# The Highland Council Caithness Committee

Minutes of Meeting of the Caithness Committee held REMOTELY on Thursday, 22 April 2021 at 10.00am.

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| **Present:** | |
| Mr R Bremner  Mr D Mackay  Mr W Mackay  Mr S Mackie | Mr M Reiss  Mr K Rosie  Ms N Sinclair  Mr A Sinclair |
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| **Officials in attendance:**  Ms N Grant, Executive Chief Officer, Education and Learning  Mr A Macmanus, Ward Manager, Communities and Place  Ms A Donald, North Area Manager, Education and Learning  Ms H Flavell, Head Teacher, Thurso High School, Education and Learning  Ms J Sutherland, Roads Operation Manager, Infrastructure and Environment  Mrs M Ross, Principal Housing Officer, Housing and Property  Ms S Murdoch, Common Good Fund Officer, Communities and Place  Ms F Cameron, Programme Manager, Infrastructure and Environment  Ms S Lamb, EFF Regional Development Officer, Infrastructure and Environment  Ms A Macrae, Committee Administrator, Performance and Governance | |
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| **Also in Attendance:**  Mr J Donaldson, Scottish Fire & Rescue Service | |

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| **1.** | **Apologies for Absence**  **Leisgeulan**  There were no apologies for absence. |
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| **2.** | **Declarations of Interest**  **Foillseachaidhean Com-pàirt**  Item 12: Ms N Sinclair (non-financial)  Item 13: Mr S Mackie (financial and non-financial), Mr K Rosie (non-financial), Mr M Reiss (non-financial) |
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| **The Items are recorded in the order that they were taken at the meeting in accordance with Standing Order 9.** | |
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| **3.** | MinutesGeàrr-chunntas There were circulated for noting Minutes of the Caithness Committee held on 21 January 2021 and 19 February 2021, which were approved by the Council on 25 March 2021, the terms of which were **NOTED**. |
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| **4.** | Matters Arising – Action TrackerGnothaichean Ag Èirigh – Tracair Ghnìomhan There had been circulated an Action Tracker which detailed the actions arising from previous meetings.  It was confirmed that Ward 2 Members would be writing directly to the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service in relation to the action to support the refurbishment of Thurso Fire Station.  The Committee **AGREED** the update to the action tracker. |
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| **5.** | **Caithness Citizen’s Advice Bureau – Board Biùro Comhairleachaidh Pobaill Ghallaibh – Bòrd**  The Committee was asked to appoint 1 Member to serve as a Director of Caithness Citizens’ Advice Bureau as a replacement for Mr D Mackay who had stepped down from this position.  The Committee **AGREED** to appoint Mr S Mackie to the Board. |
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| **6.** | Scottish Fire and Rescue Local Performance ReportAithisg Dèanadais Sgìreil Seirbheis Smàlaidh is Teasairginn na h-Alba There had been circulated Report No CC/08/21 by the Local Senior Officer for Highland.  In discussion, Members noted that Mr J Donaldson, Station Commander was leaving his post at the end of the month, and expressed appreciation for his unstinting service to the area. The Committee following scrutiny, NOTED the Area Performance Report. |
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| **7.** | **Joint use of Thurso and North West Caithness (Ward 2) and Wick and East Caithness (Ward 3) Covid Response Funds**  **Co-chleachdadh Mhaointean Freagairt Covid Inbhir Theòrsa is Ghallaibh an Iar-Thuath (Uàrd 2) agus Inbhir Ùige is Ghallaibh an Ear (Uàrd 3)**    There had been circulated Report No CC/09/21 by the Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place.  The Committee **AGREED** to allocate the sum of:-   1. £6,000 (£3,000 from each Ward) to assist the 12 local Community Councils (now including Wick and Thurso) who are part of the Village Officer Scheme to apply for up to £500 to assist with their village officers’ duties for 2021/2022; and 2. £6,000 (£3,000 from each Ward) to assist local Christmas Lights Groups with repairs to lights damaged due to prolonged exposure to the elements. A maximum of £1,500 for Wick and Thurso and £300 for other identified groups. Closing date for applications to be 30 June 2021. |
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| **11.** | Housing Performance Report – 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021Aithisg Coileanaidh Taigheadais – 1 Giblean 2020 gu 31 Màrt 2021 There had been circulated Report No CC/13/21 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.  In discussion, a slight increase in homelessness was highlighted and Members were advised that it wasn’t anticipated the changes to national homeless legislation and guidance would create a significant challenge in Caithness as accommodation was available.  In relation to the reduction of rent arrears observed at the end of Q3, it was confirmed that while there had been an increase in Q4, the anticipated impact of Covid-19 had not been realised, although changes had been observed in the west of the County due to an increase in the number of tenants on benefits and the impact of furlough.  Thereafter, an update was provided on the focused work of the Service on rent arrears, and it was hoped door-step visits would commence next week and full-service delivery would follow within 4 to 6 weeks. Members expressed appreciation for the work of the Team as demonstrated by the performance report, and the support provided to tenants during the pandemic.  The Committee following scrutiny, **NOTED** the information provided on housing performance in the period 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2021. |
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| **12.** | **Wick Common Good Asset Register**  **Clàr So-mhaoin Math Coitcheann Inbhir Ùige**  **Declarations of Interest:- Ms N Sinclair declared a non-financial interest in this item as a Director of Wick’s Heart Development Trust 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.**  There had been circulated Report No CC/14/21 by the Executive Chief Officer Community & Places and Executive Chief Officer Finance & Resources.  In discussion, Members thanked the Common Good Officer for all her work in relation to the Fund and raised the following issues:-   * an explanation was sought and provided on the level of contribution Wick Common Good would be expected to contribute towards the central costs of all Highland Common Good Funds once its assets generated income; * the potential to generate revenue from the Fund’s assets for the benefit of the community, for example opportunities to charge for the use of the Wick Town Hall and noted the implications for the public consultation around car parking charging; * confirmation was sought and provided that work had commenced in relation to Thurso Common Good Fund; and * the publication of the register represented the work which had been undertaken to date and this was a fluid process going forward, including the opportunity to add to the register in future.   \* The Committee:-   1. **NOTED** the contents of the Asset Register in the format for publication (**Appendix 1**); 2. **NOTED** the content of the document titled “Wick Common Good property consultation representations and responses” (**Appendix 2**); 3. **AGREED** to the publication of the Common Good Asset register for Wick; 4. **AGREED** to the reclassification of the property included in the Register and to the creation of a Common Good Fund for Wick; 5. **NOTED** that Wick Common Good property will continue to be maintained by Highland Council until such time as an income source is identified to sustain Wick Common Good assets; and 6. **NOTED** that the creation of a Wick Common Good Fund, and its financial position, will be reported to the next meeting of Highland Council under the minutes of this meeting given that all Highland Councillors are custodians of Common Good Funds across Highland. |
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| **8.** | Thurso Associated School Group Overview **Sealladh Coitcheann air Buidheann Sgoiltean Co-cheangailte Inbhir Theòrsa**    There had been circulated Report No CC/10/21 by the Executive Chief Officer Education and Learning.  The Head Teacher, Thurso High School, advised that the figure shown for positive destinations for pupils at the School in 2019/20 was incorrect due to a data input error and should read 94.2%. She provided an overview of the main focus of the School with the aim of raising attainment, these being nurture and pupils health and wellbeing, creating a School and classroom culture that allowed pupils to learn the behaviours they required to succeed, and on more effective teaching and learning within the classrooms with staff becoming more research informed teachers. She also provided a detailed overview of the work undertaken to deliver remote learning during the Covid-19 pandemic, and in relation to supporting the most vulnerable pupils. There had been a high level of engagement during the lockdown period, details of which she provided. The sense of the school being part of a wider community had grown, and communication with parents had improved. Currently the focus was on SQA responsibilities for senior pupils, working towards their assessments and finalising their provisional grades.  In discussion, Members raised the following issues:-   * the Head Teacher and staff be commended on the excellent work being undertaken at Thurso High School and on the high level of engagement by pupils during the lockdown period; * the School’s staff and pupils also be commended on the improvements undertaken to the School’s estate; * confirmation was sought and provided that no issues had been experienced with recruitment to permanent posts for probationary teachers, reference being made to the importance of probationary staff being retained in the area; and * issues around the national timeline associated with the allocation of probationers each year and the challenges this created for schools, and noting this matter was being raised by the Service at a national level.   Discussion then focused on the opportunities to improve Thurso High School’s estate in consultation and collaboration with other organisations, with specific reference to the bus park and road safety issues, the provision of all-weather sports facilities and equity issues in relation to disabled access. It was confirmed further discussions involving Members and officers would be held offline in regard to the full School estate, priorities and the opportunities for collaboration to move this forward on delivering improvements. This would include progressing discussions with Sportscotland on the provision of an all-weather facility.  The Committee:-   1. **NOTED** following scrutiny, the content of the report; and 2. **AGREED** that further discussions be held with Members on the opportunities to improve Thurso High School’s estate in collaboration with other organisations, with specific reference to the bus park and road safety issues, provision of all-weather sports facilities and disabled access. |
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| **9.** | Additional Support Needs Provision in CaithnessSolar Feumalachdan Taice a Bharrachd ann an Gallaibh There had been circulated Report No CC/11/21 by the Executive Chief Officer Education and Learning.  The North Area Manager gave a presentation on this item which highlighted the main points from the report in relation on the Additional Support for Learning review, the Scottish and Highland context, Highland Additional Support for Learning allocation procedures and processes, and levels of need, staffing, procedures and processes in Caithness. She advised that Additional Support for Learning (ASL) had replaced Additional Support Needs (ASN).  In discussion, Members raised the following issues:-   * concern at any proposal to move additional support staff from Mount Pleasant Primary School, reference being made to parents concerns on this matter. It was explained the review sought to maximise the additional learning resource within the Thurso ASG and achieve the best outcomes for the children and deliver best practice in the area; * in relation to the proposal that staff be attached to the ASG rather than individual schools and the reluctance of some staff to travel, clarification was sought and provided on the approach to be taken to overcome these challenges, reference being made to the importance of supporting and communicating with staff in this regard; * an explanation on the differences in the reduction in Levels 3 and 4 between the Thurso and Wick ASGs including the ongoing work with schools to ensure the levels were correctly moderated to ensure the appropriate level of support was being provided to pupils; and * concern that the new ASL model relied heavily on the data, and the need to ensure that data was correct. This was a difficult and challenging issue and it had to be rolled out carefully and with sensitivity in each local area.   The Committee **NOTED**, following scrutiny the content of the report. |
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| **10.** | **Road Structural Maintenance 2021/22**  **Càradh Structar Rathaidean 2021/22**  There had been circulated Report No CC/12/21 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure and Environment.  In discussion, Members raised a range of issues including the following points:-   * concern at potholes on the road near Dunbar Hospital, Thurso. It was confirmed this matter would be addressed as soon as possible; * additional funding for roads was to be allocated by the Environment and Infrastructure Committee in May 2021, and it was understood schemes in Caithness would benefit from those additional monies; * the lifting of the overtime ban in relation to capital works was welcomed on the basis this would help increase productivity and deliver an enhanced programme; * an explanation was sought and provided in relation to how the priorities in the Programme were determined including the inspection regime and the roads hierarchy guidance which was factored into the process; * a point of concern in relation to progress with repairing potholes in towns and villages in the area; * an explanation was sought and provided in relation to revenue and capital works and the different bodies of work carried out under each budget, with specific reference to temporary and permanent pothole repairs; * in regard to the above, Members had supported the investment in a hotbox and other kit to allow more permanent pothole repairs to be carried out first time round; * the condition of the road network was a major issue in Caithness, and across the Highlands and reflected the legacy of roads maintenance funding being reduced over a number of years in favour of other priorities. Therefore, the Council’s significant additional investment in roads be welcomed as good news; * even with the additional investment, works could only be carried out to 4% of the road network in Caithness. Government assistance was therefore required, most particularly on road safety grounds. This should include a legal change so that windfarm and timber operators paid the Council a fair contribution to maintaining the road network; * Members’ appreciation of and thanks for the hard work of the Roads Team in the area be conveyed to all the staff, concern being expressed at negative comments on social media over which staff had no right of reply; * the Redesign Board has been asked to undertake a holistic review around roads, including the potential to build a long- term sustainable strategy that served rural, urban and suburban communities equally and appropriately and the more effective resourcing of the Council’s roads repairs strategy; * highlighting the significant amount of work being undertaken by Members and officials at a local level to maximise the available funding, and specifically the progress being made through the joint monthly roads meetings held in the area; * the need to reinforce the message in relation to the importance of driving according to the road conditions all year round; * the potential for the Ward 2 allocation to be invested in projects at Braal Terrace, Halkirk; Bridge Street Halkirk; and Ormlie road from Castlegreen Road to college; * the inclusion of the Ward Allocation of £100k per Ward in the Capital Budget allocation be supported, bearing in mind this was a flexible priority list and the need to factor in the ability to respond to unforeseen issues with the road network as they arose; * the allocation of the Ward Allocation be considered and agreed at ward business meetings;   Further discussion highlighted that only 10% of the roads requiring works could be included in the Programme and one third of the projects on the priority list progressed within the available funding. Difficult decisions had to be made which inevitably meant prioritising the roads most heavily used on the grounds of road safety. It was important to communicate to the public the nature of those challenges and the rationale for agreeing the prioritised Programme within the available funding.  The Chair advised that she had prepared visuals in relation to the proposed schemes to be undertaken, the available budget and a summary of the main challenges facing the Council in the area, for issuing in the public domain.  Thereafter, the Committee **APPROVED** the proposed prioritised 2021/22 Roads Maintenance Programme for Caithness Area. |
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| **13.** | **Highland Coastal Communities Fund – Assessment of Applications** Maoin Choimhearsnachdan Cladaich na Gàidhealtachd – Measadh Iarrtasan **Declarations of Interest:-**  **Mr S Mackie, declared a non-financial interest in this item on the grounds a close family member was part of a business that represented one of the applicants and a financial interest as Managing Director of a business that was in competition with one of the applicants and he left the meeting for the entirety of this item.**  **Mr K Rosie declared a non-financial interest in the Thurso Community Development Trust’s application as a Director of Thurso Community Development Trust and he left the meeting for the determination of this application.**  **Mr M Reiss declared a non-financial interest in the Befriending Highland application on the grounds the Manager of Befriending Caithness was a friend and he left the meeting for the determination of this application.**  There had been circulated Report No CC/15/21 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure and Environment.  The Chair advised thanked the officers for their work in bringing forward the report and providing the information by which Members could make an informed decision. She welcomed the fact the HCCF was controlled entirely at an area level and also the level of flexibility that existed within the Fund. This was important for localism and communities in Caithness and she commended the range of exciting projects which had been put forward to the Fund.  The Committee considered the applications and **APPROVED** funding as follows:-  **Caithness Voluntary Group**  **APPROVED** £9,082.80  **St John's Episcopal Church**  **APPROVED** £15,000  **Dunnet Forestry Trust**  **APPROVED** £22,436  **Keiss Primary School Parent Council**  **APPROVED** £23,000  **Thurso Youth Club SCIO**  **APPROVED** £40,923  **John O'Groats Mill Trust**  **APPROVED** £30,080  **Befrienders Highland**  **APPROVED** £7,360  **Caithness Voluntary Group**  **APPROVED** £39,700  **Thurso Community Development Trust**  **APPROVED** £67,791.75  Members commented that the full amount applied for had not been awarded on the basis of the risk presented by the fact the premises identified for the zero-waste shop in the town centre was on the market for sale. The approval therefore related to the ‘Thurso Grows’ and employment of an Enterprise officer elements of the Project. This would not preclude the Trust from applying to the Fund in future if they met the criteria once the situation with the premises had been settled.  **Brough Bay Association**  **APPROVED** £27,000 subject to planning permission and match funding being in place.  **Bridgenorth Ironmongers Ltd**  **APPROVED** £9,775 subject to a business plan being provided.  **Scrabster Harbour Trust**  **APPROVED** £18,700  **Dunnet Bay Distillers Ltd**  **NO AWARD**  Members expressed concern this project may result in commercial displacement in the local area. The project was eligible for Historic Environment Scotland funding for the preservation of the historic Mill and the state aid implications had to be clarified. Members were concerned around public monies being invested in a private business to fund the stills element of the project.  **Crowvus**  **NO AWARD**  Members commented that there was no clear evidence the purchase of the building was necessary to improve literacy in Caithness. In addition, there were concerns about the suitability of the structure of the organisation.  \*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*  During further discussion, the Programme Manager confirmed that taking the above awards into account the balance remaining from the available funding of £409,652.26 was £98,803.45  Thereafter, the Committee **AGREED** to ring-fence the balance of £98,803.45 for member-led strategic investments to benefit the Caithness economy and secure match funding with local stakeholders. Further details of this investment to be brought back to the Committee.  In conclusion of this item, Members advised that for those applications which had received a reduced or no award, this did not preclude them from re-shaping their applications and making an application to the Fund at a future date. The applicants and those who did not meet this stage of the process were thanked for their efforts in relation to the Fund.    The meeting ended at 3.05pm. |