

**The Highland Council
Caithness Committee**

**Minutes of Meeting of the Caithness Committee held REMOTELY on Monday 6
February 2023 at 10.00am.**

Present:

Mr R Bremner
Mr R Gunn
Mr A Jarvie
Mr W Mackay

Ms J McEwan
Mr M Reiss
Mr K Rosie

Officials in attendance:

Ms H Ross, Senior Ward Manager, Communities and Place
Mr M Sutherland, Ward Manager, Communities and Place
Ms J Sutherland, Roads Operations Manager, Infrastructure, Environment and Economy
Ms S Lamb, Project Officer (Community Regeneration), Infrastructure, Environment and Economy
Ms D Swanson, Project Officer (Wick PSO), Infrastructure, Environment and Economy
Mr J Henderson, Policy Assistant, Housing & Property
Ms M Ross, Principal Housing Officer, Housing & Property
Ms S Murdoch, Common Good Fund Officer, Performance and Governance
Ms J MacLennan, Principal Administrator, Performance and Governance

Also in attendance:

Inspector S Mezals, Police Scotland
Sergeant R Ross, Police Scotland
Station Commander P Farrell, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service
Mr P Faccenda, Focus North

Mr R Gunn in the Chair

**1. Apologies for Absence
Leisgeulan**

An apology for absence was intimated on behalf of Mr S Mackie.

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

Items 6 & 9: Mr R Bremner (Transparency Statements)
Item 7: Mr K Rosie and Mr M Reiss (Declarations of Interest)

**3. Minutes
Geàrr-chunntas**

There was circulated for noting Minutes of the Caithness Committee held on 22 August 2022, which were approved by the Council on 22 September 2022.

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

There had been circulated Report No CC/01/23 by the North Area Commander.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- Police Scotland were thanked for the excellent work undertaken by officers in Caithness and the overall reduction in crime in the area was welcomed;
- clarification was sought and provided that the Police were not aware of any increase in road traffic collisions in Caithness due to the condition of the roads;
- concern at the difficulties experienced in contacting the Service by telephone. It was confirmed any specific issues Members had would be investigated. Reference was also made to the 'contact us' section on Police Scotland's website as an additional means of reporting issues;
- the drain on Police resources due to the increase in the number of 'concern for persons' calls and having to undertake duties that were not within their remit;
- concern at continuing issues with driver behaviour in the area and an update was sought and provided on the ongoing action to reduce the number of road traffic offences;
- the contribution of local Police officers to the work of the Caithness Drug and Alcohol Partnership was acknowledged. and it was hoped the current level of Police support would continue to help deliver effective education and prevention measures;
- the need to review staffing levels and opening hours at Police stations in Caithness, particularly in towns. It was confirmed there was an ongoing national review of local command areas and further information would be sought on the opportunity for Members to feed into the review. Members comments would also be fed back to the Service's Management Team;
- it would be helpful for the Police to attend community council meetings in the area in person while acknowledging the pressures the Service was under in terms of its resources; and
- a continued effective relationship in terms of Police Scotland's attendance at the quarterly meetings of the Association of Caithness Community Councils provided a good compromise.

The Committee **NOTED** the 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.

5. Scottish Fire and Rescue Local Performance Report Aithisg Dèanadais Ionadail Seirbheis Smàlaidh is Teasairginn na h-Alba

There had been circulated Report No CC/02/23 by the Local Senior Officer for Highland.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- the Committee's condolences be conveyed to the family and colleagues of Scottish Fire and Rescue Service's firefighter Barry Martin. His loss served as a tragic reminder of the dangers firefighters faced in the course of their duties;

- the Service be thanked for all the excellent work undertaken in Caithness;
- the positive update on recruitment, staffing levels and availability at Thurso was encouraging and was welcomed; and
- an update was sought and provided on the uptake in relation to the interlinked fire alarms in the area and the advice and assistance the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service could provide to the public.

The Committee **NOTED** the Area Performance Report.

6. **Focus North Partnership - Presentation** **Com-pàirteachas Fòcas a' Chinn a Tuath – Taisbeanadh**

Mr R Bremner made a Transparency Statement in respect of this item in his capacity as Chair of the Focus North Partnership and Chair of the Wick John O'Groats Airport Consultative Committee. However, having applied the objective test, he did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

There was a short presentation by Peter Faccenda, Focus North Partnership Manager. A paper was circulated in connection with this item.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- the review and rebranding of the Focus North Partnership and the opportunities highlighted in the presentation be endorsed as being a positive change of direction and approach;
- the scale and level of imminent development in the area was exciting and added validity to the opportunity for Caithness to be a leader in the transformation to a low carbon and circular economy;
- there was an opportunity to define and develop what was meant by community benefit and improve the opportunities and leverage in relation to renewable energies including through the changes to the National Planning Framework;
- the importance of improving and expanding relationships with external stakeholders;
- confirmation was sought and provided that Partnership was focused on the opportunities through the onshore wind sector. It was suggested that a piece of work was required to better understand that sector and the opportunities to attract significant investment and create employment;
- confirmation was sought that the Partnership was connected into Opportunity Cromarty Firth and the significant opportunities and benefits to the area this would bring; and
- reference to the fluidity of the position and ongoing work in relation to the Wick Public Service Obligation and the need for a pragmatic approach to be taken.

The Committee:

- i. **NOTED** the recent review and rebranding of the Focus North Partnership; and
- ii. **AGREED** to support the Focus North Masterplan and structure, and the Council's role in the Partnership

**7. Community Regeneration Funding – Assessment of Applications
Maoineachadh Ath-nuadhachadh Coimhearsnachd – Measadh Iarrtasan**

Declaration of Interest:-

Mr K Rosie declared an interest in part of this item as a member of Reay Golf Club. He took no part in the discussion or determination of the application for funding submitted by Reay Golf Club.

Mr M Reiss declared an interest in part of this item as a Director of the Caithness Mental Health Support Group. He took no part in the discussion or determination of the application for funding submitted by the Caithness Mental Health Support Group.

There had been circulated Report No CC/03/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy.

A verbal update was provided to Members in relation to project HCCF221 – Wick Toilets for an uplift of funding due to cost increases creating a shortfall in the funds available to deliver the project. Thereafter, it was confirmed that the total value of grant requests was £565,612 and the total available funding was £552,010.

During discussion, it was confirmed that applicants were asked for costs to be based on recent accurate quotes and this was assessed under the value for money criteria. Officers and Members were commended on the work and equitable approach being taken in relation to the applications and the relevant criteria. The variety of applications received was highlighted and the range of groups involved commended on the amount of work to be undertaken. It was suggested that applicants who may be unsuccessful be encouraged to re-apply to the next round of funding with more supporting evidence.

Following discussion on each application, the Committee:-

- i **APPROVED** all of the applications, with the exception of Projects 1034 (Thurso Community Cafe) and 1073 (Reay Golf Club), subject to conditions; and
- ii **AGREED** the remaining balance of area funds be allocated as an uplift of funding to project HCCF221 – Wick Toilets.

**8. Area Roads Capital Programme 2023/24
Prògram Calpa Rathaidean Sgìreil 2023/24**

There had been circulated Report No CC/04/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- the report set out a planned maintenance list and not all of the roads listed required maintenance at this time. Due to freeze/thaw conditions some roads had become a higher priority;
- clarification was sought and provided that day to day routine cyclical maintenance such as pot hole repairs was carried out under the revenue budget. Larger structural repairs such as such as overlay, inlay and surface dressing were carried out under the capital budget;

- an explanation was sought and provided that the priority list of schemes within the Capital Programme was essentially informed through a regular inspection regime by engineers, the Council's roads hierarchy and Road Condition Survey;
- the key issue was that the available capital funding for the repair and maintenance of roads in Caithness was inadequate. Fundamental change and more political leadership was required within the Council to address this issue;
- the above included the need for significant redesign in terms of how funding was spent to make a meaningful difference to roads in the area in line with the Council's priorities and the need for focused lobbying activity with both the UK and Scottish Governments;
- it was suggested the actual number of roads that required repair was more extensive than those detailed in the report and the costs significantly higher than reported.
- a significant number of those projects which could be funded this year were not on last year's Programme. This indicated the roads were deteriorating much faster than they could be repaired.;
- an update was sought and provided on the current position with recruitment within the Roads Team in Caithness on the ongoing activity being undertaken to fill vacancies;
- clarification was sought and provided that pot hole repairs were informed by roads inspections, Member and public reporting and in some cases pot hole repair works was reactionary;
- there were many roads in Wick that were not fit for purpose resulting in road safety concerns with delays in the repair of potholes;
- an update was sought and provided on the recent deployment of the Pothole Pro and hot-box in Caithness and on the challenges of undertaking repairs in poor weather conditions in the winter months;
- the Area Roads Manager and her staff be commended on the production of the priority list of schemes within the funding available and looking forward to the works being carried out. The Roads Team also be commended on the excellent work undertaken in the area;
- it was generally accepted the position with roads was due to a historic lack of investment including in equipment and machinery. There was a need to focus on finding solutions including through the redesign of services;
- as part of the roads redesign process and to improve communication, it was planned to post fact sheets and more information on roads on the Council's website;
- the significant increase in HGVs on minor roads due to large scale developments such onshore wind farms had significantly impacted on Caithness roads. It should be condition of planning permission that the road was upgraded prior to development commencing; and
- concern at the direction of travel for roads in Caithness if additional funding was not forthcoming. The Council should therefore write to the Scottish Government highlighting the urgent need for additional capital roads investment, particularly in Caithness.

Thereafter, and following further discussion the Committee:-

- i **APPROVED** the proposed prioritised Area Roads Capital Programme for Caithness Area; and

- * ii recognising the neutrality of the Council Leader, **AGREED** to **RECOMMEND** that the Council write to the Scottish Government highlighting the urgent need for additional Highland capital roads investment, but particularly in Caithness.

9. **Wick Public Services Obligation** **Comain Seirbheisean Poblach Inbhir Ùige**

Mr R Bremner made a Transparency Statement in respect of this item in his capacity as a Chair of the Wick John O’Groats Airport Consultative Committee. However, having applied the objective test, he did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

There had been circulated Report No CC/05/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- the importance of the Council and partners giving assurances to the public that they were doing all they possibly could to help maintain the Public Services Obligation (PSO). Partners continued to strive to ensure prices and the pricing model were not preclusive with any issues arising being highlighted to Eastern Airways;
- the need to be pragmatic and realistic in terms of ensuring the PSO was sustainable and to review all the options for flights and retain a positive outlook. If the services were not used by businesses and the public they could be lost;
- confirmation was sought and provided that a specific issue relating to the price of an advance booking in October 2023 would be investigated;
- the drop in the return of business travel following the pandemic was not unexpected given the shift to remote hybrid working;
- the opportunities to undertake more marketing of air services with a focus on the availability of easy access to the leisure market in Aberdeen, for example through leaflet drops. It was confirmed that the areas that would be promoted over the next few months were around leisure including day/weekend trips, visiting friends and relatives and onward travel. Any further suggestions from Members on this issue would be welcome.

The Committee **NOTED** the report.

10. **HRA Capital Programme 2022-23 Update and 2023-27 Programme** **Fios às Ur mu Phrògram Calpa Cunntas Teachd A-steach Taigheadais 2022-23 agus Prògram 2023-27**

There had been circulated Report No CC/06/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- officers be thanked for the report and on the consultation undertaken with Members in relation to the Programme, recognising the constraints on the budget;

- the key priority identified within the Programme of investing in energy efficiency works in the housing stock be welcomed; and
- further discussion be held at the monthly housing meetings between Members and officers in relation to housing maintenance and the flexibility for using the environmental budget to reflect tenants' priorities. In addition, and in light of the current cost of living crisis, consideration be given to further consultation being undertaken with tenants to determine whether priorities had changed.

The Committee:-

- NOTED** the update on the 2022-23 Caithness HRA Capital Programme at section 5 of the report;
- NOTED** the resources available to Caithness at paragraph 6.7 of the report;
- AGREED** the proposed investment priorities in the HRA Capital Programme for Caithness 2023-27 as set out in Appendix 1 to the report; and
- NOTED** that updates on the Housing Revenue Account Capital Programme would continue to be provided through ward briefings and at future Local Committees as requested by local Members, in addition to reporting to Housing and Property Committee.

**11. Wick Common Good Fund Annual Report 2021/22, Quarter 3 Monitoring Statement 2022/23 and Proposed Budget 2023/24
Maoin Math Coitcheann Inbhir Ùige**

There had been circulated Report No CC/07/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- the need for further discussions on the opportunities to maximise income from all Common Good assets for the benefit of the Fund including invitation to pay car parks and Wick Town Hall and to develop a detailed programme in this regard;
- it should be clarified that any income generated from the above assets was allocated directly to the Common Good Fund in the first instance and thereafter any liabilities applied; and
- all those involved be commended on the re-establishment of the Wick Common Good Fund.

The Committee:-

- NOTED** the Wick Common Good Fund Annual Report and Accounts for 2021/22;
- NOTED** the position of the Wick Common Good Fund, as shown in the Q3 2022/23 monitoring statement against budget; and
- AGREED** the position of the Wick Common Good Fund, as shown in the Q3 2022/23 monitoring statement against budget;

12. Housing Revenue Account: Garage Rents 2023/2024

There had been circulated Report No CC/08/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- garages in many areas of Caithness were in a poor state of repair and there was a high level of voids and therefore the need for additional significant investment the garage estate in in the area;
- a 7% rent increase in garage rents be approved on the basis this was both reasonable and affordable;
- noting that a review of garages and garage sites was being undertaken by the Housing Development Team with all options being considered including demolition of garages if they were beyond economic repair; and
- the opportunity to review the approach to garage rent increases next year to include consultation with tenants and consideration of the economic factors.

The Committee **AGREED** that a 7% rent increase to apply to Caithness Garages and Garage Sites.

The meeting ended at 3.40pm.