

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Lochaber Committee** held **REMOTELY** on **Monday, 28 September, 2020 at 10.30 a.m.**

Present:

Mr B Allan
Mr A Baxter
Mr A Henderson
Mr N McLean

Mr I Ramon
Mr D Rixson
Mr B Thompson

In attendance:

Mrs C McDiarmid, Executive Chief Officer, Communities and Place
Mrs D Ferguson, Senior Ward Manager (Ross, Skye and Lochaber)
Mr D Esson, Education Quality Improvement Manager (West)
Mr R Porteous, Roads Operations Manager
Ms S MacLennan, Housing Manager (South)
Mr A Lawrie, Principal Repairs Officer
Mr J Henderson, Housing Investment Officer
Mr A MacInnes, Administrative Assistant

Also in attendance:-

Mr M Colliar, Group Commander, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service (item 3)
Chief Superintendent, C Trickett, Police Scotland (Item 4)
Chief Inspector J Valentine, Police Scotland (Item 4)
Inspector I Campbell, Lochaber Area Inspector, Police Scotland (Item 4)
Sergeant R McCartney, Police Scotland (Item 4)

An asterisk in the margin denotes a recommendation to the Council. All decisions with no marking in the margin are delegated to the Committee.

Business

**1. Apologies for Absence
Leisgeulan**

There were no apologies for absence.

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

The Committee **NOTED** the following Declarations of Interest:-

Item 4, 8 & 9 - Mr D Rixson (non financial)
Item 4 – Mr A Baxter (non financial)
Item 7 – Mr N McLean (financial)

3. Scottish Fire and Rescue Service Local Committee Performance Report Aithisg Choileanaidh Comataidh Ionadail Seirbheis Smàlaidh agus Teasairginn na h-Alba

There was circulated Report No LA/12/20 by the Local Senior Officer for Highland. In discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- In relation to deliberate fires, there had been an increase in April compared to the same period in previous years. These related to grass fires and the Fire Service had introduced a number of fire reduction strategies. Landowners in Lochaber area had been very proactive and positive in terms of muirburning, but the situation would continue to be monitored.
- In terms of station availability, the efforts of the Service in recruiting staff to Kinlochleven Fire Service was recognised. It was advised that during the period of furlough, station availability was very good. As staff had returned to their full time jobs, station availability had returned to normal levels. Any local Covid-19 outbreaks may affect station availability.
- There had been an alarming increase in the number of camping fires in the area, some of which were quite a distance from the road. There was a concern that such accidental fires could continue to occur in future and it was queried what the Fire Service message was to encourage responsible camping. It was explained that the Fire Service were aware of the wild camping issues. The Service was proactive on this issue and Fire Service personnel were visiting problem areas to undertake community engagement. The Service's Prevention and Protection team were also working on wildfire impact, camping guides, caravanning and barbecues impact to get the message out nationally. Local communication on these issues would also be carried out via social media and posters. The more communication at both a national and local level the better and this should result in more responsible behaviour.
- It was advised that Norway and Sweden and some parts of North America effectively had a campfire ban from April to September. However, the Scottish Outdoor Access Code message was don't have a campfire when it is dry. It was queried if Scotland should have a ban on campfires between April and September. It was advised that this would be a matter for the Scottish Government working with partner agencies, landowners and would require evidence to back such a ban. However, the more environmental impact there was through inappropriate behaviour, the greater the risk of hazards to communities. For example, there were restrictions to campfires and drinking alcohol at certain times of the year in Loch Lomond. This had a positive impact in reduction of wildfires in that area along with Ranger patrols. There had not been a big issue with campfires causing wildfires in this area and it tended to have more to do with muirburning or hot car exhausts causing such fires.
- If Councils and local communities wished to pursue the idea of a byelaw banning the consumption of alcohol in certain areas, it was queried if the Fire Service would support this. It was advised that this would require to be considered by Senior Fire Officers so as to adhere to national guidance on this matter, but any measures that would mean a reduction in social disorder would generally be supported. The Chairman undertook to request formally that the Fire Service consider this matter.

Thereafter, the Committee having scrutinised the report, **NOTED:-**

- i the Area Performance Report; and
- ii that the Chairman would request the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service to consider if they would support Councils and local communities introducing byelaws banning the consumption of alcohol in certain areas.

In accordance with Standing Order 9, with the consent of the meeting, item 9 on the agenda was taken at this point.

9. Housing Performance Report Aithisg Coileanaidh Taigheadais

Declaration of Interest – Mr D Rixson declared a non-financial interest in this item as the Council’s representative to Lochaber Housing Association and Lochaber Care and Repair 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 his involvement in discussion.

There was circulated Report No. LA/17/20 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

In discussion, the following main points were made:-

- It was queried how safe staff were when undertaking repairs in a tenants house, did they use PPE and what actions were taken when tenants were not abiding by Covid-19 rules such as social distancing. It was confirmed that there was a risk assessment for all staff visits to households and staff were provided with PPE. If staff had any concerns about entering a property for Covid-19 or other reasons they would not enter the property.
- It was queried at what point did rent arrears become a concern in terms of revenue spend for the property maintenance budget. Also, how did rent arrears reflect on economic circumstances. It was explained that the level of rent arrears at present was a concern. The housing team were proactive in engaging with tenants on rent arrears, however there was a reluctance from some tenants to engage with housing staff. Depending on what happened with the Furlough Scheme, it was anticipated that the end of the scheme would see a further increase in rent arrears. However, daily payments from the DWP for Universal Credit were now being received which would have a positive impact on rent payments. In terms of enforcement action, there was an extension to the notice period therefore the housing team were unable to take action and issue notices at present, but this was under review. There was also a suspension of eviction action at present and eviction was always a last resort. The Council wanted to help tenants sustain their tenancy and did offer them advice on where they could go to seek help.
- There had been job losses in the tourist industry during the lockdown period and partner agencies such as Skills Development Scotland, alongside the Council’s housing options team had been available to assist those affected.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the information provided on housing performance in the period 1 April 2020 to 30 June 2020.

4. Visitor Management Rianachd Luchd-tadhail

Declaration of Interest

Mr D Rixson declared a non-financial interest in this item as the Council's representative to the Isle of Rum Community Trust and Secretary of Mallaig Heritage Trust 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 his involvement in discussion.

Mr A Baxter declared a non-financial interest in this item as a professional Tourist Guide 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 his involvement in discussion.

There was circulated Report No. LA/13/20 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure and Environment.

In discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- In relation to vehicle and pedestrian movements alongside the A82 trunk road, there was a need for an awareness campaign for people coming from an urban environment and not realising they were on a trunk road. Examples of reversing onto the trunk road and walking alongside the trunk road were provided in the Glencoe area. It was queried how the Council could help the Police address this issue before further serious accidents occurred. It was advised that the National Trust for Scotland as the major landowner in Glencoe had been leading on work to address some of these issues and information on this would be circulated by the National Trust to all Lochaber Members. It was explained that Police Scotland regularly had patrols on trunk roads at peak periods and at tourist hotspots and offered advice and assistance to motorists.
- Reference was made to the problem of tour buses dropping their passengers onto the trunk road at viewpoints. It was hoped that any professional tour operator would refuse to stop at locations where there was not suitable parking to allow their passengers to disembark safely. It was queried if the Council could work with the Police to contact tour operators reminding them that they need to be safely off the road in such instances, or alternatively not stop at all. It was confirmed that the Police could assist with this and check the appropriate road traffic legislation and highway code.
- The Council's budget required to be directed in a more seasonal manner and it was queried if Police Scotland had a similar approach. It was confirmed that Police Scotland did increase resources in the summer period, such as on the Isle of Skye and an undertaking was given to review Police deployment across the division in relation to the demands being faced and feedback the outcome on this at a future meeting.
- many communities felt that if there were special policing events involving some of the specialist Police units at tourist hotspot areas in Lochaber, this would send the message that there was zero tolerance by the Council, local communities and

the Police to drug and alcohol misuse. It was confirmed that this proposal was supported by Police Scotland as and when intelligence and resources allowed.

- There would be Police Officer accommodation available in Fort William early next year which would help with recruitment;
- Morrisons Supermarket had created a new Community Champion post and were keen to introduce high profile measures such as labelling on barbecues, to encourage responsible use;
- Areas such as Glen Etive and Glen Nevis were very restricted as far as potential infrastructure improvements was concerned. If consent from landowners was received to acquire land in order to increase parking capacity at tourist hotspots this would help matters. It was queried if efforts were being made to acquire land for this purpose. Crown Estate and rural tourism infrastructure funding could be available for such projects. It was advised that landowners in Glen Etive were looking at areas where they could provide land to create off road car parking spaces and similar discussions had been held with the Glen Nevis Steering Group. Different areas had their own particular problems and potential solutions but acquiring land for additional parking and parking charges which would provide income for use locally that would significantly help matters.
- Small car parking spaces with a parking meter was supported by local communities as long as the revenue received would be used for example to improve infrastructure or provide a Ranger Service in the area. An action plan was sought for new parking charging in the area.
- Reference was made to a lack of understanding of proper driver behaviour on single track roads and it was suggested that with the help of Police Scotland, a more proactive role be taken with all those commercial organisations who hired motorhomes to ensure that those hiring the vehicles knew what the rules of the road are in Highland.
- It was queried if Police Scotland could work with Schools to produce a short video for social media that covered some of concerns about driver behaviour on roads in the Highlands. It was highlighted that education was one of the key elements of road safety and Police Scotland would welcome to work with all road safety partners to deliver this.
- It was queried if a better system of traffic enforcement could be developed. It was explained that while enforcement would play a part in resolving parking issues, it was not the solution and other measures such as better infrastructure for car parking were needed. Also, Police Scotland's resources were limited with many priority areas and only so much time could be allocated to parking enforcement.

If parking enforcement was decriminalised and other agencies took on this role, this would free up police resources for other priority areas.

The Committee having commended Police Scotland for the policing over the summer in the Lochaber area which had been very challenging at times and that the local police were held in great respect by Lochaber communities, **AGREED:-**

- i the contents of the report and supported the approach to Visitor Management;
- ii that Police Scotland would write to Coach Tour operators reminding them of the highway code and road traffic legislation.
- iii to review the Police deployment of resources across the division and report on the outcome of this at a future meeting.
- iv high profile Police operations at tourist hotspots in Lochaber would be undertaken to tackle anti social behaviour, drug and alcohol misuse.
- v that Police Scotland would work with its road safety partners to deliver a short video for social media that covered road safety concerns specific to driving in the Highlands.
- vi that Police Scotland would consider and report back on whether a better system of traffic enforcement could be developed.
- vii an action plan be developed for introducing parking meters at popular tourist locations in Lochaber.

5. Return to Schools Update

Cunntas às Ùr mu Thilleadh dhan Sgoil

The Education Quality Improvement Manager (West) provided a return to Schools update. The update covered:- contingency planning depending on the various possible outcomes of lockdown and return to schools; Risk assessments had been developed and there had been weekly area operational meetings; High Life Highland had started re-engagement with Schools; and Council's had received additional money for teaching staff.

Continuing, reference was made to a Covid-19 outbreak at Kinlochleven High School and staff were working with the multi agencies and health protection team following national guidance in dealing with this outbreak. An update was also provided on staffing changes, retirements and appointments; SQA results and Outward Bound with a range of activities carried out by Schools highlighted.

The Committee expressed their best wishes to all staff retiring or leaving the Council and in particular Ms Norma Young, former Area Care and Learning Manager after 40 years service. Also, the work undertaken by Joseph Hannaway, Head Teacher, Kinlochleven High School was commended in relation to his efforts in dealing with the Covid-19 outbreak in Kinlochleven.

In discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- It was queried if there were any areas of concern regarding general Teacher recruitment. It was advised that staffing at all levels was becoming challenging particularly teaching in primary and secondary schools because of Covid-19. There were increased absences, anxieties and some staff were shielding and leaving the service. Cover arrangements were currently being investigated for these vacancies.
- It was requested that the Service look at emergency options for Teacher accommodation, as at times there was no accommodation available in remote locations where there was a Teacher absence. In particular, it was suggested that a mobile home could be supplied as a temporary measure in such cases,

particularly on the Isle of Rum. This suggestion would be forwarded to the Interim Head of Education and Workforce Planning Manager. It was explained that accommodation for staff in schools was an ongoing concern across Highland. In particular, it was highlighted that there had been an opportunity missed to use a house on the Isle of Rum for Teachers.

- There had been a special arrangement in the Summer for pupils from the Small Isles to return home on a weekly basis. Parents had recently requested that this arrangement be extended, as due to Covid-19 restrictions, the hostel had to operate under certain restrictions. As a result some of the pupils benefit from being able to return home more frequently. It was understood that the once a week ferry service would continue, but this would be checked and a response to Councillor D Rixson would be provided.

Thereafter, the Committee **NOTED** the update on the return to Schools.

6. Lochaber Area Roads Winter Maintenance Plan 2020/21 Plana Cumail Suas Rathaidean Geamhraidh Sgìre Loch Abar 2020/21

There was circulated Report No. LA/14/20 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure and Environment.

In discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- The Ballachulish priority route did include the top end of the village and the routes to the School. The winter maintenance route map would be expanded to make this clearer.
- In terms of Community Self Help Schemes, it was requested that Officers be proactive in communicating to Community Councils about these schemes which would help manage expectations and encourage communities to take part and submit an application.
- Options were being considered for contractor assistance this winter. Officers did have a list of contractors who could provide assistance with winter maintenance and efforts were being made to increase the number of contractors on the list. In many parts of Lochaber there were farmers and landowners that had equipment that could be called on to help and it was confirmed that they were also on the list.

Thereafter, the Committee **APPROVED** the Winter Maintenance Plan for the Lochaber Area in reference to Appendix A of the report.

7. Area Roads Structures Annual Report 2019/20 Aithisg Bhliadhnaile Structaran Rathaid na Sgìre 2019/20

Declaration of Interest –

Mr N MacLean declared a financial interest in this item on any matter relating to Invercoe Bridge and did not take part in the discussion relating to this, 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 his involvement in discussion on other items in the report.

There was circulated Report No. LA/15/20 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure and Environment.

In discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- It was requested that future reports make it easier to identify road structures and their locations;
- In relation to the Bridge Stock Condition, information was sought on how many bridges in Lochaber were above the critical index level 64;
- Members would be provided with information on the replacement Invercoe bridge project;
- An update report on the Kinlochleven Viaduct project would be provided to Ward 21 Members;
- It was requested that the Ballachulish footbridge repairs should all be done at the same time to minimise the closure period. Also, if works had not started then the closure signs should be removed.
- There had been an issue in the past with home carers travelling early in the morning prior to roads being gritted, particularly on the Ardnamurchan peninsula. It was advised that there was now flexibility in the Winter Maintenance Plan to start gritting earlier than 6a.m. if winter conditions made this necessary.

Thereafter, the Committee:

- NOTED** the contents of the report;
- AGREED** that a report be submitted to Ward 21 Members with an update on the Kinlochleven Viaduct project; and
- AGREED** that information be provided to Members on:- the replacement Invercoe bridge project; and how many bridges in Lochaber were above the critical index level 64 .

8. **Lochaber HRA Capital Programme 2021-2022** **Prògram Calpa Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais Loch Abar 2021-2022**

Declaration of Interest – Mr D Rixson declared a non-financial interest in this item as the Council’s representative to Lochaber Housing Association and Lochaber Care and Repair 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 his involvement in discussion.

There was circulated Report No. LA/16/20 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

In discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- It was queried how the proposed Aids and Adaptations budget compared to that of previous years and how adequate this had been. It was explained that the Aids and Adaptations budget for Lochaber in the current 5 year plan was set at £97k and the proposed budget for 2021/22 has been increased to £119k to meet the number of aids and adaptations referrals in the area.
- In relation to heating and energy efficiency, the evidence of reduced running costs for tenants was largely anecdotal. It was queried if efforts were being made to get more accurate information regarding the tenants experience on heating replacements and insulation e.g. share their running costs. It was explained that the energy team did focus on energy performance certificate (EPC) rating scores to see what improvements were made in the energy efficiency standards of a property. In recent contracts, an analysis has been made of some tenants energy

bills to check that the works had provided the energy efficiency benefits that had been anticipated.

- There were reports to the Local Committee on the Housing element of the capital programme. However, no reports on other Council assets in the capital programme were submitted and it was intended that in future this type of report would be submitted to Local Committees.

Thereafter, the Committee:-

- i **NOTED** the allocation of resources to Lochaber Area as set out at 5.7;
- ii **NOTED** the guideline investment priorities as set out in sections 5.2 and 5.3 of the report;
- iii **AGREED** the proposed one-year HRA Capital Programme for Lochaber 2021-22 as set out in Appendix 1;
- iv **NOTED** the position relating to the current year HRA Capital Programme; and
- v **NOTED** that updates on the Housing Revenue Account Capital Programme will continue to be provided through ward briefings and at future Local Committees as requested by local Members, in addition to reporting to Housing and Property Committee.

10. Cameron Square Canopy Project **Pròiseact Canopaidh Ceàrnag nan Camshronach**

Members were advised that on 20 February, 2020 the Scottish Government advised that the expenditure deadline for all Town Centre Fund (TCF) projects had been extended to 31 March, 2021. All TCF projects in Lochaber remain on track to be delivered in accordance with the works approved by Committee and within the extended delivery timetable. On completion of the Cameron Square canopy project a £2,169.60 underspend was realised. The Grantee formally requested that this underspend be used towards purchasing an accompanying lighting gantry for the canopy. This request was presented to Committee Members the week commencing 13 July, 2020 and a majority decision to approve the project variance was obtained on 17 July 2020.

The Committee **AGREED** to homologate this decision.

In accordance with Standing Order 9, with the consent of the meeting, item 12 on the agenda was taken at this point.

12. Lochaber Health & Social Care Redesign Steering Group

The Chairman agreed that the following urgent item of business be considered at the meeting given the public interest in this matter and the impact on the Lochaber area:-

It was highlighted that the Lochaber Health & Social Care Redesign Steering Group had last met on 5 March, 2020. A further meeting was scheduled for May, but was postponed due to Covid-19 and thereafter a meeting was arranged for August but this was cancelled. The reason provided was that work was not able to restart on the project given the ongoing work to remobilise services and designing new ways for services to operate within the Covid-19 guidelines. There had been no public information of a rescheduled date and there was increasing concern from those on the Steering Group on this matter.

Therefore, in view of the widespread public concern at the failure to reconvene the Lochaber Health & Social Care Redesign Steering Group, it was requested that a

letter, on behalf of all Lochaber Councillors, be sent to the Chief Executive, NHS Highland requesting they address this matter as a matter of urgency. All Members supported this proposal with the addition that a letter be also sent to the Cabinet Secretary for Health in the Scottish Government highlighting that this was a continuing problem for the residents of Lochaber.

The Committee **AGREED** the above proposed action.

11. Minutes **Geàrr-chunntas**

The Committee **NOTED** the Minutes of Meeting of the Lochaber Committee held on 29 June, 2020 which were approved by the Council on 30 July, 2020.

The meeting ended at 1.00 p.m.