

## Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Brexit Working Group** held **REMOTELY** on Wednesday 28 October 2020 at 2.00pm

### Present

Mr J Gray  
Mr G Adam  
Mr B Boyd  
Mr J Bruce

Mr D Louden  
Mr S Mackie  
Mrs T Robertson

### Officials in attendance

Mr A MacLeod, Brexit & European Policy Co-ordinator  
Mr A Coyle, Corporate Communications  
Mr G Corner, Environmental Health Officer  
Mrs L Dunn, Principal Administrator

### Mr J Gray in the Chair

## BUSINESS

#### 1. Apologies for Absence

An apology for absence was intimated on behalf of Mrs M Davidson.

#### 2. Declarations of Interest

Mr D Louden – Item 5 (non-financial)

#### 3. Minutes of Previous Meeting – 17 August 2020

There had been circulated Minutes of the previous Meeting held on 17 August 2020, the terms of which were **APPROVED**.

#### 4. Actions Arising

The Working Group **NOTED** the update in relation to matters arising from the previous meeting as follows:-

- Mr Anthony Coyle had been appointed to Corporate Communications from Finance on a six-month secondment with responsibility for Brexit;
- Predicted population statistics for the Highlands – the National Records of Scotland projected that the Highlands population for 2018-2028 would increase by 0.5%. This was lower than the national average (1.8%) however it was indicated that these predictions had been undertaken in March 2020 prior to the content of the Immigration Act being released;
- European Underspends – discussions were ongoing with the Scottish Government who were seeking for underspends from across Scotland to be allocated to a Covid Recovery Fund;

- Cornwall – a letter of support had been issued by the Leader of the Council regarding their offer to work jointly on various issues, including the Shared Prosperity Fund;
- Recovery Board – the Chair of the Brexit Working Group made a verbal report at the meeting of the Recovery Board held on 7 October 2020;
- Local Authorities – work was ongoing with CoSLA in terms of establishing the Brexit preparation work being undertaken by other Local Authorities; and
- Next Meeting – this meeting had been scheduled on this date on the assumption that a deal would have been reached however this had not been achieved.

## 5. **Brexit and European Update (Including UK Shared Prosperity Fund – Update)**

**Declaration of Interest – Mr D Loudon declared a non-financial interest in this item as an insulin dependent diabetic but, having applied the test outlined in Paragraphs 5.2 and 5.3 of the Councillors’ Code of Conduct, concluded that his interest did not preclude him from taking part in the discussion.**

There had been circulated Report dated 21 October 2020 from the Brexit & European Policy Co-ordinator.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- Concern was expressed at para 4.8 of the report which indicated that the flow of freight between Dover and Calais could be reduced by up to 80%. Although it was acknowledged that work was ongoing between the UK Government and the European Union, 76% of UK firms had stated that they were not ready for Brexit. Therefore, it was queried what mitigation or measures were in place to ensure the continued supply of vital medicines and foods, particularly in regard to fresh fruit and vegetables, to the UK. It was explained that it was anticipated that NHS Highland would have mitigation plans in terms of medicines but this would be clarified. Assurance was provided that the Council’s responsibility in terms of school meal obligations would be fulfilled although it was indicated that certain ingredients might need to be substituted with an equally nutritional alternative. However, it was queried whether focus should be on the Council’s needs or whether it had a duty to inform the public of potential delays/shortages of food supplies. Confirmation was provided that work had been ongoing with partners and businesses to help with preparing for Brexit readiness;
- It was noted that para 4.8 of the report related to the reasonable worst-case scenario but further information was sought on the likelihood of this coming to fruition. There should be preparation for this, even if it was not expected to happen, and it was stressed that the Highlands could be at the end of the supply chain for essential supplies due their geographical location. Further queries were raised in terms of what mitigating actions could be taken against the reasonable worst-case scenario and whether any learning opportunities could be gained from other local authorities, and whether there were any opportunities for

developing local supplies, e.g. utilising waste heat from local distilleries to grow fruit and vegetables in polytunnels;

- Concern was expressed that food standards would be reduced by other parts of the UK and this could be route in for the supply of sub-standard foods such as GM crops, chlorinated chicken and hormone fed beef from the USA;
- It was highlighted that farming, fishing and aquaculture were strong export markets and membership of the Customs Union and the Single Market had enabled these goods to flow freely. However, the World Trade Organisation rules were very complex and it was hoped businesses would be assisted with these. In addition, it was also queried what mitigating actions could be taken and suggested that discussions be held with these sectors with a view to their produce being utilised in school meals;
- Significant income was generated for the Council from harbour landing dues and fuel sales and concern was expressed at how the Council's piers/harbours infrastructure would be maintained if this income was reduced. Ports/Quays were an area asset and the risks and consequences of existing markets being lost should be factored in;
- Access to free training on Export Health Certificates for vets and local authority officials was welcomed and it was hoped that there would be maximum take up. To aid this, it was suggested that awareness of the training opportunity be circulated to local vets. It was confirmed that livestock had to be physically checked and these could not be carried out virtually. It was highlighted that certification, particularly in regard to fish, was complicated and discussions were ongoing with the Harbours Manager in this regard. In terms of the fishing industry and establishing a hub within the Highlands it was explained that Environmental Health had examined this issue and concluded that for a variety of reasons including the tight timescales this was not feasible and was therefore putting resources into obtaining Health Certificates from approved establishments. The Brexit & European Policy Co-ordinator advised that he would provide further information on this aspect;
- With regard to the fund for ports to build new facilities, it was highlighted that this could be utilised to provide warehousing and fencing requirements. It was suggested that there should be further dialogue on this with the Harbours Manager who was a representative on the Scottish Government Borders Stakeholder Group. It was also highlighted that there was Border Control facilities at Dalcross Airport and freight might be progressed through this route in the future;
- It was queried whether tourist visas would be required and it was confirmed that there would be changes to travelling abroad the details of which had been outlined in the last report;
- With regard to the EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS), sympathy was expressed for the unfair manner in which EU citizens were being treated. It was indicated that applications had to be submitted by 31 December 2020 in the event of a no deal and it was hoped that support was being provided, particularly to elderly, with this process. Assurance was provided that the Council had been very proactive using a wide range of methods to engage with key organisations and had held webinars focussed on vulnerable citizens;

- Concern was expressed at the loss of grants from EU Funding Programmes and also from the loss of potential export sales. It was queried what further support could be provided and how alternative Highland produce markets could be encouraged/developed. It was suggested that a case should be developed for financial support from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) to compensate for the loss of EU Funding. It was queried what the impact would be on existing infrastructure that had developed and relied on EU markets. It was suggested that there should be further political debate on the UKSPF and that local MPs/MSPs and partner agencies should work collectively to direct future policy and mitigate impacts; and
- The Chair recommended that regular reporting to the Recovery Board continue. In addition, although many aspects were out with the Council's control, there was a need for continued lobbying of the UK and Scottish Governments to mitigate as many of the risks and impacts as possible and secure the best results/solutions for the Highlands.

Thereafter, the Working Group **NOTED** the report and **AGREED**:-

- i. the course of action highlighted in section 12 of the report – Summary of Ongoing Preparations;
- ii. confirmation be sought from NHS Highland that mitigating action was being taken to ensure the continued supply of medicines;
- iii. information on the free training available in respect of Export Health Certificates be circulated to all vets across the Highlands; and
- iv. that further information be provided on the work undertaken by Environmental Health in regard to the feasibility of establishing a Health Certification hub in Highland.

## 6. **SWOT Analysis – Proposal for Workshop**

The Brexit & European Policy Co-ordinator advised that a report had been prepared in March 2018 for the Highlands and Islands European Partnership and it had been suggested that this report be re-examined and updated.

The Chair explained that he also chaired the Highlands and Islands European Partnership and that Brexit had been discussed at a number of meetings. He explained that several reports had been produced and that Highlands had regularly made contributions at a national level. However, he felt that there was an opportunity to work with partner agencies to take stock of the current position and determine whether any further action was required. He further suggested that the report from Councillor Loudon should be incorporated into this process.

The Brexit & European Policy Co-ordinator suggested that he recirculate the Highlands and Islands European Partnership March 2018 report for feedback however his priority was to first complete the risks and mitigation work. The Chair indicated that this work would be required to be considered as part of the wider review to determine preparedness for EU exit.

The Working Group **AGREED** that:-

- i. the Risk Analysis work be completed as a priority; and

- ii. the Highlands and Islands European Partnership March 2018 report be recirculated for feedback with a view to being updated in conjunction with Councillor Louden's report to ensure that all actions were being taken in preparedness for EU exit.

#### **8. Date of Next Meeting**

The Working Group **AGREED** that a meeting be scheduled towards the end of November 2020, following the Recovery Board on 23 November 2020.

The meeting was closed at 3.50pm.