

**The Highland Council  
Caithness Committee**

**Minutes of Meeting of the Caithness Committee held REMOTELY on Monday 29 May 2023 at 10.00am.**

**Present:**

Mr R Bremner

Mr R Gunn

Mr A Jarvie

Mr W Mackay

Mr S Mackie

Mr M Reiss

Mr K Rosie

**Officials in attendance:**

Mr M Sutherland, Ward Manager

Mr F Macdonald, Head of Property &amp; Facilities Management

Mr R Campbell, Service Lead – Capital Planning &amp; Estates Strategy

Mr A Byrne, Housing Policy Officer

Ms M Ross, Principal Housing Officer

Mr C Sharp, Housing Repairs Manager

Ms A Jansson, Area Education &amp; Learning Manager

Mr S Sandecki, Head Teacher, Wick Joint Campus

Ms M Garson, Quality Improvement Officer

Ms A Macrae, Senior Committee Officer

**Also in attendance:**

Mr P Faccenda, Focus North Programme Manager

**Mr R Gunn in the Chair****Preliminary Item**

The Chair advised that the Caithness Committee gave the public the opportunity to observe how Members and officers worked together and how decisions were made. He thanked officers for providing reports to the Committee and coordinating the issue of the papers. Difficulties were being experienced around some of the standing items being presented to the Committee and discussions on this matter were ongoing.

In discussion, concern was expressed that the agenda for the meeting did not reflect the strategic approach being taken by Members on a range of issues and topics relevant to the area. There was a need to give the public assurances in relation to the commitment Members had made in the election period to work together and it was suggested that an outline plan for future agendas be developed.

An assurance was provided that the Chair and Vice Chairs were meeting to consider future plans for Committee agendas. It was important that standing items were presented regularly for Member scrutiny. It was also important the papers presented to the Committee were contemporary and relevant and had a visible decision attached to them and there was the opportunity for Members to influence strategy to achieve better outcomes for constituents. Members input to the Committee agendas would also be welcomed.

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| 1. | <p><b>Apologies for Absence</b><br/><b>Leisgeulan</b></p> <p>An apology for absence was intimated on behalf of Ms J McEwan.</p>   |
| 2. | <p><b>Declarations of Interest/Transparency Statement</b><br/><b>Foillseachaidhean Com-pàirt/ Aithris Fhollaiseachd</b></p> <p>Item 7: Mr R Bremner<br/>Item 10. Mr R Bremner<br/>Item 11: Mr S Mackie</p>  |
| 3. | <p><b>Minutes</b><br/><b>Geàrr-chunntas</b></p> <p>There was circulated and <b>NOTED</b> the Minutes of the Caithness Committee held on 6 February 2023, which were approved by the Council on 9 March 2023.</p>  |
| 4. | <p><b>Thurso High School - Update</b><br/><b>Àrd-Sgoil Inbhir Theòrsa – Cunntas às Ùr</b></p> <p>There had been circulated Report No. CC/13/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.</p> <p>In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the development of a masterplan for a new campus in Thurso was at an early stage and would take a long period of time to be realised. The right course of action would be to agree Option 4 set out in the report to demolish and rebuild Block A. This would achieve the best return from a relatively modest investment in comparison with other schools capital projects;</li> <li>• the above option be progressed on the basis the new build could be tied into any longer term vision. This option would enable the social spaces for pupils that had been lost due to the failure of the block to be restored. The modular build classrooms being deployed to replace the accommodation could be redeployed to relieve pressure at other schools in Highland;</li> <li>• a masterplan for Thurso would have to compete with all other areas in Highland where there was a need for school estate investment. There were concerns as to whether Thurso would be a high priority given that other parts of the school estate could be considered to be adequate;</li> <li>• it would have been helpful for Members to have more information at this stage prior to making a decision including progress on the action to have discussions with UHI who had indicated a willingness to engage;</li> <li>• while all Members were supportive of the need for a masterplan for a new campus, in reality there were issues as to how this could be funded. Thurso High School was not included in the Council's 15 year medium term financial plan, LEIP funding had not yet been confirmed and it was projected the level of Council reserves would reduce. It was also unclear as to what sources of external funding would be available;</li> </ul> |

- agreeing Option 4 would demonstrate to the public that the Council was committed to Caithness and Thurso High School and to tackling depopulation in one of its remotest areas;
- there was no other school in Highland which had part of its estate condemned unexpectedly and therefore this was a special case that distinguished it from other school projects;
- further clarity was sought and provided that it was important to have a masterplan bid ready to be considered alongside other priorities if funding opportunities became available;
- further clarity was sought and provided that there were concerns around the other buildings on the campus in terms of condition, suitability and life expectancy and that the campus would need to be replaced within the next 15 years. It was therefore key to have the masterplan developed on potential opportunities to be delivered on a future site. There were concerns as to how a rebuild would integrate into a masterplan in terms of the potential relocation of the campus to an adjacent site;
- the need to explore in greater detail the way forward for Thurso High School, including whether its current footprint was appropriate. Officers had repeatedly made it clear to Members that the School had reached its design lifespan. There was a need to be innovative and think out of the box to find different solutions to better support children's ongoing education in Thurso and in relation to additional funding sources;
- decisions on capital funding and priorities for schools was a matter for the full Council. The current financial climate was challenging for the Council and other local authorities and there was to be a review of the current Capital Programme;
- the option recommended by the Caithness Committee in respect of Thurso High School and financial implications would be considered by the Council along with the other capital projects and Caithness Members would have the opportunity to feed into the decision making process; and
- it was clear in section 5.4 of the report that Option 4 would not be the best value option if Members considered a new build to replace all the buildings was the preferred long-term solution. Therefore, Option 1 detailed in the report to demolish the block and make good the site and adjoining blocks should be the recommended preferred option on the basis there be a clear commitment to engage with external stakeholders going forward.

Thereafter, Mr A Jarvie seconded by Mr M Reiss **moved** that the Committee agree to recommend Option 4 detailed in the report (Demolish and rebuild Block A) as the preferred option for Thurso High School.

Mr K Rosie seconded by Mr R Bremner moved as an **amendment** that the Committee agree to recommend Option 1 detailed in the report (Demolition of the block and make good the site and adjoining blocks ) as the preferred option for Thurso High School with an addition that there be a clear commitment to engage with external stakeholders going forward.

On a vote being taken, the **motion** received 4 votes, the **amendment** received 3 votes with no abstentions. The **motion** was therefore **carried**, the votes having being cast as follows:-

**For the Motion**

Mr R Gunn, Mr A Jarvie, Mr S Mackie, Mr M Reiss

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|                  | <p><b>For the Amendment</b><br/>Mr R Bremner, Mr W Mackay, Mr K Rosie</p> <p><b>Decision</b><br/>The Committee <b>AGREED</b> to <b>RECOMMEND</b> Option 4 detailed in the report (Demolish and rebuild Block A) as the preferred option for Thurso High School.</p>  |
| <p><b>5.</b></p> | <p><b>Caithness Area Housing Allocations</b><br/><b>Riarachaidhean Thaisghean Sgìre Ghallaibh</b></p> <p>There had been circulated Report No CC/08/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.</p> <p>In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• further clarity was sought and provided that the Housing Team could elect not to suspend tenants who refused a reasonable offer if they were under exceptional pressure in terms of housing need;</li> <li>• the policy sought to provide a solution to address the high number of refusals and void properties in Caithness and associated lack of rental income and the significant staff time involved in dealing with refusals;</li> <li>• the policy amendment be reviewed within a period of six months and a report brought back to the Committee in November 2023. In the interim, the implementation of the policy could be monitored at the monthly housing meetings; and</li> <li>• the Housing Team proactively contact new applicants to make them aware of the policy at the outset on the basis this could reduce the grounds for challenge and the staff time involved in dealing with appeals.</li> </ul> <p>The Committee:-</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. <b>NOTED</b> the unique housing allocation system used within Caithness and the challenges that exist in allocating properties within the area;</li> <li>ii. <b>APPROVED</b> the amendment to the suspension rule for housing applicants within Caithness. Applicants who refuse one reasonable offer of housing will have their housing application suspended for 6 months. Currently, this suspension only takes place after an applicant refuses two reasonable offers of housing; and</li> <li>iii. <b>AGREED</b> that the policy amendment be reviewed within a period of six months and a report brought back to the Committee in November 2023.</li> </ol> |
| <p><b>6.</b></p> | <p><b>Housing Performance Report – 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023</b><br/><b>Aithisg Dèanadais a thaobh Taigheadais – 1 Giblean 2022 gu 31 Màrt 2023</b></p> <p>There had been circulated Report No CC/09/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.</p> <p>In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the importance of the emergency repairs figures in the report being accurate and a reflection of actual performance and an update was sought and provided on the measures being taken to ensure trades/contractors were providing the correct data in completion reports;</li> </ul>  |

- there was a broader issue in regard to how the above performance was being measured and the potential for the system to be reviewed by the Redesign Board to flag up automatically where performance was outwith the target range and to reduce staff time in having to manually check for errors;
- the need to address performance on the time taken to complete emergency repairs in Wick and East Caithness and prior to the next housing performance report being presented to the Committee in six months time;
- in addition to the average figures provided in the performance report, it would be helpful to have the lowest and highest figures within the range. It was confirmed that the potential to include these figures in future reports would be considered;
- confirmation was sought and provided that an improvement was being observed in relation to the sourcing and supply of materials, albeit there continued to be significant delays in some areas, details of which were provided;
- an explanation was sought and provided on the action being taken around early intervention in relation to rent arrears in Caithness and in response to changes in legislation. Tenants were finding the current cost of living crisis difficult and it was expected the spike in arrears would continue; and
- an update was sought and provided on the proactive approach taken in relation to homeless persons who may be reluctant to accept help from the local Housing Team.

The Committee **NOTED** the information provided on housing performance in the period 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2023.

**7. Focus North Partnership - Update**  
**Com-pàirteachas Fòcas a' Chinn a Tuath – Cunntas às Ùr**

**Mr R Bremner made a Transparency Statement in respect of this item in his capacity as a Council representative on the Focus North Advisory Board. 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 briefing paper had been circulated in connection with this item.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- the rebranding and refocusing event held in Thurso had been excellent, noting there had been a high level of engagement and exchange of ideas between the attendees;
- the level of opportunity in Caithness and engagement with both the private and public sector and progress towards the development of a masterplan was highlighted;
- the partnership approach being taken around the Peatlands was welcomed and reference made to this being a significant piece of work in terms of climate change;
- the significant opportunities around offshore wind at Scrabster Harbour and the potential for further engagement in respect of Wick Harbour;
- the wider opportunities around offshore wind and the potential to work further with organisations such the UHI for example in relation to STEM learning to develop and deliver these opportunities in Caithness and address the skills gap;

- the opportunities and development of new technologies around aviation including the potential for a bus stop model for aviation in Caithness;
- the proposals relating to the nuclear industry and how they could transition, broadband connectivity and hydrogen power were exciting opportunities;
- in relation to transport, concern at the sustainability of bus services in Caithness going forward. It was explained the focus of the Partnership was on there being a single vision on a future integrated solution including hydrogen power; and
- an update was sought and provided on the engagement being undertaken with SSE on renewables.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the update.

**8. Education HMI Update - Caithness  
Cunntas às Ùr mu Fhoghlam Luchd-sgrùdaidh an Rìgh – Gallaibh**

There had been circulated Report No. CC/10/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Education and Learning.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- the Head Teacher of Wick Joint Campus be congratulated on being singled out in the report for his leadership and creating an aspirational culture at Wick High School, supported by senior staff, and the fact this was underpinning the achievements and progress being made at the School;
- the HMI report highlighted the complexity of issues that had to be dealt with in terms of the size of the School, located in a remote and rural area;
- further information was sought and provided on the re-establishment of the student representative council, its composition and role;
- further clarity was sought and provided that the report recognised that the School did not deal with a huge number of issues in relation to bullying, behavioural problems, or exclusions in comparison with other schools. However, these issues were taken seriously for the minority involved and reference was made to the range of additional resources deployed in tackling these matters;
- information was sought and provided on the extent to which there was engagement and collaboration with external partners and employers outwith the School environment on preparing younger people for future life. An update was also provided on the initiatives being undertaken within the School environment in relation to this issue;
- the Head teacher, staff and pupils be commended on the significant improvements delivered at the School over the period from 2017 and through the pandemic; and
- it would be helpful for Ward 2 Members to visit Wick High School to learn from its experiences.

The Committee **NOTED** the key strengths and next steps for Wick High School as reported by Education Scotland on 21 March 2023

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| <p><b>9.</b></p>  | <p><b>My Future, My Success</b><br/><b>M' Àm ri Teachd, Mo Shoirbheachas</b></p> <p>There had been circulated Report No. CC/11/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Education and Learning.</p> <p>There was a short presentation from Ms S MacPhee, mentee and Ms T Young mentor on their experiences in relation to the My Future, My Success programme.</p> <p>In discussion, Members thanked Ms Macphee and Ms Young for their presentation and all those involved the programme. Thereafter, specific reference was made to the successes and achievements of the programme and the opportunities created for young people, for example through the NHS Highland pathways. It was important for Members to hear from the young mentees and support the programme in any way possible.</p> <p>The Committee <b>NOTED</b> and:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. congratulated the progress made on My Future, My Success on the difference they have made;</li> <li>ii. thanked the MFMS Mentors from the local community; and</li> <li>iii. acknowledged and celebrated the young people on future destinations.</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>10.</b></p> | <p><b>Community Asset Transfers</b><br/><b>Gluasadan So-mhaoin Coimhearsnachd</b></p> <p><b>Declarations of Interest:- Mr R Bremner declared an interest in this item as Vice Chair of Thrumster Community Development Association and he left for the remainder of the meeting, taking no part in the determination of this item.</b></p> <p>There had been circulated Report No. CC/12/23 by the Head of Community Support and Engagement.</p> <p>The Committee <b>APPROVED</b> the:-</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. sale of the Garages and Land at Loch Street, Wick for £1 To St Fergus Bowling Club on the terms set out in the report; and</li> <li>ii. sale of Land/park located opposite Thrumster Primary School for £1, to Thrumster Community Development Company on the terms set out in the report.</li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>11.</b></p> | <p><b>Ward Discretionary Awards</b><br/><b>Duaisean fo Ùghdarras Uàird</b></p> <p><b>Mr S Mackie made a Transparency Statement in respect of this item in his capacity as a non- executive director of Ormlie Community Association who had been the beneficiary of an award. He advised that he had taken no part in the discussion or determination of the application by and award to Ormlie Community Association.</b></p> <p>The Committee were advised that the undernoted Ward Discretionary Budget applications were approved in the 2022/23 Financial Year.</p>   |

In discussion, the Chair welcomed the level of awards and the financial support provided to a range of organisations across Caithness. In these financially challenging times, it was good news that the Ward Discretionary funds had been protected for a further year.

The Committee **NOTED** the following awards:-

### **Ward 2: Thurso and Northwest Caithness**

| <b>Organisation</b>   | <b>Grant</b> | <b>Date</b> |
|---|--------------|-------------|
| Chamber of commerce   | £ 500.00     | 07/04/2022  |
| Thurso in colour  | £ 500.00     | 10/06/2022  |
| Castletown CC flower baskets  | £ 200.00     | 10/06/2022  |
| Budding Engineers - replacement parts for re worked computers   | £ 375.00     | 10/06/2022  |
| 1x Poppy Wreath Lord Lieutenant -1x PW Wreath HC  | £ 70.00      | 15/11/2022  |
| Surf competition - mark boyd  | £1,500.00    |             |
| Thurso Hockey Club - £4000.00 for goals and equipment   | £1,000.00    | 30/03/2023  |
| ACCC Village officer funding  | £1,750.00    | 30/03/2023  |
| Ormile association - kitchen instal   | £ 315.00     | 27/03/2023  |
| Thurso Youth club - improvements to building and staffing costs to assist during holidays for providing childcare opportunities - big Thurso employability issue! | £4,000.00    | 29/03/2023  |
| RBWCC New flag pole   | £1,000.00    | 30/03/2023  |
| Thurso Community benefit - Socially Growing – Growing Young People’s Employability and Skills Confidence  | £4,000.00    | 29/03/2023  |
| Thurso Community Development Trust - Thurso Harbour Toilets – Youth Volunteer Engagement/Socially Growing   | £1,500.00    | 30/03/2023  |

### **Ward 3: Wick and East Caithness**

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| RBWCC - Wick Community Market - Funding towards Wick Community Market       | £1,500.00 | 04/04/2022 |
| Chamber of Commerce - Funding towards Caithness Transport Forum             | £ 500.00  | 07/04/2022 |
| Wick Paths group - Materials - Path clearing at South Head Quarries, Wick   | £1,500.00 | 01/07/2022 |
| Budding Engineers - Funding towards recycling of IT equipment - with Ward 2 | £ 375.00  | 10/06/2022 |
| 1 Lord Leiuutenant Wreath + 1 HC Crest Wreath                               | £ 120.00  | 22/11/2022 |
| HLH - Wick High School Youth Hub Christmas Lunch                            | £ 100.00  | 23/12/2022 |
| RBWCC New flag pole   | £1,000.00 | 30/03/2023 |
| Thurso Hockey Club - £4000.00 for goals and equipment                       | £1,000.00 | 30/03/2023 |



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|            | Scottish Surfing Federation:- Scottish National Surfing Championships 2023 - Mark Boyd   | £1,500.00 | 13/02/2023 |
|            | Wick CDT – replace the fence around the wooded area  | £4,600.00 | 28/03/2023 |
|            | ACCC Village Officer funding   | £1,750.00 | 30/03/2023 |
|            | Caithness KLICS SCIO - Gardening Project   | £2,000.00 | 30/03/2023 |
|            | RBWCC Wick town centre revival   | £2,500.00 | 30/03/2023 |
| <b>12.</b> | <b>Concluding Items</b>  |           |            |
|            | In conclusion of the meeting, the Chair commented as follows:-   |           |            |
|            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the additional capital funding of £1.8m allocated towards roads in Caithness be welcomed. Work had started on schemes and the public should see improvements in the roads over the next few months. An update on roads would be presented to the next Caithness Committee;</li> <li>• at the previous Caithness Committee it had been agreed to recommend that the Council write to the Scottish Government highlighting the urgent need for additional capital roads investment in Highland, but particularly in Caithness. This had been approved by the full Council and a letter had been sent to the Minister for Transport. A reply had been received and whilst he had not yet seen the full text, it was understood the request had been unsuccessful; and</li> <li>• all parties involved be commended on their timely response to the recent masonry collapse from a building in Thurso. Specific thanks were extended to Police Scotland, Transport Scotland, BEAR Scotland, the Council's Roads Team, contractors and the owners of the property. The outcome of the inspection by the Council's surveyors of the property and the neighbouring property should be known soon. If the public had any concerns about potentially dangerous buildings then they should report this to the Council.</li> </ul> |           |            |
|            | The Committee <b>NOTED</b> the updates.  |           |            |
|            | The meeting ended at 1.40pm.   |           |            |