

**The Highland Council
Sutherland County Committee**

Minutes of Meeting of the Sutherland County Committee held the Chamber, Council Offices, Drummuie on Tuesday, 24 May 2016 at 10.30am.

Present:

Mr G Farlow

Mr H Morrison

Mrs D Mackay

Mr G Phillips

Mr J McGillivray

Officials in attendance:

Mr H Ross, Senior Ward Manager, Corporate Development Service

Mr D Goldie, Head of Housing, Community Services

Mr C Stewart, Area Community Services Manager, Community Services

Mr G Nichols, Care & Learning Manager, Care & Learning Service

Mr I Moncrieff, Assistant Area Manager, Community Services

Ms M Ross, Principal Housing Officer, Community Services

Mr G Cameron, Ward Manager, Corporate Development Service

Ms J Scotson, Business Change Manger, Corporate Development Service

Ms A Macrae, Committee Administrator, Corporate Development Service

Also in Attendance:

Item 4: Group Manager M Loynd, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

**1. Apologies for Absence
Leisgeulan**

An apology for absence was intimated on behalf of Ms L Munro.

**2. Declarations of Interest
Foillseachaidhean Com-pàirt**

Item 10: Mr G Farlow (financial)

**3. Digital Inclusion Presentation
Taisbeanadh mu Chom-pàirteachadh Didseatach**

The Business Change Manager gave a presentation on Digital Inclusion during which she highlighted the benefits which allowed customers access to Council Services anytime, anywhere on any device. To date, nearly 11k customers had signed up to “myaccount” to use this facility and this generated savings not only in staff time but also in improved process times. She advised that 87 forms were now available online and the range of activities was to be collated into a poster/leaflet which would be displayed at Service Points etc. The project aimed to develop a sustainable, partnership approach to addressing issues around Digital inclusion in the Highlands through a range of workstreams, details of which she provided. To help customers to use the system a variety of training and courses were available, and she provided the details of those taking place in Sutherland.

In conclusion, the Business Change Manager advised that she would circulate Members with a copy of the presentation, on-line forms leaflet and contact details

for digital champions in Sutherland. She also invited Members' comments on any issues associated with digital inclusion.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- clarification was sought and provided in regard to how the Council's pothole app could be accessed;
- it was important that assistance from the Council's customer services staff particularly through Service Points continued to be available for those clients who would continue to require assistance with IT in the long term;
- the opportunities to link in with local post offices in areas where there was no service point in relation to the requirement to provide ID for some online forms;
- the opportunities for the public to access other sources of free Council Wi-Fi coverage in rural areas where there was no access to a service point or library;
- it was suggested that the surcharge on credit card payments acted as a disincentive in terms of the public making payments on-line and that the potential for this to be reviewed be investigated;
- the importance of service points continuing to be an integral part of digital inclusion in Highland, particularly in rural areas;
- concern at the level of service provided by BT with specific reference to slow response times to repair telephone and broadband faults;
- concern at the lack of digital connectivity in some areas with specific reference to continuing concerns being expressed Creich Community Council in relation to Rosehall on this matter; and
- it was important that consideration be given to how the employment opportunities arising from digital inclusion could be dispersed on a geographical basis and particularly into rural areas.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the presentation.

4. Scottish Fire and Rescue Local Performance Report 2015-16 Seirbheis Smàlaidh is Teasairginn – Geàrr-chunntas Dèanadais Sgìreil

There had been circulated Report No SCC/10/16 dated 15 April 2016 by the Local Senior Officer for Highland which provided an update on progress against the priorities outlined in the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service Area Committee Plan for Caithness and Sutherland 2015-2016. The report also contained previously agreed information and performance as requested by Committee Members.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- that the Service be commended on its proactive approach to fire prevention and on its exemplary partnership working with the Scottish Ambulance Service and NHS Highland;
- in regard to recruitment it was disappointing that following a successful open evening in Lochinver together with the permitted travel time from the fire station having been extended, only a small number of applications had been received with one person having been recruited to date;
- in regard to the above it was important to continue to be proactive in terms of recruitment at Lochinver and all other fire stations where this was an issue;

- the potential for amateur football teams in the County to be targeted in terms of recruitment;
- it was explained that as part of a joint CPR project in Helmsdale between the Scottish Ambulance Service and the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service an event was to be held at the fire station at which it was hoped to attract both volunteer first responders and retained fire fighters;
- it was important to be aware of the increasing volume of traffic travelling on the North Coast 500 route and the potential for there to be more activity around road traffic collisions;
- it was reported that a senior Safe Highlander event would be held in Rogart Village Hall on 22 June 2016 at which the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service would be present; this would provide an opportunity to reinforce the importance of home fire assessments; and
- in regard home fire assessments it was important that further consideration be given as how to reach the most vulnerable and hard to reach in communities.

During further discussion issues were raised around the appliances sent to deal with a recent wild fire in Tongue which it was suggested had left the area between Thurso and Ullapool without cover and the opportunity for this to be reviewed for any future incidents. The Local Senior Officer advised that one of the crews attending the fire may have been on a monitoring role and available for call out but he provided an assurance that he would investigate the matter further.

In addition concern was also expressed at the lack of welfare facilities for the firefighters on duty at the fire overnight and it was requested that this also be reviewed on the basis there were local Hotels and other premises in the area that would be willing to provide supplies in future. In response the Local Senior Officer advised that he would investigate the provision of welfare facilities in future.

Thereafter, it was suggested that in view of the proximity of the wild fire in Tongue to nearby residences there would be merit in the Service approaching landowners and land managers in the area to discuss how to reduce the risk to properties through land management strategies. The Local Senior Officer provided details of the proactive approach being taken by the Service in this regard with a view to prevention, and provided an undertaking that this would continue to be progressed.

It was also reported that at its next meeting the Sutherland District Partnership would be considering an agenda item on a Sutherland wide approach to the practical aspects of wild fires and it was suggested that further piece of work was required in regard to a joined up approach on this matter.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the Area Performance Report.

5. Participatory Budgeting – Sutherland Buidseatadh Com-pàirteach – Cataibh

The Ward Manager provided Members with a verbal update on the participatory budgeting event ‘Stronger Sutherland’ held in Lairg Community Centre on Saturday 21 June 2016 which he indicated had been organised by a Steering Group comprising a range of community members from across Sutherland. He indicated that in excess of 100 people had attended the event and that on the day 32 applications from across the County had been considered for the available funding of £15,000. In recognition that transport was a particular issue for people attending

the event, the Ward Manager advised that community buses had been made available in all areas, although not all of the transport provided had been utilised.

In summary, the Ward Manager advised that the event had been extremely successful and inclusive bringing together a wide range of groups and people of all ages from across Sutherland. Going forward further discussions would be required in regard to the format of future events, in recognition of the challenges presented by the size and geography of Sutherland and associated travel and transport issues.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- the success of the event be welcomed and also the fact there had been a fair outcome with those in attendance voting for a spread of projects across Sutherland and for projects which had a wider social impact and benefit;
- a point that the quality of presentations had varied and the potential for advice and assistance to be given to participants on this aspect in respect of future events;
- the fact that this had been regarded as a community event with the Council maintaining a low profile be welcomed
- a point in regard to the need to engage with the community in Edderton in relation to future events;
- a request that the video of the event be presented to the Committee at the next meeting;
- it was suggested that the event had also been valuable in terms of the networking which had taken place between the different groups and parties in attendance who otherwise may not have been in contact;
- clarification was sought on the total cost of the event; it was confirmed that the exact figure could not be confirmed at this stage but that the costs incurred related mainly to the hire of the hall, and provision of lunch, refreshments and transport to and from the event;
- issues around the challenges faced in regard to future events associated with the geography of Sutherland and ongoing significant reductions in the Council's budget;
- in regard to the above it was noted that the Steering Group would be holding a follow up meeting in the near future to discuss the way forward including the potential for smaller events be held in different locations around the County and transport arrangements;
- the opportunities to expand events to include other items and presentations which may be of interest to participants, for example items which may have previously been reported to ward forums; and
- caution should be exercised in relation to the suggestion that participatory budgeting be used as mechanism to allocate mainstream Council budgets on the basis that there some areas that would not be appropriate.

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

6. Sutherland Associated School Groups - Overview Buidhnean Sgoiltean Co-cheangailte Chataibh – Sealladh Farsaing

There had been circulated Report No SCC/11/16 dated 16 May 2016 by the Director of Care and Learning which provided Members with an overview, as at May 2016, of the Sutherland Associated School Groups.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- it was requested that a report on the implications of the Wood Report be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee;
- clarification was sought and an explanation provided on the reasons for placing requests in terms of whether these tended to be subject led or were for other reasons, and also on the implications in terms of the provision of school transport if a request was granted;
- a point in regard to the fact that Ardgay Primary School had not been included in the report, albeit it was linked to Tain ASG and that this be addressed for future reports;
- the potential for Ullapool High School to be highlighted in future reports given that pupils resident in Sutherland attended the School;
- the joint working between North Highland College and schools in Sutherland should be acknowledged on the basis that the sharing of resources and best practice ultimately benefited the pupils; and
- an explanation was sought and provided on the status of a school which had been mothballed. The rules around mothballing were clarified that after a maximum of three years in the event there had been no change to make the school viable then the Council was required to move to a statutory consultation to close the school and reassign the catchment area.

Thereafter, reference was made to the proposed mothballing of Altnaharra Primary School and representations local Members had received from a range of parties that the School remain open. In this regard reference was made to the fact that if the School was closed the primary school pupils would require to undertake a lengthy round trip on school transport to Farr Primary School which raised issues of safety particularly given the cold conditions experienced in Altnaharra and concerns over road conditions over the winter months. It was also considered that the travel distance was too far for primary school children pupils to have to undertake on a daily basis.

In responding to the above, the Care and Learning Manager advised that the Head of Education was to meet with parents on an individual basis to discuss the educational requirements and benefits for their children in terms of the curriculum for excellence and its emphasis on social interaction and team working and to listen to their views. The Director of Care and Learning was also to organise a meeting with the local community to seek their views and to impart the rationale for the proposal.

During further discussion, a point was raised that while acknowledging the challenges in terms of travel there was a need to exercise caution on this matter in the context of being governed by GIRFEC and the fact that a child only had one chance at his or her education. Reference was made to the challenges which existed at schools in the area with low numbers on the roll in terms of team sports, wider activities and peer led and social learning. There was also a concern in regard to the difficulties pupils may face in the transition from a very small school to a much larger secondary school. In this regard the meeting to be held between the Director of Care and Learning and the local community was welcomed as a positive step.

In response to the above a further point was made that a former Head Teacher of Farr High School had advised that the attainment of pupils of Altnaharra Primary School over the past ten years had been excellent. It was also suggested that children in small schools regularly participated in activities outwith their area and with other schools.

Thereafter and following further discussion, the Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the content of the report, on the basis that some information is historic and that it is anticipated that future Committee Meetings will be considering reports on specific ASG's, which will be more current;
- ii. **AGREED** to express concern in relation to the impact on pupils at Altnaharra if the school is mothballed in particular in relation to travel and to request the Director of Care and Learning to reconsider the mothballing proposal during the consultation meetings with parents and the community; and
- iii. **AGREED** that a report on the implications of the Wood Report be submitted to a future meeting.

7. Maintenance Programme for Roads and Bridges Prògram Càraidh airson Rathaidean is Dhrochaidean

There had been circulated Report No SCC/12/16 dated 13 May 2016 by the Director of Community Services which invited Members to approve the Maintenance Programmes for Roads and Bridges for the Sutherland Area for 2016/17.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- it would be helpful to assist the Committee in managing the asset base if future reports included ragging information in relation to the overall condition status of roads and bridges in Sutherland so that Members could examine trends and to allow comparisons to be made with other areas in Highland;
- the above would also allow representations to be made to the Community Services Committee for additional funding if the Committee felt the condition of the network in Sutherland was slipping relative to other areas in Highland;
- it would be helpful if regular updates could be provided on works undertaken within individual wards;
- it was suggested that the community work officers should be provided with more flexibility in terms of devolved powers and also have their budget allocations increased;
- clarification was sought and provided around the budget allocation listed under the heading of 'HQ' as detailed in appendix 1 of the report;
- there was a need for more effective white lining of roads to be undertaken, particularly central lining, on the grounds of roads safety and also as a spend to save item in that it would help protect the road verges from damage; the Assistant Area Manager advised that there the Council had agreed a five year white lining programme to be carried out by an external contractor, further details of which he would provide to Members in relation to Sutherland;
- in regard to the above the opportunities for the Council's staff to undertake additional white lining works for example to improve junctions over a similar period; the Assistant Area Manager advised that he would discuss this matter directly with Mr H Morrison;
- reference was made to the fact the Braesgill Bridge had been washed away on a number of occasions and it was reported that the view locally was that it should be replaced by a ford; the Assistant Area Manager confirmed that he would investigate this matter further;

- a point in regard to the problems which had been experienced with surface dressing works and in particular new chippings not bonding with the emulsion and the damage caused to vehicle windscreens as a result; it was suggested that no further works should be undertaken until these issues had been resolved;
- the Chair advised that he had raised this matter with the Director of Community Services on the basis that this was a general problem experienced with surface dressing in the area;
- it was noted that the success of surface dressing was heavily temperature dependent and it was queried whether advice on this matter had been sought from Roadex on the basis that Nordic countries experienced the same problems; the Assistant Area Manager indicated that he would check and report back to the Chair on this matter;
- it was noted that the JetPatcher was to be used in Sutherland in July 2016 and details were sought and provided on the areas it would be deployed and the staff involved; and
- concern in regard to the ongoing priority attached to the Dornoch-Embo road; in response to a point raised, the Assistant Area Manager confirmed he would check the signage on the road and consider if it could be more appropriately placed.

The Committee:-

- APPROVED** the Maintenance Programmes for Roads and Bridges for the Sutherland County Committee Area for 2016/17;
- AGREED** that future reports include information on the overall condition status of roads and bridges in Sutherland to allow trends to be examined and comparisons made with other areas in Highland; and
- AGREED** that Members be provided with details of the roads in Sutherland included in the Council's five year white lining programme.

8. Golspie Links Coastal Protection Works Obraichean Dìon Cladaich Fighdeach Ghoillspidh

There had been circulated Report No SCC/13/16 dated 13 May 2016 by the Director of Community Services which updated Members with regard to the Golspie Links Coastal Protection Works.

In presenting the report, the Assistant Area Manager advised that once the design work and cost estimates had been completed he would provide an update on progress to the relevant ward business meeting. He also advised that remedial works would require to be included in subsequent capital programmes.

The Chair advised that there had been some local concerns over material which had been removed during the most recent remedial works and that it would be helpful for clarification to be provided as to the volume of material removed and for what purpose it had been used.

Thereafter, the Chair referred to the work of the Golspie Links Trust in regard to the area at the end of the rock armour and proposals by the Trust to undertake a beach replenishment scheme. As part of this he advised that both the Trust's feasibility study and a large volume of aerial photography of the coast could be made available to the Assistant Area Manager to assist with the coastal protection scheme. The Chair further advised that Scottish Natural Heritage had advised that what was once a 1:100 storm was now predicted to be a 1:60 event and therefore

it was likely there would be more overtopping in future. He indicated that the relevant research and information could also be made available to the Manager and he provided the relevant contact details in this regard.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the updated situation with regard to Golspie Links Coastal Protection Works.

9. Sutherland Traffic Order Programme Prògram Òrdugh Trafaig Chataibh

There had been circulated Report No SCC/14/16 dated 13 May 2016 by the Director of Community Services which updated Members with regard to the Traffic Order Programme for Sutherland Roads. The report advised that there were currently three outstanding traffic orders being progressed in Sutherland.

The Assistant Area Manager explained that the processing and implementation of traffic orders was generally a lengthy process involving significant staff resources on the basis they had to be legally watertight to ensure the process was not open to challenge. He also outlined the statutory consultation process for traffic orders and the mechanism for dealing with any objections received which would be determined by the Committee. Having regard to the above he advised that the proposed timetable for dealing with the current outstanding orders was as follows:-

- Bonar Bridge 30mph Speed Limit Extension – a review would be undertaken in the summer and it was anticipated the Order would be completed in the current financial year;
- Edderton 40mph Speed Limit Reduction – it was proposed that following completion of the above this order be progressed in 2017/18 with anticipated completion by the end of that financial year; and
- Amended Disabled Persons Parking Provision Order – it was proposed this would be progressed once the above Order had been completed.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- It was important that regular updates be provided to the Committee to allow Members to monitor progress with the priority programme;
- clarification was sought and provided in regard to the location and extent of the area covered by the Bonar Bridge speed limit extension;
- clarification was sought on any proposed traffic calming measures in response to Elphin Residents' concerns over motorists speeding on the A835 through the village and the potential for markings to be painted on the road as a traffic calming measure ; the Assistant Area Manager confirmed that a speed indication device was to be provided and that appropriate traffic calming measures would be taken forward; and
- reference was made to the fact that the 'slow down' sign at Laxford Bridge was lying off the road and required to be repaired and reinstated; the Assistant Area Manager confirmed he would attend to this matter at the earliest opportunity.

The Committee **NOTED** the updated situation with regard to Traffic Orders.

10. Housing Performance Report - 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2016 Aithisg Dèanadais a thaobh Taigheadais - 1 Giblean 2015 gu 31 Dùbhlachd 2016

Declaration of Interest: Mr G Farlow declared a financial interest in this item as a Council house tenant but, in terms of the dispensation granted by the Standards Commission for Scotland, remained to participate in the discussion.

There had been circulated Report No SCC/15/16 dated 22 April 2016 by the Director of Community Services which provided information on how the Housing Section performed in relation to the Scottish Social Housing Charter and other performance indicators up to 31 March 2016.

Arising from the report the Principal Housing Officer advised of a correction to 'Table 4 – Current Rent Arrears' so that for Quarter 4 for 2015/16 it read as follows:- North, West & Central Sutherland – £17314 and East Sutherland & Edderton - £10712.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- reference was made to the trend in some areas of Sutherland, with specific reference to Dornoch, whereby young people who had left the area were returning as they regarded it as a safe place to live and work and bring up a family;
- in regard to the above a point was raised that Dornoch was a pressured area in terms of housing development and that while some private housing developments had helped the situation there continued to be a lack of social housing which required low capital investment; in response to questions the Head of Housing advised that his understanding was that Dornoch had been identified as a pressured community within the Housing Development Programme but that he would provide further confirmation to Members in this regard;
- in terms of right to buy clarification was sought on the areas in Sutherland which were subject to pressured area status; the Head of Housing advised that his understanding was that pressured area status applied to the whole of the Highlands with the exception of a handful of communities in Caithness but that he would provide Members with further clarification on this matter;
- it was reported that the Kinlochbervie Community Company had leased two houses in the village from the Care and Learning Service which had been declared surplus to requirements;
- In regard to the above it would be helpful if Members and other parties could be informed that these properties were available for lease; reference was also made to the fact the Council would benefit in terms of Council tax being paid for these properties and would also not be responsible for any potential future voids;
- the opportunities to replicate the above model and encourage community developers to work in partnership with the Council particularly in relation to long term voids;
- discussion in regard to progress with the Council's rural leasing scheme in Sutherland, it being noted that a recent offer of a property for use under this scheme had been refused due to lack of demand;
- clarification was sought and provided on the two key performance indicators listed in appendix 1 which had a ragging status of amber and red;
- clarification was sought and provided on the points system within the allocations policy; and

- a query in regard to the percentage of Council houses in Highland which were either over or under occupied; the Head of Housing advised that this information would be contained in the annual monitoring report on the Housing Register allocations policy to be submitted to the next meeting of the Community Services Committee.

During further discussion it was suggested that it would be helpful if an overview could be provided on local demand in communities. The Principal Housing Officer advised that she would e-mail Members with the link for 'Prospect's on the Council's intranet on the basis this provided a range of information including the demand for every settlement per type of house. She would also provide Members with the contact details for the Housing Options Officers.

The Committee:-

- NOTED** the information provided on housing performance in the period 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2016; and
- AGREED** that Members be circulated with the link for 'Prospect' on the Council's intranet and also the contact details for the Housing Option Officers.

11. Minutes Geàrr-chunntas

There were circulated Minutes of the Sutherland County Committee held on 9 February 2016, which were approved by the Council on 10 March 2016.

Arising from item 6 of the Minute, under the heading 'Local Committees– Webcasting' the Senior Ward Manager advised that the request that an oral record of meetings be made available on the Council's website had been explored. In this regard she provided a summary of the associated costs, the fact there would be limited benefits and also likely low usage and other technical and practical issues on the basis of which it was recommended this option be not taken forward.

The Committee:-

- NOTED** the minutes; and
- NOTED** that under item 6 'Local Committees – Webcasting' the potential for an oral recording of the meeting to be made available had been explored and **AGREED** that no further action be taken on the matter.

The meeting ended at 3.05pm.
