

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Easter Ross Area Committee** held remotely on Monday, 30 October 2023, at 10.30 am.

Present:

Ms T Collier
Mr D Louden
Mrs P Munro
Ms M Nolan

Mr A Rhind
Ms M Ross
Ms M Smith

Participating Officials:

Mr M Rodgers, Executive Chief Officer, Housing and Property.
Ms H Ross, Senior Ward Manager
Mr D Martin, Area Education & Learning Manager
Mr R MacLeod, Service Lead (Investment & Building Maintenance)
Ms F Richardson, Corporate Improvement Project Manager
Mr S Dalgarno, Development Plans Manager
Ms S Murdoch, Common Good Fund Officer
Ms F Cameron, Programme Manager, Planning, Infrastructure, Environment & Economy
Ms F MacBain, Senior Committee Officer

Also in Attendance:

Area Inspector Stephen Mezals, Police Scotland (Item 3)

**An asterisk in the margin denotes a recommendation to the Council.
All decisions with no marking in the margin are delegated to Committee.**

Mr D Louden in the Chair

1. Apologies for Absence Leisgeulan

There were none.

2. Declarations of Interest/Transparency Statement Foillseachaidhean Com-pàirt/Aithris Fhollaiseachd

There were none.

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

There had been circulated Report No ERA/18/23 by the Area Commander.

Following a summary of the report, the following issues were raised during discussion:

- assurance was sought and provided that recent incidences of violence were being investigated, and the public were urged to report any information that might help, either to the local police or through Crimestoppers;
- it was possible that increased detection rates of drink and drug driving offences in Easter Ross compared with in Caithness and Sutherland could be the result of increased deployment of resources in Easter Ross;
- police officers were thanked for their assistance tackling a recent incident of vandalism in Invergordon; and
- concern was expressed that a number of vehicles were being abandoned in residential parking places and it was requested that this be tackled by joint working between the Police, the Council and the DVLA.

The Committee:

- i. **NOTED** progress made against the objectives set within the Highland Local Policing Plan 2020-2023 Year 3, attached as Annex A to this report, for the period covering 01 April 2022 – 31 March 2023; and
- ii. **AGREED** to liaise, through the senior Ward Manager, with the Police and DVLA on the issue of long-term abandoned vehicles in residential areas.

4. Housing Revenue Account Capital Programme 2023-27 Prògram Calpa Cunntas Teachd a-steach Taigheadais 2023-27

There had been circulated Report No ERA/19/23 by the Executive Chief Officer, Housing and Property.

During discussion, the following issues were considered:

- information was sought for future reports on the number of houses impacted by funding streams, with particular reference to climate change adaptations, to help understand how long projects were likely to take;
- a breakdown was requested, for ward business meetings and in future reports, of figures at ward and / or estate level;
- information was sought and provided on progress with Scottish Government's new Energy Efficiency Standard for Social Housing (ESSH) and whether air source heat pump heating was the preferred option. It was explained this was often the case but depended on individual circumstances. Communication had been undertaken with tenants on changes to heating tariffs;
- in relation to environmental projects, officers would be reminded to attend ward business meetings to engage with local Members;
- concerns were raised about housing stock which was coming to the end of its useful lifespan and further refurbishment would not be cost effective. The challenging balance between repairing existing homes versus building new ones was summarised, and attention was drawn to the budget restrictions. The importance of not raising public expectations was emphasised;
- Members thanked the Housing team for their work and assistance with customers; and
- concern was expressed that in rural areas the mobile signal was sometimes not strong enough to support the use of smart meters and suppliers and the government should be lobbied about this.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the summary update on the HRA Capital Programme at section 5 of the report;
- ii. **NOTED** the HRA Capital resources identified for Easter Ross area at paragraph 6.7 of the report;
- iii. **AGREED** the proposed investment priorities in the HRA Capital Programme for Easter Ross 2023-27 as set out in Appendix 1 of the report;
- iv. **NOTED** that updates on the Housing Revenue Account Capital Programme will 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;
- v. **AGREED** to provide a breakdown, to ward business meetings and in future reports, of figures at ward and / or estate level; and
- vi. **AGREED** to provide information in future reports on the number of houses impacted by funding streams, with particular reference to climate change adaptations.

The Committee **AGREED** to take item 6 before item 5.

6. Associated School Group Overview (ASG) Foir-shealladh air Buidhnean Sgoiltean Co-cheangailte

a) Alness Academy ASG Buidheann Sgoiltean Co-cheangailte Alanais

There had been circulated Report No ERA/21/23 by the Executive Chief Officer, Education & Learning.

During discussion, with reference to the poor attainment figures for several primary schools, and secondary being behind Highland and national levels, information was sought and provided on improvement work being undertaken. A summary was provided of the levels of support being offered to each school, including support from Collaborative Lead Officers and for the Head Teacher. The figures presented were for 2021-22 and it was expected that attainment will have increased in more recent figures.

The Committee **NOTED** the content of the report.

b) Invergordon Academy ASG Buidheann Sgoiltean Co-cheangailte Inbhir Ghòrdain

There had been circulated Report No ERA/22/23 by the Executive Chief Officer, Education & Learning. An updated report had been circulated to Members with a correction to the figures in the table in section 6.2, 'Destinations of Pupils (%)'

During discussion, Members expressed disappointment at the drop in attainment for Invergordon Academy and information was sought on what was being done to address this. Newmore and Park Primaries were commended for their performance and, while acknowledging that adequate facilities were

being provided at the Academy, it was also important to give honest and realistic information to families about the problems the Council was facing with the capital programme and its inability to fund a new school for Park at this time. It was clarified that the schools project on the capital programme had been deferred, not removed.

The Committee **NOTED** the content of the report.

**c) Tain Royal Academy ASG
Buidheann Sgoiltean Co-cheangailte Bhaile Dhubhthaich**

There had been circulated Report No ERA/23/23 by the Executive Chief Officer, Education & Learning.

During discussion, the following issues were raised:

- Hilton of Cadboll interim Head Teacher and staff were thanked for their work;
- it was suggested that writing attainment at Tain Royal Academy was a concern and information was provided on the improvement plan, and work being undertaken by the Collaborative Leads, including sharing good practice from other schools;
- concerns were expressed in relation to conditions on the site for the new campus, and the impact on local residents, and a meeting should be arranged to address these issues, including the possible need for a drainage ditch; and
- in response to questions about the management structure for the new campus, it was explained that the interim Head Teacher was in post until Easter 2024 when it was intended a permanent Head Teacher would be in post, with 4 or 5 deputy Heads for both secondary and primary. More detail, including on a name and uniform for the campus would be considered through stakeholder meetings and could also be addressed at ward business meetings.

The Committee **NOTED** the content of the report and **AGREED** to arrange a meeting with local Members, affected local residents, and representatives from Kier Construction to consider issues related to Tain Campus.

**5. Place Based Investment Programme (PBIP) Grant Award 2021/22: Tain Streetscape
Duais Tabhartais Prògram Tasgaidh Stèidhichte air Àite 2021/22: Cruth-sràide Bhaile Dhubhthaich**

There had been circulated Report No ERA/20/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment & Economy.

Members expressed disappointment that the project costs had escalated beyond the £100,000 allocated to the Tain Streetscape project at by the Committee at their meeting on 17 February 2022, with the shortfall being around £110,000. Various options were discussed including retendering the project, phasing the project, or seeking funds from elsewhere to cover the difference.

The importance of the project was emphasised but due to the risks of the Scottish Government withdrawing the funds if amendments were sought to the project, Members spoke in favour of seeking agreement to carry forward the funds as recommended, and to discuss the project with the Roads team in the meantime.

The Committee:-

- i. **AGREED** to formally withdraw the offer of grant of £100,000 PBIP from the Tain Streetscape Project;
- ii. pending agreement of the Scottish Government, **AGREED** to carry forward the £100,000 PBIP funding into the available Community Regeneration Fund allocation for Easter Ross for 2023/24; and
- iii. **AGREED** to arrange a meeting with Roads officers to discuss the project.

7. Invergordon Common Good Fund Maoin Math Coitcheann Inbhir Ghòrdain

There had been circulated joint Report No ERA/24/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Community and Place and the Head of Corporate Finance and Commercialism.

During discussion, it was proposed that support be offered to the group dealing with the application for Invergordon Naval & Heritage Museum for the Community Asset Transfer of Invergordon Town Hall, which had been paused for a minimum of 4 months. The reported investment interest was low but was anticipated to be higher by the year end. Members were reminded that the Common Good Fund was responsible for the upkeep of its assets.

The Committee **NOTED**:-

- i. the Q2 monitoring statement for the Invergordon Common Good Fund; and
- ii. that the Community Asset Transfer application received from the Invergordon Naval & Heritage Museum has been paused for reasons due to instability in the applicant group as outlined in section 5 of the report.

8. Tain Common Good Fund Maoin Math Coitcheann Bhaile Dhubhthaich

There had been circulated joint Report No ERA/25/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Community and Place and the Head of Corporate Finance and Commercialism.

During discussion, clarification was sought and provided that ringfenced money from the sale of the mussel boat would be shown separately on the annual accounts. Disappointment was expressed that from time to time additional funds required to be spent on minor repairs to the Alexandra swing bridge.

The Committee **NOTED**:-

- i. the Quarter 2 monitoring statement for the Tain Common Good Fund; and
- ii. the update on current Tain Common Good issues.

**9. Easter Ross Area Place Plan – Progress Update
Plana Àite Sgìre Rois an Ear – Cunntas air Adhartas**

There had been circulated Report No ERA/26/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place.

A presentation was provided covering key local, regional and national drivers for Easter Ross, the scope and target audience of the plan, methodology, progress, draft priorities and areas for action. A workshop was scheduled on 2 November 2023.

Members commented that, given the strategic importance of Easter Ross, it was hoped funding streams would be made available for local initiatives.

The Committee **NOTED**:-

- i. the emerging themes and priorities for action identified so far at Section 5.2, and the further background and information shared by the Officer through a verbal presentation on the day; and
- ii. the next steps for progressing this work and broadening participation, including the launch of online engagement, aligning community-led activity and establishing governance model.

**10. Invergordon Common Good Fund - the bust of Sir John Gordon by Edmé Bouchardon.
Maoin Math Coitcheann Inbhir Ghòrdain – ìomhaigh-bràghad Shir Iain Ghòrdain le Edmé Bouchardon**

There had been circulated Report No ERA/27/23 by the Executive Chief Officer, Performance & Governance.

Following a summary of the report, the following issues were raised:

- there had been speculation online about what would happen if the bust was sold but it was clarified that a decision was only being sought at this stage on whether to proceed with a consultation on whether to sell it;
- if the bust were to be displayed locally, the costs of insurance and security to display it would be prohibitive;
- in response to comments, a summary was provided of the statutory consultation process. There was no legal requirement for a public meeting but a public awareness raising session, with a defined agenda, could be beneficial. The permitted uses of Common Good Fund assets and who was permitted to benefit from them was outlined, as was the lengthy legal process that would be undertaken if a sale was the preferred option from the consultation, and that any investment decisions on the proceeds would be taken in line with legal procedure, at the appropriate time;
- the importance of clear communication with regard to the consultation was emphasised;
- Members were keen to hear the public's view on the possible sale of the bust;

- assurance was provided that the bust was being stored in a safe and appropriate location; and
- Members thanked all involved in the process over the previous 25 years and asked that they be involved in the preparation of the consultation document.

The Committee:-

- NOTED** the update on the work undertaken to explore the potential of selling the Bouchardon Bust;
- NOTED** the assessment of the various sale options and the advice from Sotheby's that a sale by private arrangement might be most beneficial in financial terms; and
- in light of this information, **AGREED** to commence a Community Empowerment consultation to inform the decision making in respect of a proposal to sell the Bouchardon bust.

11. Ward Discretionary Awards Duaisean fo Ùghdarras Uàird

The Committee **NOTED** the Ward Discretionary Projects that had been approved since 1st April 2023.

12. Minutes Geàrr-chunntas

There had been circulated and were **NOTED** Minutes of Meeting of the Easter Ross Area Committee held on 7 August 2023, which had been approved by the Council on 14 September 2023.

13. Place Based Investment Funds – Proposed Reallocation of Funds Maoinean Stèidhichte air Àite – Ath-riarachadh Mhaoinean ga Mholadh

There had been circulated Report No ERA/28/23 by the Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place.

The Committee **AGREED** to repurpose the remaining £12,000 from the £20,000 allocated to the Invergordon Social Club for its Feasibility Study, to a Ward 6 Community Grants stream set up to address one or more of the four harms of Covid.

The meeting ended at 2.40pm