

Agenda Item 3

The Highland Council Caithness Committee

Minutes of Meeting of the Caithness Committee held in Wick Town Hall, Bridge Street, Wick, on Wednesday 19 February 2020 at 10.00am.

Present:

Mr D Mackay

Mr A Sinclair

Mr M Reiss

Ms N Sinclair

Mr K Rosie

Officials in attendance:

Mr A Macmanus, Ward Manager, Chief Executive's Office

Ms A Donald, Education Quality Improvement Manager, Care and Learning Service

Dr F Grant, Head Teacher, Wick High School, Care and Learning Service

Ms J Jennett, Area Care and Learning Manager, Care and Learning Service (by VC)

Mr D Cowie, Principal Planner, Development and Infrastructure Service (by VC)

Mr D Chisholm, Planner, Development and Infrastructure Service (by VC)

Mr J Holden, Housing Manager (North), Community Services

Ms M Taylor, Housing Management Officer, Community Services

Ms A Macrae, Committee Administrator, Chief Executive's Office

Also in Attendance:

Inspector A Goskirk, Police Scotland

1. Apologies for Absence

Liesgeulan

Apologies for absence were intimated on behalf of Mr R Bremner, Mr W Mackay and Mr S Mackie.

2. Declarations of Interest

Foillseachaidhean Com-pàirt

Item 8: Mr K Rosie and Ms N Sinclair (non-financial).

3. Minutes

Geàrr-chunntas

There were circulated and **NOTED** Minutes of the Caithness Committee held on 19 November 2019, which were approved by the Council on 9 December 2019.

4. Matters Arising from the Minutes

The Ward Manager provided Members with an update on the status of the individual actions set out in the Committee's action tracker.

The Chair provided a response to the action that confirmation be sought from the Budget Leader as to whether an impact analysis was carried out in relation to any decision to introduce a recruitment freeze on schools in the area. He reported that the Budget

Leader had confirmed there was no absolute freeze on recruitment, and there was flexibility within the system. Specifically, each vacancy was considered by the Area Education Manager in the first instance and thereafter considered by the Weekly Governance Group, which was part of the Corporate Resources Committee.

In discussion, concern was expressed at the number of actions on the action tracker which remained outstanding and the need to follow up with officers to have those actions completed. It was also requested that the action tracker be appended to the minutes of the previous meeting circulated to the Committee.

The Committee **AGREED**:-

- i. the updates to the action tracker from the minutes of previous meetings; and
- ii. to follow up with officers on those actions which remained outstanding and that a copy of the action tracker be appended to the minutes of the previous meeting circulated to the Committee.

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

There had been circulated Report No CC/01/20 dated 10 February 2020 by the North Area Commander.

In discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- a reduction in speeding in Thurso had been observed in recent months which was encouraging;
- confirmation was sought and provided that the public were in the main observing the new 20mph speed limits which had been introduced in Wick and that policing of the limit had been particularly focused on schools;
- an explanation was sought and provided on the process for testing drivers for drugs;
- in terms of drugs misuse in the area, this was a complex area and the issues were constantly changing in terms of the types of drugs and how they were being sourced and delivered;
- the importance of working in partnership and of having a joined up approach to tackle the underlying causes and change the culture around alcohol and drugs misuse and the positive work being undertaken in the area including by Safer Caithness, Caithness Community Partnership, licensees, and the Caithness Drug and Alcohol Forum. There was the potential for the Icelandic Model for preventing adolescent substance use to be piloted in Caithness as an effective approach going forward;
- concern at ongoing issues of vandalism at the public toilets in Riverside, Wick. It would be helpful to highlight to the public the resourcing challenges Police Scotland faced in terms of prioritising incidents at the toilets against those involving people's wellbeing. The Area Inspector advised that he would investigate the potential for a media communication to be issued to the public on this matter;
- the improved detection rates in relation to shoplifting were exceptional and stores in the area be commended in this regard;

- concern at the figures in relation to missing persons and at the significant amount of resources Police Scotland had to invest in these cases; and
- the number of thefts from motor vehicles was extremely low and was a reminder that Caithness was a safe place in which to live;

The Committee **NOTED** following scrutiny, progress made against the objectives set within the Highland and Islands Local Policing Plan 2017-2020 Year 3, for the period covering 1 April 2019 - 31 December 2019.

6. Wick Associated School Group Overview Sealladh Coitcheann air Buidheann Sgoiltean Co-cheangailte Inbhir Ùige

There had been circulated Report No CC/02/20 dated 7 February 2020 by the Interim Chief Executive Officer Education and Learning.

The Education Quality Improvement Manager provided an update on progress with staffing at Wick High School and Keiss and Bower Primary Schools. She also provided a summary of the HMIe inspection reports in relation to Thrumster Primary School and Noss Primary Schools highlighting the key strengths and areas for improvement which had been identified and confirming that no follow up visits would be undertaken.

Dr F Grant, Head Teacher, Wick High School reported that she was on secondment for a period of six months with the Education Quality Improvement Team. Her role was to support schools in the North, including in Caithness, with the main agenda of raising attainment. Her other role was to help develop learning and modern teaching strategies in schools across all areas of the Highlands.

Members congratulated Dr Grant on her secondment and looked forward to her contribution and strong leadership in North schools.

In response to a question, it was confirmed the most recent figures on school leaver destinations at Wick High School were due to be published by the Scottish Government by the end of the month.

The Committee **NOTED** following scrutiny, the content of the report.

7. Caithness Educational Trusts Urrasan Foghlaim Ghallaibh

There had been circulated Report No CC/03/20 dated 7 February 2020 by the Interim Chief Executive Officer Education and Learning.

In discussion, Members welcomed the recommendations set out in the report and the proposals to simplify and streamline what was currently a complex process and minimise officers time in administering the trust funds. The proposals would achieve a fairer outcome and the reallocation of responsibility to the relevant schools was welcomed.

The Committee **AGREED**:-

- i. the funds that are noted in Appendix 1, schedule 3,4 and 5 are allocated to the school and that the head teacher uses this for the benefit of any/all pupils;
- ii. that a process is set up to automatically issue these funds in April of each financial year which will provide clarity around the remaining budget for the coming year;
- iii. that an application window be applied and that based on available funds and received applications the amount set aside for the year be allocated on that basis. This will require some advertising on the Council website and by other means to encourage applications at a certain time;
- iv. the amount set aside for bursary payments be agreed by the Committee at the beginning of the financial year with data available to inform decision making; and
- v. the sum allocated in each year provides opportunity and fairness with new applicants receiving priority over returning applicants, with a new maximum being set per person.

8. Caithness and Sutherland Town Centre Strategy Ro-innleachd Meadhan Baile Ghallaibh agus Chataibh

Declaration of Interests – Ms N Sinclair and Mr K Rosie declared non-financial interests in this item as a Director of Wick’s Heart and Board Member of Thurso Community Development Trust respectively but, having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors’ Code of Conduct, concluded that their interests did not preclude them from taking part in the discussion.

There had been circulated Report No CC/04/20 dated 4 February 2020 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure and Environment.

In discussion, Members commended the officers on their work in producing the Strategy and raised the following issues:-

- welcoming that the Strategy reflected the local priorities which had been identified by local Members and the community in relation to Wick Town Centre and that the comments on traffic management aligned with the recent introduction of the 20mph limits and enforcement of the Market Square pedestrian zone;
- support for the Action Programme on the basis local Members and the community were eager for the Strategy to be more action focused following the extensive consultations which had been carried out;
- the potential to engage with other parties with a high level of expertise in urban regeneration and regional development. The Principal Planner referred to there being opportunities for other parties to get involved in the actions to be identified in the Action Programme and in the work of local organisations such as the Thurso Community Development Trust. At a wider strategic level, there was the potential for anyone to engage with the Scottish Government’s consultation on the National Planning Framework;
- clarification was sought and provided that the harbour area was identified in the Strategy as part of Thurso Town Centre and following the consultation feedback had been identified as one of the key opportunities in the Action Programme. It was noted that Thurso Community Development Trust had identified a number of projects in the harbour area; and

- in terms of the place making priorities for Thurso, the challenges associated with developing the attractive river corridor setting in view of the flood risk in this area and the uncertainty around whether a flood prevention scheme would be progressed.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the issues raised in consultation responses to the Draft Caithness and Sutherland Town Centre Strategy (Section 5 and Appendix 1) and revisions to the Strategy (Appendix 2);
- ii. **AGREED** that the Strategy, finalised in line with the decisions of the two Area Committees, be submitted to Scottish Ministers for consideration as per the statutory process for adoption of Supplementary Guidance;
- iii. **NOTED** that the Strategy will be a material consideration for development management purposes with immediate effect;
- iv. **AGREED** to the adoption and issuing of the submitted version of the Strategy as statutory Supplementary Guidance to the Caithness and Sutherland Local Development Plan upon completion of the requisite 28 day period for consideration by Scottish Ministers, subject to any directions from Ministers indicating otherwise; and
- v. **NOTED** that the associated Action Programme will be drawn together by officers in consultation with Ward Members and the parties mentioned in it and subsequently will be published and promoted to those parties and the wider communities.

9. **Housing Revenue Account: Garage Rents 2020/21** **Cunntas Teachd A-steach Taigheadais: Màil Gharaidsean 2020/21**

There had been circulated Report No CC/05/20 dated 5 February 2020 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

In discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- a written comment received from Mr R Bremner on the need for a discussion on using the income generated from garage rents to demolish and improve areas, including the provision of off street parking for tenants rather than using environmental monies for redevelopment;
- concern was expressed at the lack of repairs being undertaken to garages in general and a proposal that no rent increase be applied to garage rents in Caithness and consideration given to an overall strategy for garages and garage sites going forward;
- a 3% rent increase be applied to garages and garage sites in Caithness in 2020/21 given the relatively small increase involved and to ensure there was the income stream officers had anticipated to carry out repairs. This was on the basis that a report be submitted to the Committee in August 2020 providing more detailed information and costings on the potential options for garages and garage sites in Caithness, including a local assessment of demand and condition, to enable decisions on future investment and use; and

- noting that Mr D Mackay did not support the proposal to apply a rent increase in 2020/21.

The Committee **AGREED** that :-

- i. a 3% rent increase be applied to Garages and Garage Sites in Caithness for 2020/21; and
- ii. a report providing more detailed information and costs on the potential options for garages and garage sites in Caithness be submitted to the Committee in August 2020 to enable decisions on future investment and use.

10. Housing Performance Report – 1 April 2019 to 31 December 2019 Aithisg Coileanaidh Taigheadais – 1 Giblean 2019 to 31 Dùbhlachd 2019

There had been circulated Report No CC/06/20 dated 4 February 2020 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

The Area Housing Manager advised the incorrect version of appendix 2 had been attached to the report and he would arrange for the correct appendix to be circulated to Members.

The Chair reported that a number of written comments on the report had been received from Mr R Bremner, details of which he provided.

In regard to the reduction in arrears since the previous quarter, it was reported this reflected the work undertaken by the Council's Housing Policy team with the DWP, the Housing Team's robust approach to rent arrears and the advice and assistance provided to tenants. The fact that tenants had a better understanding of how Universal Credit worked was also a factor.

Thereafter, it was confirmed the figures for homeless presentations did not include any cases as a result of Council evictions due to rent arrears. The Loch Street garages project was being advanced separately to the strategic discussion on the future options for garages. There were complex issues around community asset transfer and access to be resolved. There was an expectation that environmental monies would be committed, however there was a need to ensure the proposals were deliverable and fitted with the overall strategy for garages to be considered by the Committee.

The Area Housing Manager confirmed he would arrange for responses to be provided to Mr Bremner on his other written comments. He would provide a response to all Members on the clarification sought on the environmental budget.

A further point was raised on the importance of external maintenance to improve the appearance of Council properties going forward.

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

The meeting ended at Noon.

The Highland Council Caithness Committee

Minutes of Meeting of the Caithness Committee held remotely on Monday 6 July 2020 at 10.00am.

Present:

Mr R Bremner
Mr W Mackay
Mr S Mackie
Mr M Reiss

Mr K Rosie
Mr A Sinclair
Ms N Sinclair

Officials in attendance:

Mrs C McDiarmid, Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place
Mr P Senior, Executive Chief Officer, Education and Learning
Ms A Clark, Head of Policy and Reform, Communities and Place
Mrs H Ross, Senior Ward Manager, Communities and Place
Mr A Macmanus, Ward Manager, Communities and Place
Ms A Macrae, Committee Administrator, Chief Executive's Office

Also in Attendance:

Inspector A Goskirk, Police Scotland
Mr A Tait, Caithness Voluntary Group

1. Appointment of Chair and Vice Chair Cur an Dreuchd Cathraiche agus Iar-Chathraiche

The Ward Manager advised of an amendment proposed in relation to this item. He invited nominations for the appointment of the Chair of the Caithness Committee. He also invited nominations for two Vice Chairs of the Caithness Committee, one proposed from each of the two County wards. This was on the basis the Vice Chairs would assume the reinstated civic roles of the Provost of Thurso and the Provost of Wick and that the appointees would have a civic role but that the roles and responsibilities would be taken back for formal agreement at the next Caithness Committee, scheduled for 22 October 2020.

Thereafter, Mr R Bremner seconded by Mr W Mackay moved that Ms N Sinclair be appointed as Chair.

On there being no other nominations, **Ms N Sinclair** was appointed as **Chair** of the Caithness Committee.

Mr K Rosie seconded by Mr M Reiss moved that Mr S Mackie be appointed as Vice Chair from Ward 2: Thurso and Northwest Caithness.

Mr R Bremner seconded by Mr A Sinclair moved that Mr W Mackay be appointed as Vice Chair of the Committee from Ward 3: Wick and East Caithness.

On there being no other nominations, **Mr S Mackie and Mr W Mackay** were appointed as **Vice Chairs** of the Caithness Committee.

Thereafter, the Committee **AGREED** that the Vice Chairs of the Committee would assume the reinstated civic roles of the Provost of Thurso and the Provost of Wick and would have a civic role and that the roles and responsibilities would be taken back for formal agreement at the next Caithness Committee, scheduled for 22 October 2020.

At this point, the Chair thanked Members for her appointment and indicated she was honoured to be given the opportunity to serve Caithness. She paid tribute to Mr M Reiss for serving as Chair for the past two years, and on representing Caithness's best interests within Highland Council. She hoped to build on that foundation by driving the Committee forward as a powerful and relevant forum for local decision-making. The Council had made a commitment towards localism and it was important to ensure that Members worked together to address the issues that mattered most to the community and ensure those issues were championed at a Highland level.

The Chair continued that she hoped to facilitate closer collaboration between the Members, local officers and partners, across county and party lines as the area emerged from the pandemic and sought to rebuild the economy and social structures. She was confident that the inspirational example set by the community could be harnessed to deliver meaningful progress.

Thereafter, Members congratulated the Chair on her appointment and raised the following issues:-

- the importance of the Committee having a strong voice within the Council on the matters of most importance to Caithness and was proactive in tackling the issues around housing, drugs and mental health, poverty and antisocial behaviour, economic factors and regeneration;
- as the area emerged from Covid-19, the Committee's role should be one of leadership and providing encouragement to the third sector and the general public in confronting the challenges facing the County;
- the potential to engage with the Faroe Islands to open up new opportunities for business and to learn from their air services, and also to accept the offer from Planet Youth in Iceland to explore in partnership the Icelandic model for substance use;
- there was a renewed sense of enthusiasm to take a different approach in Caithness and to represent the unique challenges and often different priorities to other areas within Highland; and
- the new roles and responsibilities provided a structure to support the Chair and also drive forward the ambitions and needs of the County going forward. It was important the Committee robustly put its case forward to the Council and nationally to the Scottish and UK Governments.

The Chair advised that a meeting of Caithness Members would be arranged to discuss the issues within Wards 2 and 3, and those affecting the whole area with a view to an action plan being developed as soon as possible.

2. Apologies for Absence Liesgeulan

An apology for absence was intimated on behalf of Mr D Mackay.

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

Item 4: Ms N Sinclair (non-financial)

Item 6: Mr R Bremner, Mr W Mackay and Mr K Rosie (non-financial)

4. **Return to School Update** **Fios às Ùr mu Thilleadh dhan Sgoil**

Declarations of Interest: Ms N Sinclair declared a non-financial interest in this item on the grounds that family members attended Newton Park Primary School and Nursery in Wick, but having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct, concluded that her interest did not preclude her from taking part in the discussion.

During a verbal update, the Executive Chief Officer Education & Learning advised that the Council's whole ecosystem was working on the plans and preparations to ensure schools would be ready for reopening on 12 August 2020. He explained that Council services and schools had been working on a scenario-based approach with the primary focus on Option A (100% return with no social distancing) in accordance with the national guidance but that work continued on contingency plans (Option B - 100% return with 1m social distancing and Option C - 50% return with 2m social distancing). However, the primary concern was the safety and wellbeing of pupils, staff and communities and therefore risk assessments continued and mechanisms were in place to adapt the model dependent on circumstances and national guidance received. He had written to all Head Teachers thanking them and their staff for their efforts, flexibility, innovation and creativity in continually adjusting plans and processes. In addition, the Council's support services such as transport, catering, IT, facilities management should be recognised for their crucial role throughout this process.

Members recorded their thanks to head teachers, teachers and support staff for continuing in their roles and on taking on new roles during the Covid-19 pandemic, for example delivering digital learning and looking after the wellbeing and social elements of school. Staff had faced significant challenges associated with the changing guidance in relation to the return to school environment, however the focus in Caithness had always been on the welfare of pupils and ensuring the best educational experience.

In discussion, Members then raised the following main points:-

- the work ongoing in Caithness to comply with the social distancing guidelines for the different age groups of children taking into account the available space within school settings. It was confirmed that while the primary focus was to have a 100% return to schools with no social distancing measures, assessments had been undertaken and plans were in place in the event Options B or C had to be deployed, including a greater reliance on blended learning to bridge any gap;
- concern there would be insufficient capacity to provide the level of school transport required if social distancing measures had to be deployed, particularly as many public services were shared with schools. It was confirmed a transport sub group had been established involving transport providers and operators and was working to deliver flexible and creative solutions for example offering parent fuel vouchers and active travel solutions. There had also been engagement with the parent council partnership to ensure the co-design of any plans. In addition,

a local project board involving transport providers was overseeing the return to schools in the area;

- the potential for monies to be allocated to undertake works to improve facilities at Thurso High School, noting the underspend on the previous year's DSM allocation was being used to help bridge the budget gap. The Executive Chief Officer confirmed he would ensure any specific requests directed to him in relation to the School would be considered by the relevant officers in terms of priorities within the capital programme;
- whether an increase in home schooling was being observed given the anxieties of some parents around the return to school. It was confirmed there was anecdotal evidence home schooling may be on the rise and that plans were in place to communicate with parents and carers to help manage and alleviate anxieties, including a dedicated web page on returning to school which also included a frequently asked questions section and regular engagement between schools and parent councils;
- the opportunities to use renewable energies which was a key strength of the area to provide alternative forms of school transport in future; and
- the support being provided by the Council to head teachers and teachers in relation to their mental health and wellbeing. It was confirmed that the wellbeing of staff was a priority. The information generated by a recent staff survey would assist in targeting support. There was regular engagement and meetings with staff including the opportunity for one to one conversations.

The Committee **NOTED** the updated.

5. Police Scotland Update Cunntas às Ùr mu Phoileas Alba

Inspector A Goskirk, Police Scotland provided a verbal update on performance in the area. In regard to road safety, the number of road traffic fatalities had reduced to zero, albeit it was important not to be complacent going forward. There had been a decrease in the number of detections for drink and drug driving, however in recent weeks there had been an increase in drug driving compared to the previous year due to the introduction of the new test swipes, details of which he provided. There had been a reduction in the number of speeding and other road traffic offences which he suggested was due to Police Scotland's level of enforcement in addition to the limited traffic volumes over recent weeks. In the previous year there had been an increase in the levels of violence, however since 1 April 2020 a decrease had been observed, and there having been a reduction in crimes in the area. There had been an increase in anti-social behaviour and disorder mainly related to the failure to comply with the Scottish Government's Covid-19 legislation introduced in March 2020 which had been applied 38 times, however this had resulted in only 2 arrests. In recent weeks the application of the legislation has tailed off as the Service returned to normal policing. He recorded his thanks to all the special constables who had been deployed during the Covid-19 period for giving up their time and providing reassurance to communities. There had been a reduction in dishonesty crimes, particularly housebreakings compared to the previous year, albeit most recently a rise in shoplifting had been observed.

Members recorded their appreciation to Police Scotland for keeping communities safe and providing reassurance during this challenging period. Inspector A Goskirk was also thanked for keeping local Members informed and the Caithness community commended on their high level of compliance with the Covid-19 legislation.

In discussion, reference was made to the partnership working being undertaken by Caithness Community Partnership and third sector interface in the area in response to issues of drug and alcohol misuse, social isolation, mental health and wellbeing in the area, and the need to get the message across to the community that their support was required as an integral part of this work on an ongoing basis. It was highlighted that at a seminar held in Caithness earlier in the year, it had been agreed to adopt the Icelandic model for tackling substance use in young people and Members looked forward to this being progressed.

In regard to the above, it was suggested that the agencies involved in the Caithness Community Partnership consider how to improve support services to tackle these issues and for this to be included in the actions plans for the County. There was a specific suggestion that the Council, Police Scotland, NHS Highland and communities work in partnership with the support of an independent facilitator.

In addition, there was a structural issue that needed to be addressed to ensure that calls about health issues which did not involve crimes were directed appropriately, concern being expressed that while it was the nature of the Police to respond, police officers were not experts in this field.

Inspector A Goskirk confirmed the evidence suggested that officers in the area were dealing with more urgent individual vulnerability calls than in the past. These were difficult issues and he welcomed the support of Members and the opportunity to have further discussions outwith the Committee.

Thereafter, Members raised the following main points:-

- issues around policing the Covid-19 legislation in rural communities where there may have been a consideration there was not the same level of risks as towns and cities;
- the special constabulary be commended for their important role and level of work during the Covid-19 pandemic;
- concern at the environmental impact of wild camping and the opportunity to have discussions with Police Scotland on whether their powers to tackle this issue needed to be enhanced;
- a point as to whether the Police carried out a risk assessment and background checks prior to homeless persons being allocated a Council house in the area. It was confirmed the Police shared information with the Council's Housing Service in this regard; and
- clarification was sought in relation to the drink driving cases reported in the press at the end of phase one of the lockdown period. It was confirmed these figures reflected both the proactive approach of the Police and also the level of reporting from within communities.

The Committee **NOTED** following scrutiny, the update.

6. Covid-19 Response Freagairt Covid-19

Declarations of Interest: Mr R Bremner as Chair of Thrumster Community Development Association, Mr W Mackay as a Director of Caithness Voluntary Group and Mr K Rosie as a Board Member of Thurso Community Development Trust declared non-financial interests in this item, but having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors' Code of Conduct, concluded that their interests did not preclude them from taking part in the discussion.

i. The Highland Council Comhairle na Gàidhealtachd

The Ward Manager provided a verbal report on the Council input to the Covid-19 pandemic in Caithness. He explained that humanitarian assistance centres (HACs) had been established as part of the emergency response to support key groups within the community that would be vulnerable to Covid-19. The presentation provided detailed information on the types of support that had been provided and the local arrangements that had been established; set out the key learning opportunities; outlined the next steps including how the Council would continue to work with local communities; provided financial information on the local funding for community support and how this had been distributed; and provided information on the Business Grant support that had been awarded to businesses across Caithness.

ii. Third Sector – Caithness Voluntary Group An Treas Roinn - Buidheann Saor-thoileach Ghallaibh

Mr A Tait, Caithness Voluntary Group (CVG) gave a verbal update on Covid-19 responses in Caithness on behalf of the Third Sector. He reported that at the outset lead anchor organisations had been identified in each community council area to organise and deliver support where required. There had been challenges in some areas and he thanked Thurso Community Development Trust and Thrumster Community Development Association for covering the gaps, and also Caithness Connections on its response. The lead groups, CVG, Members, Ward Manager, local Foodbank, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and Dounreay representatives had worked in partnership to share information and ideas and try to solve any problems. The CVG had also sought to share best practice from the Highlands and also nationally. Procedures had been developed to ensure all the groups kept themselves and others safe. Leaflets and posters had been prepared to capture those not on social media, and goods such as hand sanitisers, activity boxes, and other activity items had been widely distributed to help improve wellbeing. CVG had worked with the community groups to help them obtain the funding outlined in the Ward Manager's presentation. Support had also been provided from the Citizens Advice Bureau, Chamber of Commerce, NHS Highland and others throughout the period.

Mr A Tait continued that resilience meetings continued to be held fortnightly overseeing the ongoing effort but also focusing more on recovery and preparing for future challenges such as the end of the furlough period. Resilience groups were being encouraged to work with those people they had been supporting to increase their independence and CVG would support this process. In conclusion, he advised that discussions had been held with the Highland Third Sector Interface in relation to

developing more capacity around mental health in Caithness through a partnership approach.

In discussion, Members acknowledged the tremendous response of the community, third sector and volunteers in Caithness to the Covid-19 pandemic and recorded their thanks for the work undertaken by the Ward Manager, Mr A Tait and Council officers during this period. This collective effort had brought an unprecedented level of support and reassurance to people in Caithness. It also provided a high level of confidence that the community would continue to be resilient through the recovery process and beyond. The funding organisations should be commended on their flexibility and on releasing monies expeditiously to provide resilience funding to communities. Members also recorded their thanks for the level of volunteer support in undertaking amenity works in the area.

Thereafter, and in response to questions, Mr A Tait reported that the partnership and team working and volunteering within the County had been excellent, and the third sector and community organisations in the area were stronger as a result of this work. The Ward Manager suggested there was now a firmer base on which to build the community partnership in Caithness.

A point was then raised in regard to how the Members could support the third sector through the period of recovery, advising it would be helpful to have an update on progress with the actions identified by third sector organisations. In this regard, Mr A Tait be invited to provide an update to the next meeting of the Committee in October 2020.

In response, Mr A Tait advised that as volunteers returned to work and groups assumed their normal roles, it was critical to work in partnership with the Council and to benefit from Member and officer contacts and expertise to continue to provide support and deal with the wide ranging issues that would arise in the recovery period. He confirmed he would welcome the opportunity to provide an update to the next meeting of the Committee.

During further discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- Thurso Community Development Trust be congratulated on its vegetable garden initiative in Thurso town centre as part of its Thurso Grows project and the wider benefits of the initiative recognised. The Trust was also commended on its significant overall contribution to the community over the period;
- the opportunity for the Council to facilitate the continuation and expansion of Thurso Community Development Trust's lunch club service throughout the area, for example through the use of Council greenhouses;
- a follow up letter be sent by Mr S Mackie to the funding organisations expressing thanks for their support to date and asking that they continue to be considerate in terms of the qualifying criteria going forward;
- the need to consider the most effective level of Council officer support to be provided to the third sector and community partnership; and
- the need to ensure the excellent level of preparatory communication which had been achieved in the lockdown period was continued into recovery to keep communities informed.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the update and **AGREED** to invite Mr A Tait, Caithness Voluntary Group to the next meeting in October 2020 to give an update on progress with recovery.

Following on from the debate, the Committee also **AGREED** the following as proposed at the meeting by the Chair and seconded by Mr M Reiss –

“The Caithness Committee formally acknowledges the astonishing community and voluntary response to the coronavirus pandemic, which has been both inspirational and humbling. Local members – on behalf of the Highland Council – thank the community of Caithness and will work together to agree a formal, lasting tribute to the many people who have come together to get us through these difficult times.”

7. **Urgent Item** **Housing in Caithness**

The Chair **AGREED** the following item be taken as an urgent item to allow discussion on housing issues in Caithness in view of the fact the quarterly housing performance report was not on the agenda for this meeting.

It was reported that discussions had been held with the Chair of the Housing and Property Committee, Head of Housing, Housing Manager (North) and Principal Housing Officer. This related to the ongoing problem of void housing stock in Caithness and the fact there was a lack of material action to address the problem. This issue continued to impact on the Council’s housing performance despite the exhaustive efforts of the local housing team, and therefore there was a need for action and for this issue to be brought to the Council’s attention.

Thereafter, the Committee **AGREED** the following as proposed at the meeting by Mr R Bremner seconded by Mr K Rosie –

“The Caithness Committee recognises the ongoing challenges in Caithness in respect of void housing stock. It also recognises the commitment made from the new Chair of the Housing and Property Committee to meet the challenge by reviewing and implementing necessary action to reduce the impact that void housing has on the housing performance of Highland Council. The Committee supports and recognises the excellent work of the local housing team in achieving the level of service they are currently delivering.”

The meeting ended at 1.20pm.
