

**The Highland Council
Caithness Committee**

Minutes of Meeting of the Caithness Committee held in Wick Town Hall, Bridge Street, Wick, on Tuesday, 14 February 2017 at 10.00am.

Present:

Mr D Bremner
Mrs G Coghill
Mr B Fernie
Mr D Mackay

Mr W MacKay
Mr M Reiss
Mr J Rosie
Mr R Saxon

Officials in attendance:

Ms H Ross, Senior Ward Manager, Corporate Development Service
Mr A Macmanus, Ward Manager, Corporate Development Service
Mr M Macleod, Head of Planning and Building Standards, Development & Infrastructure Service
Mr D Cowie, Principal Planner, Development & Infrastructure Service
Mr D Chisholm, Planner, Development & Infrastructure Service
Mr B Northedge, Education Quality Improvement Manager, Care and Learning Service
Mr G Mackenzie, Roads Operations Manager, Community Services
Ms M Ross, Principal Housing Officer, Community Services
Ms A Macrae, Committee Administrator, Corporate Development Service

Also in Attendance:

Item 3: Chief Inspector I MacLelland, Police Scotland

Mr R Saxon in the Chair

Preliminaries

Additional Urgent Item

Caithness General Hospital – Maternity Services

The Chair **AGREED** to consider this item as an additional urgent item to allow an update to be provided in respect of the changes to maternity services at Caithness General Hospital in response to a recent press article.

Mr B Fernie referred to a recent article in the John O’Groat Journal where the Chair had been quoted on behalf of the Caithness Committee in regard to the changes in maternity services at Caithness General Hospital. He advised that not all Members of the Committee agreed with his comments as set out in the article.

The Chair indicated that he had been misquoted in the article and had asked the John O’Groat Journal for a retraction and provided them with an account of events which was that the Committee had agreed to request that NHS Highland arrange for an independent review to be carried out of the proposed maternity care changes and their wider impacts, which they had subsequently declined to undertake. Since then a meeting involving Members, NHS Highland and representatives of the Caithness Health Action Team (CHAT) had been held, and a further meeting was due to be held involving the Scottish

Ambulance Service. A working group was also to be set up with a wide ranging membership, details of which he provided.

Thereafter, Mr Fernie indicated that he intended to submit a notice of motion to the next Highland Council meeting on 9 March 2017 which called for the Council to take forward an independent review of the changes to maternity services in Caithness and the wider impacts, which he considered had been requested at the previous meeting of the Committee on 22 November 2016. In response, the Chair advised that the minute of the previous meeting, including the Committee's request that NHS Highland undertake an independent review, had been approved without comment at the Council meeting on 15 December 2016.

The Committee **NOTED** the update.

**1. Apologies for Absence
Liesgeulan**

An apology for absence was intimated on behalf of Mr N Macdonald.

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

Item 4 – Mr D Mackay (non-financial)

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

There had been circulated Report No CC/01/17 dated 2 February 2017 by the North Area Commander which provided a local summary update to Committee Members on progress with reference to the local priorities within the Highland 2014-2017 Policing Plan.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- confirmation was sought and received that there was close partnership working between the Police and NHS Highland in dealing with mental health calls to ensure people with mental health issues were accommodated in an appropriate place of safety;
- the Livestock Worrying Campaign 2017 be welcomed with particular reference to problems of sheep worrying in the area;
- a point in regard to the training Police officers received to deal with emergency calls where they may be the first point of contact, for example in cases involving pregnant women;
- while the increase in the figures in respect of the festive drink/drug drive campaign was disappointing, Police Scotland should be commended on their detection rates;
- concern was expressed around the number of abandoned and uninsured/unlicensed end of life vehicles located on both public and private land in communities and the action that could be taken in response to this type of antisocial behaviour; the Chief Inspector acknowledged Members concerns on this issue and confirmed that he would investigate this matter further;

- reference to the success of Operation Notebook in continuing to identify and deal with offenders at an early stage through its interventions and preventative approach to antisocial behaviour;
- the correlation between the number of licensed premises checks and the reduction in crime was welcomed;
- the positive figures in relation to detections around drugs and warrants executed was also welcomed;
- a point in regard to the contribution of alcohol to incidents of breach of the peace, common assault, antisocial behaviour, and vandalism in terms of the statistics outlined in the report; and
- clarification was sought in regard to the position regarding the Area Priorities for Caithness going forward; the Chief Inspector advised that he would seek to clarify this matter referring to the importance of the new locality plans being aligned with the next Policing Plan to meet the needs of local communities.

The Committee **NOTED** the progress report and updates in relation to the 3 Priorities; Road Safety, Alcohol and Drug Abuse/Misuse, and Antisocial Behaviour.

4. Caithness and Sutherland Local Development Plan Plana Leasachaidh Ionadail Ghallaibh agus Chataibh

Declaration of Interest - Mr D Mackay declared a non-financial interest in this item on the basis he had expressed an opinion in respect of a potential future planning development in Thurso and left the room for the determination of this item.

There had been circulated Report No CC/02/17 dated 2 February 2017 by the Director of Development and Infrastructure which presented the outcome of consultation on the Modified Proposed Caithness and Sutherland Local Development Plan (CaSPlan) in order that each of the Local Committees can agree the Council's position on outstanding issues to enable progression to the Examination stage.

In response to a question, the Principal Planner confirmed that the recommendation to the Committee was for the Council, through the Examination process, to defend its proposals as set out in the Modified Proposed Plan. He explained that through the Examination process an independent Reporter would consider all of the outstanding issues that had been raised through the consultation on the first Proposed Plan and the Modified Proposed Plan, including the objections/representations and the Council's position as agreed at Committee. The Reporter would then decide whether any further changes should be made to the Plan before it was adopted by the Council.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- the recommended approach in respect of Site WK14 'Hillhead Primary School' was welcomed, reference being made to the importance and value of green space in improving the attractiveness and health and wellbeing benefits of developments;
- the recommendation to exclude Sites TS12 and TS14 from the Plan should be supported on the grounds it was important that both these greenfield sites be protected as amenity land for Thurso into the future;
- in regard to the socio-economic arguments being put forward for the inclusion of TS12 and TS14 in the Plan, concern was expressed that a

potential hotel development may result in jobs being displaced from facilities in the town centre;

- it was suggested that given the topography of Sites TS12 and TS14 that any mitigation would likely be insufficient to address the visual dominance of development;
- a contrary view was expressed that sites TS12 and TS14 should be included in the Plan on the basis of concerns about the need to retain and create jobs in Thurso and across the wider County, particularly with the decommissioning of operations at Dounreay and the impact this would have on the economy of the area;
- concern at the inclusion of the greenfield Site TS04 'Thurso West' on the basis there were a number of brownfield sites in the town which remained unoccupied;
- the potential for a postal ballot to be held locally in regard to the Thurso West sites, noting a precedent for this existed in respect of a previous development proposal in the County;
- it was difficult to predict the position in respect of jobs and employment in Caithness in the future at this stage;
- it was suggested the skills associated with jobs at Dounreay were not easily transferable to the hospitality trade;
- in regard to the comments of Dunnet and Canisbay Community Council the opportunity to include the reinstatement of the core path at John O'Groats, as an aspirational project for the future, noting there was a willingness within the local community to take this project over and that the position in regard to a coastal defence scheme may change in future; in response the Principal Planner confirmed this could be included as an aspirational project within the Action Programme that will accompany the Local Development Plan; and
- a point in regard to whether a comment could be included in the submission to the Reporter in regard to issues around jobs and employment in Caithness and particular concerns in relation to Thurso; the Principal Planner advised that issues around jobs had been raised in the representations received and would be included in the Schedule 4s to be submitted to the Reporter as part of the Examination stage.

Discussion then followed on Site TS04 'Thurso West', during which further clarity was provided on the different allocations within this site. It was reported that the Committee had agreed at its meeting on 31 August 2016 that the site remain presented as a single mixed use allocation within the Modified Proposed Local Development Plan with further detail on proposed uses, including the long term elements, being provided in the wording contained within the Plan.

In regard to the proposal to allocate Area D, as identified in Appendix 4, within Site TS04 for housing it was pointed out that there were existing issues with the road network at Pennyland estate and that further development in this area could make the situation worse, and therefore a separate access may be required. In addition clarification was sought in regard to how the site would be protected from any inappropriate piecemeal development.

In response, officers explained that as part of the developer requirements and prior to any development taking place on the site, a development brief/masterplan for the Thurso West site would be required to be prepared and that it would need to be approved by the Council. The development brief would set out in detail the proposals for the area and would safeguard against piecemeal development which

may not be consistent with the overall development proposals for the site. In addition the Plan already identified that a transport assessment will be required for TS04 to demonstrate that suitable access arrangements could be achieved to the satisfaction of the Council. It was also explained that the development brief for the site would be issued for public consultation and therefore there would be an opportunity for Members and the public to comment on the detail of the proposals at a future date.

Thereafter, the Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the comments received on the Modified Proposed Plan and updated Proposed Action Programme and **AGREED** to take the joint submission of NDA and DSRL into consideration and, likewise, to ask the Reporter(s) holding the subsequent Examination to consider it;
- ii. **NOTED** the issues raised through representations on the Plan and **AGREED** the Council's position as set out in Section 2 of the report and Appendices 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 also noting the decisions made previously by the Council's Committees on the proposed content for CaSPlan, subject to inclusion of the reinstatement of the core path at John O'Groats as an aspirational project within the Action Programme in response to the comments of Dunnet and Canisbay Community Council;
- iii. **AGREED** to authorise officers to undertake the statutory procedures required to progress the Modified Proposed Plan to Examination, including the submission of all Schedule 4s for 'unresolved issues' to Scottish Ministers; and
- iv. **AGREED** to authorise the Director of Development and Infrastructure, in consultation with the Chairs and Vice Chairs of the Local Committees, to make non-material changes to the Schedule 4s prior to their submission to the Directorate for Planning and Environmental Appeals.

5. **Associated School Group Overview** **Sealladh Coitcheann air Buidheann Sgoiltean Co-cheangailte**

There had been circulated Report No CC/03/17 dated 1 February 2017 by the Director of Care and Learning which provided an update of key information in relation to the schools within the Wick Associated School Group (ASG), and provided useful updated links to further information in relation to these schools.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- the trend in relation to the percentage of positive destinations for Wick High School continued to be disappointing and it was hoped an improvement would be observed in 2015/16; and
- concern at the number of pupils whose destinations were recorded as 'unemployed' or 'unknown' and the need for more proactive interventions to be explored to improve the statistics in this regard.

Thereafter, the Education Quality Improvement Manager reported on the Scottish Government's Pupil Equity Fund which provided additional funding to schools for each pupil registered for free school meals. He advised that significant additional funding could be secured through the initiative, and provided details of the sums involved for some schools in the area. In response to a question he indicated that he would circulate Members with information on the additional funding received by each individual school in Caithness. He also explained there was flexibility in terms

of how the schools used this additional funding including the potential for joined up working across ASGs in respect of attainment levels.

In regard to the above, Members suggested it was in the interests of individual schools to work proactively with parents to overcome any stigma associated with registering their children for free school meals and to explain the additional funding which was available to schools.

Thereafter, the Education Quality Improvement Manager provided an update on the Wick Campus advising that following the handover by Hub North Scotland and Morrison Construction to the Council, it had been confirmed that due to the level of snagging and other works still to be completed that the facilities would now open in April 2017, after the Easter school holidays.

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

6. Roads Structural Maintenance – 2017/18 Càradh Structarail Rathaidean – 2017/18

There had been circulated Report No CC/04/17 dated 23 January 2017 by the Director of Community Services which invited Members to approve the prioritised Structural Maintenance Programmes for Roads for the Caithness Area for 2017/18 and 2018/19.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- in terms of the Council's budget for 2017/18, the Administration was proposing that the budget allocation for structural maintenance would be protected with an uplift of £1m being applied for roads across Highland;
- in regard to the above, details were awaited as to how the uplift would be allocated although it was understood part of the monies would be used to purchase an additional machine to undertake jet patching across the Highland area;
- it was hoped there would be opportunities for further works to be undertaken in Caithness through the allocation of additional monies for roads;
- a request that Healthfield Road, Thurso should be considered as a high priority on the basis there had been issues with this road for a considerable period of time; the Roads Operations Manager advised that he would bring this matter to a Ward Business Meeting given the potential impact on other priority schemes;
- the potential to extend the proposed length of the works along Ormlie Road, Thurso on the basis that it was a well-used road which was in relatively poor condition; the Roads Operations Manager undertook to investigate this matter further;
- it was suggested there were fewer potholes across the County and reference was made to the positive comments which had been received from the public in this regard; the Manager was commended on the improvements being achieved and he was asked to extend the Committee's appreciation to the staff involved;
- a request that the removal of old signposts be further investigated; and
- a point in regard to the need to undertake white lining works at the entrance to TESCO in Wick on the basis of road safety issues associated with faded lines at the give way with the main road; the Roads Operations Manager advised that he would investigate this matter as a priority.

The Committee **APPROVED** the prioritised rolling programme of Maintenance for Roads for the Caithness Local Committee Area commencing in 2017/18, with any changes being ratified at Ward Business Meetings.

7. Housing Performance Report - 1 April 2016 to 31 December 2016
Aithisg Dèanadais a thaobh Taigheadais – 1 Giblean 2016 gu 31 Dùbhlachd 2016

There had been circulated Report No CC/05/17 dated 26 January 2017 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 December 2016.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- concern was expressed at the average time taken to complete non-emergency repairs in Thurso;
- in regard to the level of voids it was suggested that the most difficult to let properties were skewing the performance figures for Caithness and that early action was required to have these properties removed from the statistics;
- concern at the negative impact on rent arrears associated with an increasing number of tenants being moved onto Universal Credit;
- the opportunities for the Service's staff locally to undertake works to properties to reduce re-let times;
- it was suggested the pilot scheme being undertaken in Caithness to conduct six monthly tenant visits and inspections should be welcomed while noting there were associated resource implications;
- clarification was sought and received in respect of position with tenant arrears if they were evicted from their Council property;
- clarification was also sought and received in regard to the new housing support arrangements to be implemented by the Service; and
- the willingness of the Service to discuss with tenants issues around the provision of new windows at properties in Caithness be welcomed.

In regard to some of the points raised above, the Principal Housing Officer advised of changes to the Building Maintenance Team which she anticipated would have a positive impact on some of the statistics for Caithness. In particular, she reported that Mr Colin Sharp, Repairs Manager North, was now in post and that Members should contact him directly with any specific queries.

In regard to voids and difficult to let properties the Principal Housing Officer reported that an offer had been received for the block of four properties in Wick which had been declared surplus to requirements. In addition a further three properties were being considered for disposal, details of which she provided. The opportunity to market individual properties was also being considered.

The Committee **NOTED** the information provided on housing performance in the period 1 April 2016 to 31 December 2016.

8. **Cycling, Walking and Safer Streets Update** **Fios Às Ùr air Rothaireachd, Coiseachd is Sràidean nas Sàbhailte**

There had been circulated Report No CC/06/17 dated 25 January 2017 by the Director of Development and Infrastructure which invited Members to approve the projects delivered through the Scottish Government funding for Cycling, Walking and Safer Streets for the Caithness Committee, as set out in Appendix 1. This related to a project to install a footpath, barrier and lining at Miller Academy Primary School to make the usage of the drop off area safer for pupils, thus encouraging pupils to park and stride to/from school and also reduce school gate congestion.

In discussion, Members welcomed the project while expressing concern that the scheme may not prevent the public from continuing to park on the road and pavement in close proximity to the school and therefore that pupil safety would continue to be an issue.

In response, the Head of Planning and Building Standards explained that at this stage the lining would be advisory. In the event the scheme was proven not to work on a voluntary basis then more stringent action would require to be considered.

The Committee:-

- i. **APPROVED** the CWSS/SRTS project detailed in **Appendix 1**; and
- ii. **NOTED** that the Road Safety Unit will continue to work with schools to develop further SRTS Projects for future years.

9. **Minutes** **Geàrr-chunntas**

There were circulated and **NOTED** Minutes of the Caithness Committee held on 22 November 2016, which had been approved by the Council on 15 December 2016.

10. **Caithness Vision** **Lèirsinn Ghallaibh**

The Chair reported that he had circulated Members with a copy of the latest version of the Caithness Vision and invited any comments on the document. He also thanked Members for their contribution to the Caithness Vision to date.

The Committee **NOTED** the update.

The meeting ended at 12.40pm.
