

The Highland Council Caithness Committee

Minutes of Meeting of the Caithness Committee held remotely on Monday 20 May 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:

Mr P Tomalin, Community Development Manager
Ms A Jansson, Area Education & Learning Manager
Mr M Crowe, Project Officer, Community Regeneration
Ms M Ross, Principal Housing Officer
Mr C Sutherland, Principal Repairs Officer
Ms S Murdoch, Common Good Fund Officer
Mr M Johnstone, Principal Estates Surveyor
Ms J MacLennan, Joint Democratic Services Manager
Ms A Macrae, Senior Committee Officer

In Attendance:

Mr J West, Director of Culture & Learning, High Life Highland

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 4: Mr S Mackie (Transparency Statement).

3. Minutes Geàrr-chunntas

There were circulated and **NOTED** minutes of the Caithness Committee held on 29 January 2024 which were approved by the Council on 14 March 2024.

4. North Coast Visitor Centre Update Cunntas mu Ionad Luchd-Tadhail a' Costa a Tuath

There had been circulated Report No CC/06/24 by the Director of Culture and Learning, High Life Highland.

Mr S Mackie made a Transparency Statement in respect of this item in his capacity as Chair of the Dounreay Stakeholders Group. However, having applied the objective test, reviewed his position in relation to the item and any personal connection, he did not consider that he had an interest to declare.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:

- High Life Highland be commended on the progress achieved in partnership and through collaborative working with organisations to deliver solutions. In particular, NRS Dounreay and the Council be thanked for their support;
- the increase in visitor numbers and the fact the Centre had retained its four star accreditation be welcomed;
- information was sought and provided on the main challenges around staff recruitment and the variety of approaches being pursued;
- the potential to liaise with Thurso High School and North Highland College to provide opportunities for young people, support career choices and provide flexibility in terms of staffing and opening hours;
- the potential for other services to co-locate in the premises given the benefits this could deliver for High Life Highland, partner organisations and the public;
- confirmation was sought and provided that a range of local community groups used the premises delivering benefits in terms of room hire or increased footfall through events and programmes;
- it would be helpful for Members to receive updates at area business meetings on the Centre and all High Life Highland managed facilities in Caithness and to discuss the potential to maximise opportunities;
- in response to a query, it was confirmed a regular maintenance regime was in place and there were no issues with the condition and maintenance of the building. The Council's Maintenance Team were commended for their work in this regard;
- a query in relation to High Life Highland's proposals for increasing visitor numbers at the Centre and how any increase would be accommodated. It was confirmed key issues were the café being open and having the flexibility to respond to community and other events including traffic from cruise liners;
- the current plan for reversing the financial deficit to deliver a more positive financial outcome and the type of funding requests required to make the facility sustainable. It was explained that discussions were ongoing with NRS Dounreay and the Council on the business model going forward and to develop options for the future and as part of which any potential innovative funding mechanisms would be considered; and
- Members would welcome the opportunity to have further discussions on measures to further advertise and publicise the Centre and to fly the Caithness flag at the premises.

The Committee **NOTED**:

- i. the current position with regards to finance and performance;
- ii. the progress that has been made in terms of partnership and programming;
- iii. the challenges in terms of the current operating model;
- iv. that funding is in place as per the initial three-year agreement until November 2024; and
- v. that discussions are underway between partners to consider options for the future of the facility.

5. Wick Associated School Group Attainment Overview **Foir-shealladh air Buileachadh Buidheann Sgoiltean Co-cheangailte Inbhir Ùige**

There had been circulated Report No CC/07/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive - People.

In discussion, Members raised the following issues:

- the attendance figures for rural primary schools were excellent given the small number of pupils on their school rolls;
- information be provided on the work ongoing around attainment in small rural primary schools and how attainment at secondary level could be maintained and improved upon;
- the attendance at Wick High School was just marginally below the national and Highland average and inclusion rates excellent. The Area Education and Learning Manager and Head Teacher be invited to attend an area business meeting to discuss with Members the range of work ongoing, concerns and future plans;
- in terms of positive destinations, the need to reflect in future reports the higher than average number of pupils from Wick High School going into direct employment with some being supported by higher and further education;
- work be undertaken with other organisations such as Focus North to understand the training needs and address the skills gaps in the area going forward;
- more context be placed in the public domain in relation to school roll forecasts given the changes that could occur over time, reference being made to Wick High School which had now exceeded capacity despite previous forecasts;
- the Manager, Head Teachers, staff and pupils be commended on what was a positive report overall, specific reference being made to quality and standards and level of positive destinations achieved; and
- Members may not always agree fully with all aspects of Education Scotland inspection reports and it was recognised these reports captured a particular point in time.

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

6. Community Regeneration Fund Assessment of Deferred Applications Measadh air Iarrtasan Dàilichte airson na Maoin Ath-bheòthachaidh Coimhearsnachd

There had been circulated Report No CC/08/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Place.

Following discussion, the Committee **AGREED** the applications presented for a funding award from the Community Regeneration Fund as follows:

Organisation	Project Title	Grant Approved
John O' Groats Development Trust	John O' Groats Hall Refurbishment	£25,000.00
Home Start Caithness	Volunteer Coordinator and Family Hub	£68,142.00
Thurso Community Cafe	Helping Hub	£27,520.00
Wick Harbour Authority	Harbour Entrance Improvement Works - Phase 1	Not Approved. Members requested that the applicant be invited to a future area business meeting to discuss how they could support the Wick Harbour Authority in other ways.

7. Community Regeneration Fund - Assessment of Application from Ringfenced Funding

Maoin Ath-bheòthachaidh Coimhearsnachd – Measadh air Iarrtas airson Maoineachadh air Fheansadh Dheth

There had been circulated Report No CC/09/24 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

The Committee **AGREED** the application presented for a funding award from the Community Regeneration Fund as follows:

Organisation	Project Title	Grant Approved
The Highland Council	Wick Town Centre Regeneration Project	£50,000

8. Housing Performance Report – 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024 Aithisg Dèanadais a thaobh Taigheadais – 1 Giblean 2023 gu 31 Màrt 2024

There had been circulated Report No CC/10/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:

- officers be commended on the level of performance achieved against targets as set out in the report;
- in response to a query, it was confirmed a specific case in relation to a delay in a non-emergency repair of a fence would be investigated;
- an update was sought and provided on the Service's focus on early intervention in relation to rent arrears and tenants facing financial hardship including the advice and assistance offered by officers, third sector and specialist services;
- the potential to further improve performance on housing repairs; and
- whether there was a seasonal element to the variations shown in rent arrears and noting the position at the end of Quarter 4 reflected the ongoing work within the Service in response to the challenges faced.

The Committee **NOTED** the information provided on housing performance in the period 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024.

**9. Wick Common Good fund – Consultation on proposal to dispose by ribbon leases of small parcels of Common Good land at Riverside Park (south of River Wick) to wind farm developers for the oversail of turbines and other equipment necessary in connection with wind farms
Maoin Math Coiteachann Inbhir Ùige – Co-chomhairleachadh mun mholadh faighinn cuidhteas, tro mhàil ribeanan, de phìosan beaga fearainn leis a' Mhàoin Choitichinn aig Pàirc Taobh na h-Aibhne (deas air Abhainn Inbhir Ùige)**

There had been circulated Report No CC/11/24 by Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place and Acting Executive Chief Officer Performance & Governance.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:

- further clarity was sought and provided in relation to the short term work around detailed at section 4.3 of the report;

- concern that preparatory work for a wind farm development had commenced in Wick prior to the lease for the short term work around having been concluded;
- the Common Good Officer be commended on her responses to those who had submitted representations to the consultation; and
- Members had a responsibility to balance the issues raised in the representations and the benefits to the Common Good Fund through income generation opportunities.

Thereafter, and in terms of the public representations received, it was queried whether there was an option to progress this matter on a case by case basis as had been done with other wind farm developments in the area. It was confirmed that each development would be considered on a case by case basis and a general oversail, involving small portions of land, was being sought so that a full and lengthy consultation did not have to be carried out in each case. Council Members would ultimately continue to have the final decision on these matters.

Following on from the above, it was suggested there was a need to improve communication with the public and make it clear the disposals related to the air space above Common Good Land and not the actual land, in return for which the Fund would receive considerable financial benefit. There would be no occupation of the parcels of amenity Common Good Land under the proposals.

The Committee:

- i. **NOTED** the outcome of the consultation process undertaken as contained in the analysis at **Appendix 1**.
- ii. **APPROVED** the responses to the representations received within the consultation period for publication on the Council's website as contained in the document at **Appendix 2**.
- iii. **NOTED** the possibility that as some of the future lease arrangements may exceed 10% of the full value of Wick Common Good fund, governance provisions require it must be referred to a meeting of full Council for a decision.
- iv. **NOTED** the representations received together with the responsibilities for the Wick Common Good fund.
- v. following consideration of the representations received and the best interests of Wick Common Good fund:
 - a) **AGREED** to recommendation to full Council that the proposal should go ahead (see paragraph 6.3).
 - b) **NOTED** that, if approval is recommended, it will be necessary to seek Sheriff Court consent because the area of land is classed as inalienable.

10. Ward Discretionary Awards Duaisean fo Ùghdarras Uàird

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:

Caithness Chamber of Commerce – Caithness Transport Forum	£500.00
Thurso Community Benefit Society – Socially Growing Project	£2,500.00
Thurso Football Academy – Professional Coaching Event	£1,500.00
Sidhchailleannart – Legends of Caithness	£675.00

Feis Ghallaidh/Caithness 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
Vikki Mackay School of Dance – 1 st Annual Easter Festival	£500
CastleTown Youth Club – Community Sharing Shed	£1800
Caithness Voluntary Groups – Befriending Green Health Walks	£250
Thurso Festive Lights – Christmas Tree Support Improvements	£1500
Dwarwick Pier Association – Picnic Area	£2000
Total	£15,001.50

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
RBLs Wick, Canisbay and Latheron Branch – Poppy Wreath	£120.00
Wick Development Trust – Campsite Toilet Block	£4800.00
Highlife Highland – Where We Live Street Arts	£200.00
Caithness Voluntary Groups – Befriending Green Health Walks	£250.00
Dunbeath & District Centre – Emergency Status – Community Resilience	£2450.00
Total	£16,051.50

The meeting ended at 12.30pm.