

**The Highland Council
Caithness Committee**

Minutes of Meeting of the **Caithness Committee** held remotely on **Monday 29 January 2024 at 10.00am.**

Present:

Mr R Bremner, Mr R Gunn, Mr W Mackay, Mr S Mackie, Ms J McEwan, Mr M Reiss, Mr K Rosie

Officials in attendance:

Ms A Clark, Head of Community Support & Engagement, Communities & Place

Ms F Cameron, Programme Manager, Community Regeneration, Infrastructure, Environment & Economy

Mr M Crowe, Project Officer, Community Regeneration, Infrastructure, Environment & Economy

Ms A Jansson, Area Education & Learning Manager, Education & Learning

Ms J Sutherland, Roads Operations Manager, Infrastructure, Environment & Economy

Ms M Ross, Principal Housing Officer, Housing & Property

Mr A MacInnes, Senior Committee Officer, Performance & Governance

In Attendance:

Station Commander Gary Cringles, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

Mr R Gunn in the Chair

Business

**1. Apologies for Absence
Liesgeulan**

An apology for absence was intimated on behalf of Mr A Jarvie.

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

Item 5 – Mr R Bremner, Ms J McEwan, Mr M Reiss, Mr K Rosie (declaration of interest)

Item 11 – Mr S Mackie (transparency statement)

**3. Minutes
Geàrr-chunntas**

There were circulated and **noted** minutes of the Caithness Committee held on 13 November 2023 which were approved by the Council on 14 December 2023.

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

There had been circulated Report No CC/01/24 by the Local Senior Officer for Highland.

Following commentary on the report by the Station Commander, thanks were extended to elected members, the local crews and members of the community in their efforts to

help with the ongoing recruitment to the service and ensuring crews were available to attend incidents. Thanks were also extended to the local roads team and the community for their assistance during the recent spell of heavy snow which was very much appreciated.

Members referred to the encouraging position regarding new/potential recruits to the service and the Station Commanders comments regarding the assistance provided during the spell of heavy snow was echoed by Members and showed there was a great community spirit in the area. The benefits of the fire skills program for young people was highlighted and specifically the satisfaction it brought to them and it was hoped they would continue. The service was looking to increase the number of instructors to deliver these courses. Information would be provided to Members on where the funding came from for the fire skills program for young people, and the number and gender of young people in the SFRS youth volunteer scheme.

Continuing if the service had the flexibility to attend and prevent flooding incidents, flood victims would not be applying for extra public funds to help them make good the damage. While this subject could continue to be discussed outwith the meeting, it was stressed that the service would respond where there was a risk to life.

The Committee **noted** the Area performance report.

5. Community Regeneration Fund Assessment of Applications Measadh Iarrtasan Maoin Ath-bheòthachaidh Coimhearsnachd

Declaration of Interest

Mr R Bremner declared an interest in part of this item as he had a connection with one of the applicants, Thrumster community development association. He took no part in the discussion or determination of the application for funding submitted by Thrumster community development association.

Ms J McEwan, Mr M Reiss, Mr K Rosie declared an interest in part of this item as members of the Association of Northern Trails Scotland. They took no part in the discussion or determination of the applications for funding submitted by the Association of Northern Trails Scotland.

There had been circulated Report No CC/02/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy. The report detailed the community regeneration fund allocations received in the current round. There were 14 applications to be considered with a total grant request of £500,358.68 and the available area funds were £354,412.98. Details were provided of 3 projects (Thurso youth club; Wick amateur swimming club; Pentland firth yacht club) that had applied for CRF funding that had received funding separately through the community led local development capital funding.

The Committee dealt with the applications that had been presented as follows:-

- a) Caithness KLICS – approved £11,244.80
- b) Dunbeath Community Centre – approved £28,940.66
- c) John O' Groats Development Trust – Deferred for further application when project has planning consent;
- d) Home Start Caithness – approved £3615 revenue costs and deferred capital costs for future consideration following submission of additional information relating to building development works.
- e) Thurso Community Café – deferred for information on financial plan and sustainability of project.
- f) Thrumster community development Association – approved £9,500.22
- g) Reay Golf Club – approved £75,000
- h) Staxigoe community football pitch – approved £33,871
- i) Thurso on Board – deferred pending further information on structural condition of the building; costs to bring it into a safe condition and to develop the building; and information on what consultation there has been with other organisations in the locality about youth activity provision
- j) High Life Highland Youth development Thurso – approved £29,831
- k) Association of Northern Trails Scotland (embarking on the north coast trail) – approved £20,000
- l) Association of Northern Trails (stepping up on the JOGT) – approved £8,000 subject to landowner consent
- m) Wick Harbour Authority – deferred. Further information on funding package for this project be sought.
- n) John O' Groats Mill Trust – approved £50,000

ii. agreed to ringfence remaining grant within the 2023/24 allocation for consideration of deferred applications that will be resubmitted.

6. Thurso Associated School Group Attainment Overview Tar-shealladh Buileachaidh Buidheann Sgoiltean Co-cheangailte Inbhir Theòrsa

There had been circulated Report No CC/03/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Education & Learning.

Following a summary of the report by the Area Education and Learning Manager and in response to Members queries it was confirmed that Education Scotland inspections of schools had started and reports on inspections undertaken were detailed in the report. However, in the Thurso associated school group there had not been an inspection in the last five years. In terms of standards and quality reports, the service was fair in its evaluation of schools and there were Collaborative lead officers who worked closely with schools to improve standards and quality. The work of nurseries in the area was commended. Overall members were pleased with the report, it was very encouraging for the schools and the hard work of staff was recognised.

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

7. Area Roads Programme 2024/25 Prògram Rathaidean Sgìreil 2024/25

There had been circulated Report No CC/04/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy.

The Chair on behalf of the Committee thanked the Roads team for the brilliant job over the recent bad period of weather. Thanks were also extended to Bear Scotland, the emergency services for their professionalism during this challenging period and also members of the community and businesses who had also helped.

The Roads Operations Manager provided an overview of the proposed roads maintenance programme for Caithness. The priorities for roads maintenance were set out in the report, however the budget for roads maintenance had not yet been agreed. Priorities throughout the year could also change and members would be briefed and they would consider any proposed changes to priorities at their monthly roads meetings with officers. The Roads Operations Manager gave an update in relation to specific road schemes raised by Members.

It was highlighted that over the last few years significant additional money had been spent on road maintenance and the challenge would be to see what funding could be given for further capital investment on our roads in Caithness and across Highland. There was a roads redesign project underway and this would look at area prioritisation of resources. Also, if there was to be extra funding for the area, consideration be given to improving footpaths. It was advised that a separate programme of footpath maintenance priorities would be discussed with Members.

An update on white lining in the area was provided. There had been difficulties with contractors coming to the area to do this work as work was mainly done during the busy summer period and accommodation for contractors was difficult to find. An undertaking was given to encourage contractors to forward plan their accommodation bookings. Going forward an inhouse white lining team was being formed.

Further, as part of the roads redesign process it should be considered how to maximise the benefits of the Pothole pro. Also, it was felt there should be a bid for extra staff in the roads team given how stretched they were to undertake all the work required of them. It was advised that in the last few years Caithness had appointed 2 additional foremen as a result of additional funding.

Continuing, the positive stories regarding work on road maintenance, such as with the benefits achieved through use of the Pothole pro, should be communicated to the public. It was advised that as part of the roads redesign, newsletters and fact sheets were to be produced on road maintenance/investment. The lack of investment in road maintenance nationally over many years was highlighted and the need to work more closely with both Scottish and UK Governments on this. In particular, it was felt that the funding provided to the trunk road network was unfair in comparison to funding given to the local authority for its road network.

Thereafter, the Committee:-

- i **approved** the proposed prioritised Area Roads Capital Programme for the Caithness Area; and
- ii **noted** that a separate programme of footpath maintenance priorities would be discussed with Members.

**8. Annual Roads Capital Programme 2023/24 Update
Cunntas Bliadhnaile Prògram Calpa Rathaidean 2023/24**

There had been circulated Report No CC/05/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy.

The Roads Operations Manager presented a summary of the report during which it was highlighted that there had been a significant increase in last years roads budget across Highland with Caithness receiving £2.9m which allowed for a significant amount of work to be undertaken. External contractors had been engaged to help deliver the programme of works and all the capital allocation had been largely spent.

Members commended the work of the roads team for undertaking and completing the additional works to ensure the capital allocation was spent. There were now many good road surfaces in Caithness as a result of this additional investment in road maintenance. There would be an ongoing commitment to find additional resources for roads.

The Committee **NOTED** the:

- i. final budget allocation for Caithness area for 2023/24;
- ii. works completed on the approved prioritised list to date; and
- iii. additional works identified and prioritised throughout the year.

**9. Housing Revenue Account: Garage Rents 2024/2025
Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais: Màil Gharaidsean 2024/25**

There had been circulated Report No CC/06/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property. The Principal Housing Officer gave a summary of the report, following which Members were invited to agree a level of rent increase for garages and garage sites for 2024/25.

The Committee **agreed** a 7.95% rent increase to apply to garages and a 10% rent increase on garage sites in the Caithness area.

**10. Wick Common Good – Draft Accounts 2022/23, Proposed Budget 2024/25
and Quarterly Monitoring Statement 2023/24
Math Coitcheann Inbhir Uige – Dreachd Chunntasan 2022/23, Buidseat ga
Mholadh airson 2024/25 agus Aithris Sgrùdaidh Ràitheil 2023/24**

There had been circulated Report No CC/07/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place and Head of Corporate Finance.

The Head of Community Support & Engagement provided a summary of the report, after which it was queried how it was proposed to maximise income from Wick common good fund assets for the benefit of the area. A commitment was given to discuss the development of the fund at an Area business meeting.

The Committee:-

- i. **agreed** the Wick Common Good Fund Statement of Accounts (Appendix 1) and Quarter 4 monitoring report for 2022/23 (Appendix 2);
- ii. **noted** the position of the Wick Common Good Fund, as shown in the Q3 monitoring statement (Appendix 3) against budget for 2023/24;
- iii. **agreed** the Wick Common Good Fund Annual Budget for 2024/25 (Appendix 4); and

iv **noted** that further discussions on the development of the Wick common good fund to look at opportunities in order to maximise income from assets would be held at an Area business meeting.

Urgent Item of Business – *In terms of standing order 8, the following item was taken as an urgent item of business as an assessment of the Wick Street Design project bid for funding and award was expected to be made before the next meeting of the Committee.*

Item 12 - Wick Street Design Project

It was advised that The Highland Council was in the process of submitting a bid for funding for the Wick street design project. A decision on the bid was expected at the end of March. This project had been in development for a number of years and it was fully supported by elected members and hugely supported by many members in the community. Elected Members had been involved throughout the process for each stage of the project. It was now the final stage where it was hoped to secure funding for the construction phase in the region of £2.2m. This would be a tremendous investment for Wick town centre. Members were invited to formally endorse the submission of the bid for £2.2m funding and, in recognition of this support, it was requested that the Chair of the Committee, submit a letter of support for the bid to the Service Lead, Infrastructure, which would also be signed by all Ward 3 Members.

The Committee **agreed** to endorse the submission of the bid for funding for the Wick street design project and that a letter in support of the bid be sent by the Chair of the Committee to the Service Lead, Infrastructure.

11. Ward Discretionary Awards Duaisean fo Ùghdarras Uàird

Transparency Statement – Mr S Mackie made a Transparency Statement in respect of this item, as he was a co-owner of a business that was a member of the Caithness Chamber of Commerce. However, he was not involved in the decision regarding the award to the Caithness Transport Forum, and having applied the objective test, he did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

Thurso and Northwest Caithness Ward Discretionary Budget applications approved 1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024

The Committee **NOTED** that the following Thurso and Northwest Caithness Ward Discretionary Budget applications have been approved since 1 April 2023:

Caitness Chamber of Commerce – Caitness Transport Forum	£500.00
Thurso Comm Devt Trust – Thurso Toilets/Youth Volunteer Engagement (2/2)	£2,500.00
Thurso Football Academy – Professional Coaching Event	£1,500.00
Sidhchailleannart – Legends of Caithness	£675.00
Feis Ghallaidh/Caitness Feis – Traditional Music Workshops	£1,250.00
Pennyland Primary School – Pennyland Wellbeing 60	£580.00
Association of Caithness Community Councils – Village Officer Fund	£1,876.50
RBLs Thurso Branch – Poppy Wreath	£70.00

Total

£8,951.50

Wick and East Caithness Ward Discretionary Budget applications approved 1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024

The Committee **NOTED** that the following Wick and East Caithness Ward Discretionary Budget applications have been approved since 1 April 2023:

Caithness Chamber of Commerce – Caithness Transport Forum	£500.00
Dunbeath and District Centre – Back Office Support	£2,500.00
Pentland Parish Church of Scotland – Flower Festival	£800.00
Sidhchailleannart – Legends of Caithness	£675.00
Highlife Highland – Schools Out 2023	£630.00
Feis Ghallaidh/Caithness Feis – Traditional Music Workshops	£1,250.00
Association of Caithness Community Councils – Village Officer Fund	£1,876.50
RBSL Wick, Canisbay and Latheron Branch – Poppy Wreath	£120.00
Total	£8,351.50

The meeting ended at 1.45 pm