

**The Highland Council  
Caithness Committee**

Minutes of Meeting of the Caithness Committee held in Wick Town Hall, Bridge Street, Wick, on Wednesday, 15 May 2019 at 10.00am.

**Present:**

Mr R Bremner  
Mr D Mackay  
Mr W Mackay

Mr M Reiss  
Mr K Rosie  
Ms N Sinclair

**Officials in attendance:**

Mrs H Ross, Senior Ward Manager, Chief Executive's Office  
Ms A Donald, Education Quality Improvement Manager, Care & Learning Service  
Mr S Dalgarno, Development Plans Manager, Planning & Development Service (by VC)  
Ms L MacKellaich, Road Safety Officer, Community Services (by VC)  
Ms J Sutherland, Senior Engineer, Community Services  
Ms M Ross, Principal Housing Officer, Community Services  
Mr J Allan, Lighting and Communications Manager, Community Services  
Mr J Gunn, Technician, Community Services  
Ms A Macrae, Committee Administrator, Chief Executive's Office

**Also in Attendance:**

Group Manager R Dibble, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service  
Ms K Jenks, External Auditor, Audit Scotland

**Mr M Reiss in the Chair**

The Chair welcomed Ms K Jenks, Audit Scotland who was attending the meeting in relation to the Best Value Assurance audit.

**1. Apologies for Absence  
Liesgeulan**

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr S Mackie and Mr A Sinclair.

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

There were no declarations of interest.

Following on from this item, It was proposed the Minutes be taken as the first item of substantive business on the agenda followed by 'Matters Arising' to allow Members to raise any issues from the previous meeting. In addition, it was suggested that an action tracker be produced for the Committee to allow Members to monitor progress with individual actions.

The Committee:-

- i. **AGREED** that in future the 'Minutes' be taken as the first item of substantive business on the agenda followed by an item 'Matters Arising'; and
- ii. **AGREED** that an action tracker be produced for the Committee.

### **3. Scottish Fire and Rescue Local Performance Report Aithisg Dèanadais Sgìreil na Seirbheis Smàlaidh is Teasairginn**

There had been circulated Report No CC/06/19 dated 3 May 2019 by the Local Senior Officer for Highland.

In discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- an update was sought on progress with the upgrading of Thurso Fire Station. It was confirmed that discussions were ongoing with NHS Highland on the potential for a shared facility in Thurso and Wick;
- clarification was sought and provided on the processes in place to identify individuals at risk and an update was provided on the lessons learnt by the Service and partners following a recent fire fatality;
- the potential to expand the use of social media as a measure to address recruitment challenges in the area;
- the appointment of a full time rural full time officer post in the area was a good news story and should be welcomed;
- the Service be thanked for the hard work and commitment of firefighters in tackling recent major wildfires in Sutherland. It was also important to thank employers for the support they had provided in releasing firefighters to attend these incidents and communities for the support they had provided;
- clarification was sought and provided on the decision making process around the deployment of a helicopter to tackle major wildfires and the process for recruiting and training volunteers to attend these incidents;
- the importance of continuing to reinforce key messages to the public with a view to reducing the number of wildfires.
- the potential to use Traffic Scotland's information signs to alert the public when there was a high fire risk. The Local Senior Officer advised that he would raise this matter with Traffic Scotland;
- the importance of ensuring the locations referred to in the Service's news releases were identified correctly; and
- an explanation was sought and provided on the interventions undertaken by the Service, including with schools, to reduce the number of deliberate fires.

The Committee following scrutiny, **NOTED** the Local Performance Report.

### **4. Area Priorities - Caithness: The Energy County Prìomhachasan Sgìreil – Gallaibh: Siorrachd an Lùtha**

There had been circulated Report No CC/07/19 dated 29 April 2019 by the Acting Head of Policy.

The Chair thanked Mr R Bremner and Ms N Sinclair in particular for their work in developing the Area Priorities.

In discussion, it was suggested this was a positive and aspirational document which achieved a good balance in terms of being a genuine strategic vision while also being as local and pragmatic as possible. It set realistic and achievable goals, and also tied in with the key themes of the Council's Programme.

Further points raised included:-

- a key issue for Caithness as the 'Energy County' was both the opportunities in the energy sector in terms of employment and the economy and also the collective energy and determination of communities within area to deliver on the area priorities;
- the challenge going forward was how to progress the document. There was a need to develop the local community partnership further and have a mechanism of tracking progress and measuring what was being delivered and achieved;
- the projections for depopulation in the area would only be realised if no action was being taken and therefore a key focus of the area priorities was to build on the plans already in place and focus on future plans, for example in the energy and technology sectors, and also on lobbying to create further opportunities
- there were communities in Caithness where the population was increasing and therefore it was important to maintain a balanced view across the whole area;
- a point in regard to the interest being expressed by local families in vacant affordable housing in Mey which was becoming available for sale and the boost this would provide to the community; and
- the creation of more modern apprenticeships in Caithness was key to retaining young people in the area.

The Committee:-

- i. **APPROVED** "Caithness: The Energy County", the local strategic priorities for Caithness, including the stated priorities for the next 12 months;
- ii. **AGREED** to promote these with the wider Council membership and as part of the Council's Programme 2017-22 Local Voices, Highland Choices;
- iii. **NOTED** that there will be opportunity through the Caithness Community Partnership and engagement with partner agencies, community bodies and communities to consider wider shared priorities over the Council's term; and
- iv. **NOTED** that further work will be done in 2019 to identify how the local priorities agreed can be supported by staff and any other Council resources. This will include considering how best to measure progress. Some priorities are already well aligned to the Council's Programme

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

There had been circulated Report No CC/08/19 dated 3 May 2019 by the Director of Care and Learning.

In discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- the need to ensure the continuation of Gaelic medium education from the current level of provision at nursery and primary school level within the ASG, through Thurso High School. An update was therefore requested in relation to the provision of and preparation for Gaelic medium education at the School;

- concern was expressed in relation to the review of the Council's policy on the transition from nursery to primary school. The view was expressed that while the driving factors to tighten up this policy maybe budget and capacity issues, these should not override the judgement of head teachers and parents, and the principal consideration should always be the wellbeing and development of the individual child. The Education Quality Improvement Manager confirmed that the wellbeing and development of the child was always the most important driver she would inform Ms N Sinclair of any meetings being arranged in relation to this policy;
- there were also potential resource implications associated with the additional support that maybe required for children starting school before they were ready to make the transition from nursery;
- the improvements delivered in the figures for positive destinations at Thurso High School was welcomed;
- the potential for Members to meet with Head Teachers in the area be investigated further ;
- clarification was sought and provided on the policies in place to reintegrate pupils who had carried out physical assaults at school;
- the Head Teacher and Senior Management Team at Thurso High School be congratulated on their hard work and proactive approach in delivering improvements at the School;
- concern at the delays in securing improvements to the bus turning area at Thurso High School and specifically in the Council providing a plan to show the developer the area of land involved, noting that this had been raised again at a recent meeting of the Parent Council;
- the offer of the refurbished former Janitor's House at Thurso School had contributed towards attracting two new teachers to the area, and the opportunities to upgrade other similar disused janitor's houses in the area. The Manager advised that this issue was being considered at a Highland wide level and she would report back to the Chair as to whether a report was to be brought to Members on the matter; and
- while the condition and suitability of Thurso High School was listed as 'poor', this did not reflect all parts of the building such as the soft areas, and the Senior Management Team should be commended on being realistic in relation to the prospect of a new build.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** following scrutiny, the content of the report; and
- ii. **AGREED** that an update be brought back to the Committee in relation to the provision of and preparation for Gaelic medium education at Thurso High School.

## 6. **Caithness & Sutherland Town Centre Strategy Supplementary Guidance Ro-innleachd Meadhan Baile Ghallaibh agus Chataibh**

There had been circulated Report No CC/09/19 dated 2 May 2019 by the Director of Development and Infrastructure.

In discussion, Members welcomed the report and raised the following issues:-

- the Supplementary Guidance complemented and supported the work being undertaken locally and involving a range of stakeholders to develop a town

centre regeneration strategy for Wick, which demonstrated there was a joint shared purpose on this matter;

- this joint approach created an opportunity to create a more vibrant, welcoming and identifiable town centre in Wick;
- in terms of next steps, it was important that the public consultation exercise was aligned with the consultation being undertaken locally;
- local Members would be encouraging the Thurso Community Development Trust to engage fully in the consultation and it would be helpful if a Council officer could meet with the Trust directly;
- support was expressed for the potential to convert vacant shops for residential use;
- caution was expressed in relation the practicality of cycling through the town centre precinct on safety grounds;
- in relation to the Thurso town centre, the opportunities to better signpost the views and proximity to the beach; and
- support for the focus in the Strategy regenerating the area around the Caithness Horizons building in Thurso.

The Committee:-

- i. **APPROVED** the Draft Caithness and Sutherland Town Centre Strategy Supplementary Guidance at **Appendix 1** for the purposes of public consultation;
- ii. **AGREED** to authorise officers to make minor presentational changes prior to publication, in consultation with and agreement from the chairs of the Area Committees;
- iii. **AGREED** the approach to public consultation as set out in section 5 of this report; and
- iv. **NOTED** that issues raised in comments received on the draft Strategy will be reported back to the two relevant Area Committees for their consideration, together with possible amendments to the Strategy prior to completion of procedures leading to its adoption as statutory Supplementary Guidance.

## **7. 20mph Speed Limit Implementation Wick Cur an Gnìomh Casg Astair 20msu ann an Inbhir Ùige**

There had been circulated Report No CC/10/19 dated 13 May 2019 by the Director of Community Services.

The Road Safety Officer advised that following a recent meeting with local Members, the proposed order/scheme extents had been amended to remove a number of arterial routes from the proposal i.e. North Road, Thurso Street, Thurso Road, George Street, Robert Street, Miller Avenue and Gowrie Place. In relation to the Bridge Street/High Street section it had been agreed to retain the 20mph limit on this routes on the basis this was an accident cluster area and that as parking restrictions in this area were to be removed this could naturally have the effect of increasing speeds.

In discussion, Members commented as follows:-

- the introduction of a blanket 20mph limit in Wick would not have been appropriate for the town and the amendments to the proposed order would

reduce driver frustration while at the same time significantly improving road safety particularly in school zones and built up residential areas;

- the Road Safety Officer be thanked for facilitating the amendments to the original proposal within a short timescale;
- clarification was sought and provided in relation to the retention of the 20mph limit on Bank Head Row/Station Road;
- clarification was sought and provided that four speed signs were being ordered for specific locations in Wick to support the implementation of the speed limit, and that after speed counts would be carried out to determine the effectiveness of the new speed limit;
- it was hoped the Police locally could undertake an appropriate level of enforcement following the implementation of the speed limit;
- the scope for camera vans to be deployed to assist with enforcement. The Road Safety Officer confirmed she would investigate the potential to request that a camera van be deployed; and
- a request that a meeting be arranged with local Members to consider traffic management issues in Ward 2: Thurso and North West Caithness.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the background to the proposed 20mph speed limit order for Wick, in particular the collision history, and the representations received;
- ii. **APPROVED** the making of the Road Traffic Regulation Order (RTRO), subject to an amendment to remove arterial routes from the proposal on the basis agreed with local Members; and
- iii. **NOTED** the intention to carry out after speed counts to determine effectiveness of the new reduced speed limit, and **AGREED** that the potential for camera vans to be deployed be investigated.

The Committee further **AGREED** that a meeting be arranged with local Members to consider traffic management issues in Ward 2: Thurso and North West Caithness.

## **8. Road Structural Maintenance Report 2019/20** **Càradh Structarail Rathaiden 2019/20**

There had been circulated Report No CC/11/19 dated 2 May 2019 by the Director of Community Services.

In discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- concern around the extreme challenges in terms of the available budget and the condition of the road network in the area and the frustrations this created for Members and the public;
- concern the schemes local Members were identifying as priorities were not been recognised in the Programme;
- the plan to have monthly meetings between Roads officers and Members to discuss progress with roads issues was welcomed on the basis there was a need to improve communication; and
- a point in regard to the potential costs associated with undertaking works to improve the condition of Ormlie Road, Thurso. The Senior Engineer confirmed she would provide the Chair with the costs of repairs and overlaying.

Thereafter, the local Members advised that they had expected the Riverside/Norseman Car Park in Wick to be included within the Programme. This was on the basis that a fit for purpose car park in this location was considered to be an important part of the holistic approach being taken locally to the regeneration of Wick town centre. It was important therefore that the Service had regard to the views of Members, local community council and the public on this issue.

Members expressed concern that car park had been deteriorating for a number of years. There was a question as to which Service within the Council was responsible for its maintenance, and concern was expressed that this type of bureaucracy should not be allowed to take priority over localism. It was acknowledged there had been a commitment given by the Service to carry out pot hole repairs to the car park at a cost of approximately £6k. However, it was requested that a new Programme be developed which included a good repair of the Norseman Car Park, and an indication provided on the implications for the other schemes to ensure a reasonable level of safety and quality was maintained in terms of the priorities identified within the Programme

The Senior Engineer advised that the capital element of the Programme was allocated for roads schemes on the basis of the mileage of roads in the area. She understood that the Care and Learning Service who were responsible for the car park had instructed repairs at a cost of £50k to be carried out, but she was unaware of what these works would involve.

In response, Members expressed concern that they had not been informed about the intention of the Care and Learning Service to allocate monies to carry out repairs to the car park. There was a need for clarity to be provided at a senior level within the Council as to level of repairs this would achieve, and whether it would include re-lining works. There was also a need to consider whether the Roads budget or alternative sources funding could be used to top up the 50k to achieve a higher standard of repair.

In regard to the proposal to defer consideration of the Programme, the Senior Engineer cautioned that there was a narrow window in June and July for undertaking surface dressing works.

During further discussion, it was suggested that the Roads Structural Maintenance Programme 2019/20 be deferred to an urgent special meeting of the Committee to allow further consideration on the options in respect of the Norseman Car Park, Wick, and that the Director of Community Services or the Head of Roads and Transport be invited to attend, by video conference if more convenient. This would be on the basis that the allocation of £6k to undertake emergency pot hole repairs would also be deferred meantime.

The Committee **AGREED** to defer consideration of the Roads Structural Maintenance Programme 2019/20 to an urgent special meeting of the Committee, and that the Director of Community Services or Head of Roads and Transport be asked to attend this meeting.

## **9. Christmas Lighting and Decorations Solais agus Sgeadachaidhean Nollaige**

There had been circulated Report No CC/12/19 dated 29 April 2019 by the Director of Community Services.

In discussion, reference was made to the opportunity to use Ward discretionary funds to assist with the additional amounts of community funding that would be required, as detailed in the report.

It had been reported that the new LED street lights on the A9 at Spittal, had not been fitted with the connections to allow Christmas lighting to be erected. In response, it was confirmed that the trunk road was the responsibility of BEAR Scotland and communities would have to bear the costs which were prohibitive. The Lighting and Communications Manager confirmed that where the Council replaced street lighting connections were provided, and undertook to check any opportunities in respect of the truck road.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** that the Council has previously removed the £35,000 budget for the delivery of Christmas lighting;
- ii. **AGREED** to liaise with local Community Councils and/or Community Groups where communities wish to deliver Christmas lighting and decorations; and
- iii. **NOTED** that Health & Safety and general guidance will be published for communities to enable the safe erection of Christmas lighting and decorations in the future.

#### **10. Housing Performance Report - 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019**

**Aithisg Dèanadais a thaobh Taigheadais - 1 Giblean 2018 to 31 Am Mart 2019**

There had been circulated Report No CC/13/19 dated 3 May 2019 by the Director of Community Services.

The Principal Housing Officer circulated a corrected the narrative in connection with section 6.3 of the report.

In discussion, concern was expressed at the delay between the budget being agreed in February and authority to recruit requests being granted, with specific reference to a vacant housing management post in the area for which budget provision had been made.

Related to the above, it was reported that complaints were being received in relation to the standard of grass cutting in the area due fact the grass cutting programme had commenced late. The budget had been agreed in February and therefore it was critical that by the beginning of April, budget holders had the authority to commit to the ordering of machinery to ensure works could commence at start of the season.

Further points raised included:-

- an update was sought and provided on the continuing challenges associated with the impact of Universal Credit on rent arrears in the area, noting that slow improvements were being observed;
- clarification was sought on the issues around the potential to provide housing for homeless people from other areas in void properties in



Caithness and reference to the challenges around having the infrastructure and capacity within services in the area to support and sustain such tenancies;

- issues around advantaging certain professional groups such as teachers in terms of cheap accommodation including the option of refurbishing janitors houses given the level of voids in the area; and
- in regard to the above, it was suggested that Members have a separate discussion on the options to reduce the number of void properties in Caithness in a forthcoming meeting on the environmental budget.

The Committee following scrutiny, **NOTED** the information provided on housing performance in the period 1 April 2018 to 31 March 2019.

## **11. Minutes**

### **Geàrr-chunntas**

There were circulated and **NOTED** Minutes of the Caithness Committee held on 20 February 2019, which were approved by the Council on 7 March 2019.

The meeting ended at 1.45pm.

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**The Highland Council  
Caithness Committee**

Minutes of Special Meeting of the Caithness Committee held in Wick Town Hall, Bridge Street, Wick, on Thursday, 30 May 2019 at 2.00pm.

**Present:**

Mr R Bremner  
Mr D Mackay  
Mr W Mackay

Mr M Reiss  
Mr A Sinclair  
Ms N Sinclair

**Officials in attendance:**

Mr W Gilfillan, Director of Community Services (by VC)  
Mr A Macmanus, Ward Manager, Chief Executive's Office  
Ms J Sutherland, Senior Engineer, Community Services  
Mr J Gunn, Technician, Community Services  
Ms A Macrae, Committee Administrator, Chief Executive's Office

**Mr M Reiss in the Chair**

**1. Apologies for Absence  
Liesgeulan**

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr S Mackie and Mr K Rosie.

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

There were no declarations of interest.

**3. Road Structural Maintenance Programme 2019/20  
Càradh Structarail Rathaidhean 2019/20**

There had been re-circulated Report No CC/11/19 dated 2 May 2019 by the Director of Community Services.

In discussion, a point was raised in regard to the fact the upgrading of Princes Street, Thurso was not included in the Programme, given that it was in a poor state of repair and should be considered a priority. In response to a question, the Senior Engineer provided an assurance that she would undertake a site visit and provide the indicative costs of upgrading the road.

The Chair advised that a similar exercise had been undertaken in respect of Ormlie Road, Thurso and the cost of repairs and overlaying were significant. In this regard, it was suggested that developer contributions from a prospective hotel development may potentially fund improvements to a section of Ormlie Road, Thurso.

Thereafter, an explanation was sought and provided in regard to the reason the jetpatcher had not been deployed in Caithness during the previous year. It was explained this had been due to unforeseen staffing issues, details of which were provided, and that as an alternative option manual patching had been undertaken.

In regard to the above, concern was expressed that Members had not been informed of the situation, and it was hoped the plan to hold periodic meetings between Roads officers and Members to discuss progress with roads issues would improve communication going forward. Training for staff on the operation of the jetpatcher should be arranged at the earliest opportunity.

Members then heard from the Director of Community Services and Senior Engineer in regard to the potential to upgrade Norseman/Riverside Car Park from the Roads Budget Allocation 2019/20 for Caithness. The proposal was for the sum of £11,282 from the revenue budget and £10,000 from the capital budget to be ring-fenced for works to the Car Park. This would allow local Members to have discussions with the community on the potential to secure match funding to enable the Norseman Car Park to be upgraded to an appropriate standard. This was with the caveat that the works be undertaken in-house by the Council's DLO section. This option would maintain the viability of the proposed surface dressing element of the Programme and allow the schemes set out in the report to be completed during the June/July window for undertaking surface dressing works.

In regard to the above proposal, clarification was sought on the impact of the proposal on the revenue budget. The Senior Engineer reported that the jetpatcher would not be deployed in the area in the current year and alternative methods of patching would be used. In addition, other essential works which did not require materials would be progressed such as ditching, which Members observed was important to the long term maintenance and safety of the roads.

In discussion, Members raised the following main issues:-

- a holistic approach was being taken in conjunction with local stakeholders to the regeneration of Wick town centre and the upgrading of the Norseman Car Park was a key element and focal point of the draft regeneration plans;
- local Members would be seeking to match fund the proposed Council allocation of £21,282 from the Scottish Government's Town Centre Fund 2019/20 allocation for Wick, to create an overall funding package for the Norseman Car Park;
- the Town Centre Fund had to be spent within a period of one year and therefore confirmation was sought and provided that the DLO had the capacity to deliver the works within this timescale;
- there was a need to scope out as soon as possible the works required to achieve a good fix of the Norseman Car Park;
- confirmation had been provided that the approximate cost of white lining the car park was £4,000 which it was suggested was achievable within the available resources;
- white lining should be laid out to accommodate cars and other vehicles such as campervans and include disabled and child/parent spaces. The design should also discourage younger drivers from using the car park later in the evenings;
- a meeting of wider stakeholders, community groups and the general public on the draft regeneration plans for Wick Town Centre would be held on 10 June 2019, at which the bid to Wick's allocation of the Town Centre Fund for the Norseman Car Park would be discussed;

- following the above meeting on 10 June 2019, there would be an opportunity to have a further discussion on the scope and progress with the scheme at the regular meetings to be held with Roads officials; and
- it was important also to be mindful of the allocation of the budget for schemes in Thurso and North West Caithness within the Programme;

Thereafter, Members thanked the Senior Engineer for bringing forward the proposals for the Norseman Car Park in such a short timescale.

The Committee:-

- i. **APPROVED** the Roads Structural Maintenance Programme 2019/20; and
- ii. **AGREED** that the sum of £21,282 be set aside from the Roads Budget Allocation for Caithness 2019/20 to allow match funding to be sought to create an overall funding package towards the upgrading of the Norseman Car Park, the works to be carried out in-house by the Council and completed by 30 November 2019.

The meeting ended at 2.55pm.

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