

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Easter Ross Area Committee** held remotely on Thursday, 17 February 2022, 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

Officials in Attendance:

Mark Rodgers, Executive Chief Officer - Property & Housing
Helen Ross, Senior Ward Manager, CSER
Colin Howell, Head of Infrastructure
Iain Moncrieff, Roads Operations Manager
Rory MacLeod, Housing Manager
Alan Webster, Regeneration Team Leader
Fiona Cameron, LEADER Programme Manager
Ian Graham, Road Safety Officer
Fiona MacBain, Committee Administrator

Also in Attendance:

Inspector Chris Murray, 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.**

Preliminaries

At the request of the Chair, the Committee **AGREED** to consider Item 5 (Placed Based Investment Programme) and Item 7 (Area Roads Capital Programme 2022-23) immediately after Item 3. This was to allow officers to present at another meeting that was taking place that day.

1. Apologies for Absence Leisgeulan

Apologies were submitted on behalf of Ms Carolyn Wilson.

2. Declarations of Interest Foillseachaidhean Com-pàirt

Mr D Louden – Item 5

3. Police – Area Performance Summary Report Poileas – Geàrr-Aithisg Coileanadh Sgìreil

There had been circulated Report No ERA/01/22 dated 3 February 2022 by Chief Inspector Kevin MacLeod, (North Highland Area Command).

During discussion, the following issues were considered:

- the overall reduction in vandalism was welcomed, although concern was expressed at the damage being done to the Rose Garden public toilets. It was felt the multi-agency approach being taken to tackle this was not adequately covered in the report. A specific police officer had been allocated to tackling the situation and would be invited to ward business meetings to fully explain actions being undertaken and work being done across wards 6 & 7;
- information was sought on whether the high numbers of missing Looked After children were reflected in national figures, and it was confirmed this was the case and that the figures included Looked After teenagers who returned home after their official curfew and who had to be immediately reported as missing, even though they might only be late home;
- information was sought on the reported increase in hate crimes, but this was not available at the meeting;
- although there had been a reduction in the reporting of incidents of supplying drugs, this was not reflected in the number of people using drugs, and was of concern in certain communities;
- work should be undertaken with Corporate Communications to help publicise Operation Close Pass, which related to changes to the Highway Code and improved safety measures for cyclists;
- Cyber-crime was of concern and was dealt with by a specialist unit based in Glasgow; and
- information was sought and provided on officer numbers at various local police stations.

The Committee:

- i. **NOTED** progress made against the objectives set within the Highland Local Policing Plan 2020-2023 Year 2, attached as Annex A to this report, for the period covering 01 April 2021 - 31 December 2021;
- ii. **AGREED** to invite the new police officer who covered Easter Ross wards to Ward Business Meetings for Wards 6&7; and
- iii. **AGREED** to discuss outwith the meeting with Corporate Communications how to best publicise Operation Close Pass.

4. **Highland Coastal Communities Fund – Assessment of Applications** **Maoin Coimhearsnachdan Cladaich na Gàidhealtachd – Measadh Iarrtasan**

There had been circulated Report No ERA/02/22 dated 1 February 2022 by the Executive Chief Officer, Infrastructure, Environment & Economy.

The Committee **APPROVED** the application from Saltburn & Westwood Community Council to undertaken Saltburn Beach Access Improvements, subject to conditions on the resolution of land ownership or control to the satisfaction of the HCCF team/internal audit, and the provision of a suitable maintenance plan.

5. **Placed Based Investment Programme** **Prògram Tasgaidh Stèidhichte air Àite**

Declaration of Interest: Mr D Loudon declared an interest in this item as a Director & Company Secretary of Tain Heritage Trust, which was a potential beneficiary from the Place Based Investment Programme, and he left the meeting for the duration of this item.

There had been circulated Report No ERA/03/22 dated 10 February 2022 by the Executive Chief Officer, Infrastructure, Environment & Economy.

A key requirement of the decision making process agreed by the Economy and Infrastructure Committee was that Members took into account the views of the community partnerships when allocating the place-based funding and the Ward Manager confirmed that the projects were considered to align with and contribute to the aims of the Community Planning Partnership, with reference to creating vibrant local economies, promoting tourism, increasing mental health and wellbeing, and developing strong and safe communities.

During discussion, the following issues were considered:

- the 50:50 split of the funds between Wards 6 & 7 was confirmed;
- the projects for Ward 6 were welcomed, and updates were sought and provided on various schemes, including Shore Road laybys and Evanton public toilets. It was hoped charging points could be added to a second phase of the Evanton toilet project;
- Ward 7 Members voiced support for the Tain picture house project but felt, on balance, that these funds would be better used for the Streetscape project, with attention drawn to the benefits to the wider public of the pavement improvements. It was suggested that a more detailed breakdown of the anticipated costs of the Picture House refurbishment was required before any future funding could be allocated; and
- attention was drawn to the urgent requirement for additional roads funding for Easter Ross.

The Committee:

- i. **AGREED** to investing £2,887.64 in the TCF Shore Road project, Invergordon;
- ii. **AGREED** to investing £30,000 in CCTV infrastructure in Alness town centre;
- iii. **AGREED** to investing £35,000 in CCTV infrastructure in Invergordon town centre;
- iv. **AGREED** to investing £40,000 in new public convenience provision in Evanton;
- v. **AGREED** to investing £14,948 in Teandallon Play Area, Evanton;
- vi. **AGREED** to holding £17,319.36 as contingency for Ward 6 projects;
- vii. **NOTED** the two proposals for Tain and **AGREED** the Tain Streetscape project should benefit from Place Based Investment Programme investment of £140,000;
- viii. **GRANTED** delegated authority to the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment & Economy in consultation with the Area Committee Chair to allocate any uncommitted PBIP grant to approved PBIP beneficiaries in the event that additional investment is required; and

- ix. **AGREED** that the Council write to the Scottish Government to request permission to carry over the value of any uncommitted PBIP grant into 2022/23.

6. Highland Council Place Based Funds Maoinean Chomhairle na Gàidhealtachd Stèidhichte air Àite

There had been circulated Report No ERA/04/22 dated 31 January 2022 by the Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place

The Ward Manager highlighted section 4.7 of the report which contained a missing sentence and confirmed that the proposed £3,000 allocation for Alness Toilets in the Cromarty Firth ward met the criteria and aims of the fund.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:

- Support was voiced for the use of any additional funds being allocated to the purchase of two battery and solar powered Speed Indicator Devices, although it was asked that alternatives also be investigated and details provided to Members. Speed indicators near pedestrian crossings would be particularly useful; and
- it was hoped the play park projects would be fulfilled as quickly as possible and the need for a further design process was queried given the limited options for placing the equipment. Members should be kept updated on timescales to allow them to respond to queries.

The Committee **APPROVED** the proposed applications and funding allocations and **AGREED** to investigate the purchase of two Speed Indicator Devices, or similar alternative.

7. Area Roads Capital Programme 2022-23 Prògram Calpa Rathaidean Sgìreil 2022-23

There had been circulated Report No ERA/05/22 dated 11 January 2022 by the Executive Chief Officer, Infrastructure, Environment & Economy.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:

- concern was expressed about various roads projects in Tain and Easter Ross which had not been completed and appeared to have been removed from the list of planned projects. Members asked for more regular updates on local projects to enable them to respond to queries from the public and it was suggested the Council's CRM system should be investigated as a possible means of achieving this;
- attention was drawn to the poor state of repair of many roads in the area, several with significant potholes, and Members felt strongly that the Council roads allocation to the Cromarty Firth and Tain & Easter Ross wards was unfair, with reference being made to significant road repair work being undertaken in Wester Ross in comparison. The Area Roads Officer and his team were thanked for their dedication and hard work in the face of a challenging budget situation. Members made it clear the problem lay with lack of resources from the Council and asked that a letter be sent to the Council

Leader and Budget Leader by the end of the day to ensure it could be shared prior to the Redesign Board on 18 February 2022 at which the Roads Project Brief was being approved;

- it was clarified that the verges on the back road from Dingwall to Evanton were due to be repaired from a different budget;
- appreciation was expressed for the projects that had been undertaken and information sought on others that had not been; and
- assurance was sought and provided that drainage and verge improvements were also considered when tarring projects were being undertaken in a particular area.

In response to comments, attention was drawn to the Roads Project Brief that was being considered the following day by the Redesign Board, and would consider the budget allocation across the Highlands, as well as communication and effective scheduling. In relation to the Easter Ross roads allocation, it was explained that the capital works requested by Members that were undertaken in 2020-21 had exceeded the 2020-21 budget and resulted in less funding being available in 2021-22. Members asked that the current figures for this year's roads capital budget be provided to them outwith the meeting, including budget allocations, expenditure to date and anticipated corresponding adjustment of the budget into next financial year. A brief summary of progress with various local projects was provided and it was confirmed that money allocated to an area would remain in that area.

The Committee:

- APPROVED** the proposed 2022/23 Area Roads Capital Programme for Easter Ross Area;
- AGREED** to thank the Area Roads team for their dedication and hard work in the face of a challenging budget situation;
- AGREED** to write to the Council Leader and Budget Leader to draw attention to the need to increase the Roads budget for Easter Ross. This should be done by 17 February 2022 to allow the letter to be shared at the Redesign Board on 18 February, when the Roads Project was being considered;
- AGREED** to investigate a means of improving communication with the public on progress with roads projects, this investigation to consider the use of the CRM system; and
- AGREED** to provide Committee Members, outwith the meeting, the current figures for this year's roads capital budget, to include budget allocations, expenditure to date and anticipated corresponding adjustment of the budget into next financial year.

8. Bridgend Primary School, Alness – Traffic Calming on Caplich Road and Ardross Road
Bun-Sgoil Cheann na Drochaide, Alanais – Socrachadh Trafaig air Rathad na Caplaich agus Rathad Àird Rois

There had been circulated Report No ERA/06/22 dated 28 January 2022 by the Executive Chief Officer, Infrastructure, Environment & Economy.

The Committee:

- i. **NOTED** the background to the proposed traffic calming measures and the representations received;
- ii. **APPROVED** the construction of the associated traffic calming; and
- iii. **NOTED** the intention to monitor the area after the construction including commissioning a traffic survey at the junction of Caplich Road/Perrins Road to determine the effectiveness of the new road layout and traffic calming measures.

9. Housing Performance Report Aithisg Choileanaidh Taigheadais

There is circulated Report No ERA/07/22 dated 3 February 2022 by the Executive Chief Officer, Housing and Property.

During discussion, the following issues were considered:

- Members praised the area housing staff for their hard work, responsiveness to queries, and support offered to vulnerable clients, which was much appreciated;
- it was hoped the excellent work undertaken to reduce rent arrears would continue and improve the situation even further;
- it was disappointing that targets for non-emergency repairs in Tain and Easter Ross were not being met. Non-emergency repairs had been significantly affected by the Covid crisis;
- information was sought on responsibility for maintaining pavements and car parks in housing estates, and on issues previously raised under the Housing Revenue Account. Staff from repairs and maintenance would be asked to attend ward business meetings to review works required; and
- Mrs P Munro asked that she be contacted by housing staff in relation to the storage of foodbank items at Milnafua.

The Committee:

- i. **NOTED** the information provided on housing performance in the period 1 April 2021 to 31 December 2021;
- ii. **AGREED** to thank the Housing team for their hard work and responsiveness; and
- iii. **AGREED** to ask Housing staff to contact Mrs P Munro in relation to the storage of foodbank items at Milnafua.

10. Garage Rents Màil Gharaidsean

There had been circulated Report No ERA/08/22 dated 3 February 2022 by the Executive Chief Officer, Housing and Property.

A 1% increase was recommended, in line with the increase to Council house rent, and discussion ensued on whether to accept this recommendation, or freeze the rents at their current level, particularly given the small size and poor

state of repair of some of the garages. Further issues raised included the following:

- a future report was required on the viability of the garage stock, along with an options appraisal for their use and continuity;
- the HRA would not be a suitable source of funding for this and an asset transfer to facilitate the use of external funding might be required;
- the environmental budget was not used for garage improvements;
- a 1% increase only represented approximately £1.5k of income, minus the administrative costs; and
- a Highland-wide policy on garages might be required.

The Committee **AGREED** to retain the status quo for the garage rents, namely a rent freeze, giving due consideration to bringing back a report as soon as possible on the viability of garage stock and an options appraisal for their use and continuity.

11. Invergordon Common Good Fund Maoin Math Coitcheann Inbhir Ghòrdain

There had been circulated Report No ERA/09/22 dated 8 February 2022 by the Executive Chief Officer, Resources and Finance and Executive Chief Officer, Community and Place.

A brief summary was provided of the situation with the Bouchardon Bust and Invergordon Town Hall, with particular reference to the high maintenance costs of the hall, which made it more of a liability than an asset. It was generally considered preferable to sell the hall, even if only for a nominal sum, to enable the building to be preserved for the future, the Council having no budget to do anything other than mothball it. Assurance was sought that the Town Hall belonged to the Common Good Fund and not the Highland Council. It was suggested that it would be preferable for any proceeds from the sale of the Bust to be used to form a fund, such as a common good fund, to which local groups could apply for the benefit of the local community;

The Committee:

- i. **NOTED** the Invergordon Common Good Fund Annual Report for 2020/22;
- ii. **NOTED** the position of the Invergordon Common Good Fund, as shown in the 2021 Quarter 3 monitoring statement;
- iii. **APPROVED** the proposed budget for 2022/23; and
- iv. **AGREED**:
 - a. to commence work on an options appraisal and outline business case for a use of any seedcorn money returned from the sale of the Bouchardon Bust, i.e. setting up of an Invergordon common good fund which would generate substantial income for the community to use for local projects for the future; and
 - * b. **TO RECOMMEND** to Highland Council to dispose of Invergordon Town Hall by sale, after considerable years of attempting to bring it into viable use to provide sufficient income for its continued use.

12. Tain Common Good Fund Maoin Math Coitcheann Bhaile Dhubhthaich

There had been circulated Report No ERA/10/22 dated 3 February 2022 by the Executive Chief Officer, Resources and Finance and Executive Chief Officer, Community and Place.

The Ward Manager highlighted the Tain Golf Club Road project for which a budget of £20,000 had been set aside from reserves to carry out repairs, but for which there had been a query raised relating to land ownership. An investigation had been undertaken and although the land on which the works was required was in third party ownership, there were clear benefits from the project for the wider public and for the land owned by the common good fund.

Although not included in the report, Mr Louden expressed concern about how land at Blarliath had come to be in the ownership of the Highland Council rather than the Common Good Fund and he asked that this issue be included as a standing item on ward business meetings and included as a section on the Common Good monitoring reports, accepting that it would be some time before there was sufficient staff resource to carry out this work.

The Committee:

- i. **NOTED** the Tain Common Good Fund Annual Report for 2020/21;
- ii. **NOTED** the position of the Tain Common Good Fund, as shown in the 2021 Quarter 3 monitoring statement;
- iii. **APPROVED** the proposed budget for 2022/23; and
- iv. **AGREED** to have Blarliath land ownership as a standing item on ward business meetings and included as a section on the Common Good monitoring reports, accepting that it would be some time before there was sufficient staff resource to carry out this work.

13. Minutes Geàrr-chunntas

There had been circulated and were **NOTED** Minutes of Meeting of the Easter Ross Area Committee held on 18 November 2021.

The meeting ended at 1.20pm