

**The Highland Council
Caithness Committee**

Minutes of Meeting of the Caithness Committee held remotely on Monday 13 November at 10.00am.

Present:

Mr R Bremner, Mr R Gunn, Mr A Jarvie, Mr W Mackay (arrived 10.40am), Mr S Mackie, Ms J McEwan, Mr M Reiss, Mr K Rosie

Officials in attendance:

Mr M Sutherland, Ward Manager
Mr R Macleod, Service Lead (Investment & Building Maintenance)
Ms I MacMillan, Project Manager, Climate Change and Energy Team
Mr M Crowe, Project Officer (Community Regeneration)
Ms A Macrae, Senior Committee Officer

In Attendance:

Inspector S Mezals, Police Scotland

Mr R Gunn in the Chair.

Business

**1. Apologies for Absence
Liesgeulan**

An apology for absence was intimated on behalf of Mr W Mackay.

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

There were no declarations of interest.

**3. Minutes
Geàrr-chunntas**

There were circulated and **NOTED** Minutes of the Caithness Committee held on 21 August 2023 which were approved by the Council on 14 September 2023.

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

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

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- the Inspector and officers be thanked for the excellent work carried out in the area;
- further clarity was sought and provided around the reporting and self-referral process for sexual crimes;
- concern the statistics appeared to show that drink/drug driving offences were almost equal to the number of speeding offences in the area which differed from

the statistics for some other areas. The Inspector advised that the under detection of speeding was the issue rather than there being an equality of risk. A visible Police presence on roads immediately influenced driver behaviour in relation to speeding;

- concern at the high proportion of missing persons in the area who were looked after children in comparison to some other areas. The Inspector advised that while it was difficult to draw any conclusions from the figures which included repeat incidents, the availability of partner support services was probably a factor;
- the additional pressure being placed on officers dealing with the high number of missing person cases and a point that the closure of Avonlea children's care home in Wick may impact on the figures in future reports. The Inspector advised that looked after children also included those on supervision orders residing at home with family members. The majority of missing persons cases involved vulnerable adults, many of which had travelled into the area;
- concern at the significant reduction in Police Scotland's budget and an update was sought and provided on the implications in respect of the roll out of new technology projects such as body worn video, overtime and training, and reduction in officer numbers in Sutherland. The staffing establishment in the area had not been reduced, albeit there were ongoing challenges with filling vacancies;
- clarification was sought and provided around the 101 Service and the initiatives being undertaken locally to improve the interface between the Police and public;
- the Contact Commander Control C3 Division required to be reinforced to give prompter responses to the public and address concerns with the current 101 Service;
- noting there was no indication as to Police Scotland's budget for the next financial year, and while there was a recruitment freeze, applications for positions in Caithness were being sought and efforts made to resolve any conflicting messages around staffing;
- the increase in hate crimes statistics in the area was disappointing and the severity by which the Police had dealt with the repeat incident in Thurso was appreciated;
- further clarity was sought and provided that Police Scotland had a zero tolerance approach to hate crime and on the follow up action taken and range of prevention and intervention mechanisms in place to tackle this form of crime in the area and nationally;
- it would be helpful to have figures for officer time spent dealing with out of hours mental health cases and when attending court, noting there were challenges in providing the former and a system was being developed to track court attendance; and
- the significant improvement in detection rates for homicides and reduction in these crimes nationally was welcomed and an explanation was sought and provided on the approach taken by Police Scotland to investigate homicides and deaths that required further investigation.

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

5. Wick District Heating Project - Housing Pròiseact Teasachaidh Sgìre Inbhir Ùige

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

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- this was an excellent initiative and a good news story and the feedback from tenants on the benefits of the scheme had been very positive;
- the Project Team be commended on the excellent work being undertaken in relation to the project;
- as the scheme was extended, the potential to include difficult to let void properties to boost demand for these houses, for example where one of those properties was located within a block of tenanted properties;
- there was a potential benefit to owner occupiers of former Council houses through the ability to extend the scheme to their properties;
- the project was also seeking to incorporate as many commercial buildings as possible to assist with costs and also the potential to roll out the scheme to other parts of Caithness, specific reference being made to Thurso, and the wider Highlands;
- consideration was being given to minimising the risk factor of introducing tenants and properties to one particular heat source and the options in the event of system failure, albeit there was the same risk factor with any heating system;
- it was important to have tenants and communities engaged in expanding the scheme and to understand the meaningful benefits of the project for those tenants most in need to mitigate the impacts of fuel poverty and the cost of living crisis;
- reducing energy demand was a key target towards the Council achieving net zero and there were excellent tranches of work across the wider organisation around local energy heating strategies in terms of insulating homes, improving energy efficiency and reducing costs; and
- improved collaboration and cooperation from renewable energy companies was being observed and there were opportunities for private sector investment in local heating networks that would help accelerate their roll out in Caithness, the Highlands and nationally.

The Committee **NOTED** the:

- i. contents of the report outlining the benefits to tenants;
- ii. progress for Phases 1 and 2 of the District Heating Expansion Project; and
- iii. potential for further expansion of the domestic heating network dependent on infrastructure expansion and connection of public buildings.

6. Renewable Energy Investment Opportunities in Caithness Cothroman Tasgadh ann an Lùth So-ùrachaidh ann an Gallaibh

Isla MacMillan, Project Manager, Climate Change and Energy Team, gave a local area update on the Energy Efficient Scotland: Area Based Scheme.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- noting that a report on the Area Based Scheme would be brought to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee in the first instance and thereafter cascaded to local committees for an area based focus. Members looked forward to a substantive paper being brought to a future Caithness Committee;
- the need to identify redundant Council land for renewable energy projects that would generate income for the Council and provide benefit to local communities. Such initiatives included solar farms, battery storage for other renewable energy projects, and schemes that would complement the district heating project and other projects being taken forward by partner agencies and local stakeholders;

- confirmation was sought and provided that information would be provided to a future Caithness Committee on the scope of the Area Based Scheme and reference was made to the external funding opportunities;
- the huge range and scale of opportunities at the Council's disposal and the need to move forward with due diligence to ensure the right decisions were made taking account of net zero implications;
- there was a significant volume of work ongoing within the Council and through the Climate Change Committee around renewable energies, reference being made to the development of a strategy and action plan;
- the above included bringing forward information to the Climate Change Committee and Council on the investment and funding opportunities around solar energy and the potential to generate significant levels of income;
- discussions had been held in relation to the shared ownership of wind farms with a private company where they absorbed the risk and the potential to generate significant returns from such developments;
- reference to pilot projects around hydrogen as a heating source, considerations around transport and expanding the EV charging network in Highlands and the use of data collection technologies to provide EPC ratings for the Council's domestic properties; and
- it was important to continue to drive investment in renewable energy opportunities and keep pace with new technologies to generate much needed income for the Council, and for projects to be ready to take advantage of funding opportunities as they arose.

The Committee **NOTED** the update on this item.

7. Wick Common Good Fund Quarterly Monitoring Report Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Ràitheil Maoin Math Coitcheann Inbhir Ùige

The Chair advised that this item had been withdrawn as there were outstanding matters around finance and property that required to be explored more fully in order to provide a full report. An update to an Area Business Meeting would be provided as matters were progressed.

The Committee **NOTED** the item had been withdrawn.

8. Community Regeneration Funding Update 2023-24 Cunntas às Ùr mu Mhaoineachadh Ath-bheòthachadh Coimhearsnachd 2023-24

There had been circulated Report No CC/22/23 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment & Economy.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the delivery plan of the Community Regeneration Fund for 2023/24; and
- ii. **AGREED** to ringfence the allocation of £50,000 Community Regeneration Funding towards Wick Town Centre Regeneration, which should be brought back as a full application to a future committee for consideration.

9. Ward Discretionary Awards
Duaisean fo Ùghdarras Uàird

The Committee **NOTED** that the following Ward Discretionary Budget applications had been approved since 1 April 2023:

Wards 2 & 3

Association of Caithness Community Councils (ACCC) - Village Officer Fund -
£3,753.00 (£1,876.50 each Ward)

Ward 2

Pennyland Primary School - Project: Pennyland Wellbeing 60
(Painting of 10m x 10m area of playground in preparation for marking installation) -
£580.00.

The meeting ended at Noon.