reduce stress particularly at the current time, specific reference being made to that associated with teacher interviews, school plans; and
- the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on leavers, noting that more pupils were staying on at school and that it was too early to assess the impact on senior pupils pursuing positive destinations outwith the area.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the content of the report and the verbal update provided on education in Caithness during the current Covid-19 lockdown period.

7. Town Centre Fund Maoin Meadhan a' Bhaile

Declarations of Interest – Mr K Rosie as a Trustee of the Thurso Community Development Trust and Mrs N Sinclair as Director of Wick's Heart declared non-financial interests in this item but, having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct, concluded that their interests did not preclude their involvement in the discussion.

There had been circulated Report No CC/03/21 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure and Environment.

In discussion, Members commended the officers for the progress made to the Town Centre Fund projects. Members also welcomed the proposal to enhance CCTV provision in Wick and Thurso, commenting this was supported by the local community and considered essential to protecting current and future investments in the town and public protection.

The Committee:-

- i. **AGREED** the proposed additional Town Centre Fund expenditure for 126 High Street, Wick; and
- ii. **AGREED** that a Special Committee Meeting be held on 19 February 2021 to consider Council led projects to benefit from the remaining Town Centre Fund investment.

8. Covid-19 Response Update: Caithness Voluntary Group / Caithness Community Partnership Fios às Ùr mu Fhreagairt Covid-19: Buidheann Saor-thoileach Ghallaibh

Declarations of Interest – Mr K Rosie as a Trustee of the Thurso Community Development Trust and Mrs N Sinclair as Director of Wick's Heart declared non-financial interests in this item but, having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs

5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct, concluded that their interests did not preclude their involvement in the discussion.

Mr Allan Tait, Caithness Voluntary Group (CVG) provided an update on this item during which he advised that resilience meetings would continue to be held on a fortnightly basis. CVG had contacted the groups who had previously been working in the community, all of which had confirmed they would provide support in the current lockdown. Halkirk Village Committee were now providing support to their community in the form of meals for the elderly, lunch packs for school children and help with shopping. There was concern about the absence of food supplies from the Scottish Government to people shielding in the current lockdown and the pressure this was placing on community groups, and representations were being made in this regard. CFINE was supplying food supplies and sanitary products to a range of organisations in the area. Caithness Foodbank had confirmed they were well stocked and able to assist the community groups, and the Mental Health Action Group was making progress developing their mental health hub. A number of organisations including CVG had been participating in the Connecting Scotland project which involved the provision of tablets and chrome books to young families, older people and those shielding who were not previously online. CVG had issued 100 devices in the last six months and requests had been received for 72 more devices. Thurso Community Development Trust were also involved in this project. He thanked all parties for the funding received for transport to allow people to attend their vaccine appointments. In conclusion, Mr Tait advised that while these continued to be challenging times, the community had pulled together and was working well with statutory partners to support as many people as possible.

Mr Eann Sinclair and Mr Martin Thomsen, both Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE), provided an update on behalf of Caithness Community Partnership and advised that focus over the next period would be on delivering funding to communities and business. HIE had moved from administering the Scottish Government's Supporting Communities Fund which had been successful in the area, to administering the successor programme, the Scottish Government's Community Recovery Fund and three substantial approvals had been made to Home Start Caithness, Northlands Creative Glass and Lybster, Latheron, and Lyth Community Development Company. The Fund remained open until 12 February 2021 and information was provided on the application process. Take up had not been to the same extent as the previous Fund for a number of reasons, however the number of applications was expected to increase. An update was also provided in the business resilience support being provided through a range of funds.

In discussion, Members expressed conveyed thanks to the community and officers for the ongoing resilience work being undertaken in Caithness and raised the following issues:-

- the resilience effort by the community in Caithness had been outstanding and excellent links and networks had been established as a result of the resilience effort in the area and there was an opportunity to build on this work after the pandemic;
- the response had been genuinely driven by the community from the ground up and was a model of localism that should apply across all the Council's services;
- the potential to extend the Community Recovery Fund's deadline for applications given that the current lockdown would delay the recovery process, potentially until Easter. It was confirmed that representations had been made to the Scottish

Government on this matter and that officers were being as flexible as possible within the current structure of the Fund. The case was to be made to the Scottish Government about extending deadlines and CVG would continue to coordinate partnership bids into the Fund.

The Committee **NOTED** the update.

**9. Wick: Pulteneytown Conservation Area: Appraisal and Management Plan
Inbhir Ùige: Sgìre Glèidhteachais Pulteneytown: Measadh is Plana Stiùiridh**

There had been circulated separately in Booklet A Report No CC/04/21 dated 7 December 2020 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure and Environment.

In discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- confirmation was sought and provided that the potential to extend the Conservation Area around Huddart Street would be considered further;
- clarification was sought and provided on the timescales for undertaking an appraisal and management plan for the conservation area in Thurso. It was confirmed that an initial assessment has been conducted and there would be consultation with local Members within the next few months;
- the report highlighted how special and unique the Pulteneytown Conservation Area was and there was a need consider how to better promote the area; and
- the potential was to extend the consultation period beyond the proposed six-week period depending on the level of response in the lockdown period.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the content and findings of the Wick: Pulteneytown Conservation Area Appraisal (CAA);
- ii. **NOTED** the content, findings and recommendations of the Wick: Pulteneytown Conservation Area Management Plan (CAMP); and
- iii. **APPROVED** both the CAA and CAMP for a minimum six-week public consultation, subject to there being flexibility to extend the consultation period if required.

**10. Wick and Thurso Active Travel Plans
Planaichean Siubhal Gníomhach Inbhir Ùige is Inbhir Theòrsa**

Declarations of Interest – Mr K Rosie as a Trustee of the Thurso Community Development Trust and Mrs N Sinclair as Director of Wick’s Heart declared non-financial interests in this item but, having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors’ Code of Conduct, concluded that their interests did not preclude their involvement in the discussion.

There had been circulated Report No CC/05/21 dated 15 December 2020 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure and Environment.

In discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- clarification was sought and provided on the next steps in relation to stakeholder discussions and sense checks to ensure local knowledge was taken into account;
- specific concern was expressed at the proposal for a quiet street/low traffic neighbourhood at Sir Archibald Road, Thurso on the basis that it was a no through road on which residential and commercial premises were located;
- confirmation was sought and provided that there would be full consultation with taxi operators and retailers in relation to the proposals for Princes Street, Thurso;
- concern at any proposal to widen the pathway along the section of Ormlie Road subject to the national speed limit if it would reduce the width of the road on safety grounds;
- the potential for any signage in Ward 2 to be in one language only on the basis it was suggested this was the preference of the majority of the public locally; and
- consideration of the report be deferred to allow for further discussions to be held between Members and officers on the detail of the proposals and for clarity to be provided on the Council's policy in relation to the inclusion of Gaelic on Council signage.

Following discussion, the Committee **AGREED** to defer consideration of this item to the Special Meeting to be held on 19 February 2021.

The meeting ended at 1:00pm.

**The Highland Council
Caithness Committee**

Minutes of Special Meeting of the **Caithness Committee** held **REMOTELY** on **Friday, 19 February 2021** at 10.00am.

Present:

Mr R Bremner
Mr D Mackay
Mr W Mackay
Mr S Mackie

Mr M Reiss
Mr K Rosie
Ms N Sinclair
Mr A Sinclair

Officials in attendance:

Ms N Grant, Executive Chief Officer, Education & Learning
Mr A Macmanus, Ward Manager, Communities and Place
Mr A Webster, Principal Regeneration Officer, Development & Infrastructure
Mr N Young, Senior Engineer, Education & Learning
Mr R Pope, Policy and Programmes Manager, Development & Infrastructure
Ms A Macrae, Committee Administrator , Performance and Governance

Also in Attendance:

Ms V Trelfer, HiTRANS
Ms J Allan, ARUP
Mr G Diamond, ARUP

1. Apologies for Absence

There were no apologies for absence.

2. Declarations of Interest

Items 3 and 4: Mr K Rosie and Mrs N Sinclair (non-financial)

**3. Town Centre Fund
Maoin Meadhan a' Bhaile**

Declarations of Interest – Mr K Rosie as a Trustee of the Thurso Community Development Trust and Mrs N Sinclair as Director of Wick Development Trust declared non-financial interests in this item but, having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct, concluded that their interests did not preclude their involvement in the discussion.

There had been circulated Report No CC/07/21 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure and Environment.

In discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- the Town Centre Fund investment would contribute to revitalising town centres in Caithness and the Principal Regeneration Officer be thanked for his work, particularly in relation to funding;

- in respect of Thurso, the sum of £6,384 be taken from the approved £15,000 wayfinding budget and supplemented by the residual balance of the 2020/21 Town Centre Fund allocation (£2,379) in order to allow the market stall proposal to proceed, leaving £8,616 for the refurbishment of the Precinct clock;
- the role of the community and the Council in bringing forward the proposals be recognised;
- it was anticipated the funding would be recurring and going forward there was an excellent opportunity to take a more strategic approach and work flexibly in partnership with other community stakeholders in the area to effect positive change;
- the CCTV project would have wider impacts than the initial investment as it would protect future larger infrastructure projects from vandalism and contribute to public safety; and
- confirmation was sought and provided that it was for the Council to take a sensible and practical approach in determining what constituted the town centre in relation to funding opportunities.

The Committee:-

- AGREED** to invest £16,100 in CCTV infrastructure in Wick;
- AGREED** to invest £25,625 in CCTV infrastructure in Thurso; and
- AGREED** that in respect of Thurso, the sum of £6,384 be taken from the approved £15,000 wayfinding budget and supplemented by the residual balance of the 2020/21 TCF allocation (£2,379) in order to allow the market stall proposal to proceed, leaving £8,616 for the refurbishment of the Precinct clock.

4. Wick and Thurso Active Travel Plans Planaichean Siubhal Gnìomhach Inbhir Ùige is Inbhir Theòrsa

Declarations of Interest – Mr K Rosie as a Trustee of the Thurso Community Development Trust and Mrs N Sinclair as Director of Wick Development Trust declared non-financial interests in this item but, having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors’ Code of Conduct, concluded that their interests did not preclude their involvement in the discussion.

There had been re-circulated Report No CC/05/21 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure and Environment.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- the need for more regular consultation with local Members and the Committee going forward as the Plan was implemented to ensure there was community support for specific proposals;
- an update on this item be provided to the Committee on a regular basis as a standing item;
- further information was sought and provided in relation to the proposed active travel forums;
- the level of public engagement in response to the consultation was welcomed, particularly given the challenges in undertaking a consultation during the Covid-19 pandemic;

- the potential for active travel to link in with local projects aimed at improving mental health and wellbeing in the area;
- the reality of budgetary constraints in terms of balancing the need to invest in improving the condition of the road network and delivering active travel projects;
- the social value and mental health and wellbeing benefits associated with active travel would generate savings across the board;
- the need to better communicate to the public what was involved in active travel and the outcomes the Plan intended to achieve;
- active travel had featured relatively high up the rankings in relation to a community survey undertaken by the Thurso Community Development Trust, and there was an expectation projects would be delivered in the area;
- the importance of towns being made as accessible as possible was key to attracting inward investment to the area;
- the need to be smart and flexible in terms of maximising the available funding to deliver active travel projects and to be more strategic in terms of linking in with other projects and funding opportunities in the area;
- a proposal that further local sense-checking and discussion be undertaken by ward members, supported by officers, as funding became available to implement specific proposals. These proposals were considered to be fluid and adaptable to changing circumstances; and
- additionally, the Caithness Area Chair and Vice-Chairs would take responsibility for investigating funding opportunities and driving the implementation of the Plan to improve active travel options in the County.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the contents of the report, in particular the recent policies that identify walking, wheeling and cycling at the top of the sustainable transport hierarchy;
- ii. **APPROVED** the use of the Wick and Thurso Active Travel Masterplans as material consideration when dealing with development proposals and as supporting documents for funding bids;
- iii. **AGREED** to delegate authority to the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure and Environment to liaise with other bodies, including Transport Scotland, with a view to identifying funding opportunities and a delivery programme to target early improvements across the Wick and Thurso active travel network; and
- iv. **AGREED** that further local sense-checking and discussion be undertaken by ward members, supported by officers, as funding becomes available to implement specific proposals. These proposals are considered fluid and adaptable to changing circumstances. Additionally, the Caithness Area Chair and Vice-Chairs will take responsibility for investigating funding opportunities and driving implementation of the Plan to improve active travel options in the County.

5. **Housing Revenue Account: Garage Rents 2021/2022** **Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais: Màil Gharaidsean 2021/22**

There had been circulated Report No CC/08/21 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

- options to rationalise and change the use of some garages and garage sites were being considered and piloted in the area, including off-street parking, storage units and other uses;

- the need to address the level of garage voids and the potential to consider demolition as part of the range of options being discussed at the monthly housing meetings;
- confirmation was sought and provided that the Principal Housing Officer would respond directly to Mr S Mackie on the comparison between Council and housing association garage rents in the area; and
- the proposed increase in the rents represented a few pence per week.

The Committee **AGREED** that a 2% increase be applied to Caithness Garages and Garage Sites in 2021/22.

The meeting ended at 11.05am.