

**The Highland Council
Sutherland County Committee**

Minutes of Meeting of the Sutherland County Committee held remotely on Monday 28 February 2022 at 10.30am.

Present:

Mr R Gale

Mr H Morrison

Mrs D Mackay

Ms L Munro

Mr J McGillivray

Officials in attendance:

Ms F Duncan, Executive Chief Officer, Health and Social Care

Mr P Tomalin, Ward Manager, Communities and Place

Mr C Howell, Head of Infrastructure, Infrastructure, Environment and Economy

Ms J Sutherland, Roads Operations Manager, Infrastructure, Environment and Economy

Mr A Webster, Regeneration Team Leader, Infrastructure, Environment and Economy

Ms A Donald, North Area Manager, Education and Learning

Ms K Van Voornveld Head Teacher, North Coast Campus, Education and Learning

Mr B Cameron, Housing Policy and Investment Manager, Housing and Property

Mrs M Grant, Principal Housing Officer, Housing and Property

Ms A Macrae, Committee Administrator, Performance and Governance

Also in Attendance:

Station Commander P Farrell and Group Commander M Humphreys, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

Mr R Gale in the Chair

**1. Apologies for Absence
Leisgeulan**

An apology for absence was intimated on behalf of Ms K Currie.

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

Items 7 and 10: Mr R Gale

**3. * Additional Urgent Item
Russian Invasion of Ukraine**

The Chair **AGREED** to consider an additional urgent item to allow the support of the Highland Council to be sought on the need for the UK Government to act urgently and without delay to close travel loopholes to and from Russia

It was reported that at the weekend a private jet, registered in Estonia, had flown from Inverness to Moscow. Its journey had started the previous day when it departed Moscow to Geneva. It then flew to Amsterdam and on to

Inverness from where it flew to Moscow. There was a need to query as to why was this allowed, who was on this round trip to Moscow, and what was their business. Russian planes, including private jets, were banned from UK airspace and so what had been witnessed was the exploitation of a loophole which required to be closed rapidly. This was at the same time a Russian oil tanker was due to dock in Orkney.

This incident has been referred to Westminster and it was understood would be raised in Parliament. However, it also brought into sharp focus the reach of Putin's evil regime and the role everyone needed to play against the man who has invaded Ukraine, threatened Scandinavian neighbours and placed his nuclear force on special alert.

Like the rest of the free and civilised world people in the Highlands had been sickened and appalled by the invasion and stood firm with the people of Ukraine. Every act of unity counted, and at every level, there was a need to do all possible to support the people of Ukraine. The UK Government was required to act urgently and without delay to close loopholes to ensure the Highlands did not provide a back door for travel to and from Russia and the full support of Highland Council was sought on this matter.

* The Committee **AGREED** that the full support of the Highland Council be sought on the need for the UK Government to act urgently and without delay to close travel loopholes and ensure the Highlands did not provide a back door for travel to and from Russia.

4. **Scottish Fire and Rescue Local Performance Report** **Aithisg Dèanadais Ionadail Seirbheis Smàlaidh is Teasairginn na h-Alba**

There had been circulated Report No SCC/01/22 by the Local Senior Officer for Highland.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- concern at the availability at Tongue Fire Station and the potential to base a full-time member of staff in the area to provide additional resource and focus on a more concentrated recruitment drive;
- the main challenges around recruitment in rural areas was an ageing population, resulting in a lack of potential recruits and concern in relation to the school roll projections going forward;
- the need to reduce the age at which young people could join the service and the importance of considering the challenges around retaining staff;
- confirmation that the open days hosted by the Service held in Bettyhill and Tongue had attracted a number of recruits and arrangements would be made to repeat these events;
- the role of Members in assisting the Service with recruitment locally; and
- the Station Commander and his staff be thanked for their work in keeping the public safe, while recognising the challenges the Service faced in the area.

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

5. North Coast Campus Overview
Sealladh Coitcheann air Campas a' Chost a Tuath

There had been circulated Report No SCC/02/22 by the Executive Chief Officer Education and Learning.

The Head Teacher gave a detailed presentation on the recovery and growth within the Campus following the pandemic and the ongoing challenges.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- the significant challenges around staffing and support service allocations and reductions due to pupil numbers falling below set thresholds was recognised by Members;
- the policy in relation to the staffing allocation model required to be changed as a priority so that it took account of rurality and the impact of reducing pupil numbers on smaller schools in terms of the curriculum and subject choices available to pupils;
- the Head Teacher and staff be commended on the energy, positivity and a strong drive forward within the Campus in challenging times and on being creative in terms of seeking to overcome some of the challenges outlined in collaboration with local Members and officers;
- concern at the delay in approving the applications for the supply list, and for this matter to be addressed urgently. It was explained that a main issue around the delays was in relation to references being received. The North Area Manager advised she would follow up on this matter;
- confirmation there was some sharing of teachers with neighbouring secondary schools although there were challenges in terms of timetabling and staff already being at the minimum for non- contact time and the lack of capacity at other schools. Any further opportunities and creative solutions to this issue would be welcomed by the Campus;
- support for the Head Teacher in relation to the Care Inspectorate visit to Tongue Primary School and noting the robust discussions that had taken place with the Inspectorate in respect of this visit;
- confirmation that the ECO Health and Social Care would have discussions with the Manager and Head Teacher in relation to the roll out of trauma champions and materials by the Council across Highland to ensure the Campus was actively involved; and
- the Head Teacher and staff be highly commended on doing an excellent job in the face of significant challenges.

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

6. Area Roads Capital Programme 2022/23
Prògram Calpa Rathaidean Sgìreil 2022/23

There had been circulated Report No SCC/03/22 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy.

During discussion, Members raised the following issues:-

- the Ward 4 Allocation budget be used to undertake improvements to pavements, specific reference being made to locations at the Back Road, Golspie and the Free Church, Brora. The introduction of a dropped kerb at Col Bheinn Road, Brora was also sought to improve disabled access;
- the budget allocation for Sutherland compared well with other areas in Highland;
- confirmation was sought and provided that if there was an underspend on the current Ward Allocation budget this could be carried forward to the next financial year;
- the potential to address an animal welfare issue associated with a cattle grid and fencing at Achintoul from the ward allocation budget. It was confirmed that this matter was being investigated in conjunction with the estate with a view to resolving the issue;
- it was recognised the Keoldale Ferry Road was being undermined by sea water and therefore the works required may be more extensive than anticipated;
- confirmation was sought and provided that officers were investigating the need for works on the Skerray loop road;
- the quality of the works undertaken on the Struie Road and other routes in the area and also in relation to winter maintenance be welcomed and Members appreciation be conveyed to the Roads Team in this regard;
- the allocation of any additional monies for roads approved at the Council's budget meeting on 3 March 2022 be considered at a Ward Business Meeting;
- an assurance was provided that programming works were being undertaken with intention of ensuring the budget and any additional allocation was fully spent and this included supplementing the inhouse resource with external contractors for some works; and
- the improvements being delivered to the A897 Helmsdale/Strath Road were excellent and had been welcomed by the local community.

The Committee **APPROVED** the proposed prioritised Area Roads Capital Programme for the Sutherland Area.

**7. Placed Based Investment Programme
Prògram Tasgaidh Stèidhichte air Àite**

Declaration of Interest:- Mr R Gale declared an interest in this item as a Trustee of the Go Golspie Development Trust and left the meeting for the determination of this item.

There had been circulated Report No SCC/04/22 by the Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment and Economy.

The Committee **AGREED:-**

- i to award the Golspie YMCA project £30,000 for delivery in 2022/23 subject to Scottish Government approval to carry over funds into the next financial year; and

- ii that the Council write to the Scottish Government to request permission to carry over the £76,964 uncommitted PBIP grant into 2022/23 and that a report be brought to the next meeting of the Sutherland County Committee outlining the Scottish Government's decision and any associated recommendations if the response is favourable

8. **HRA Capital Programme 2022/23** **Prògram Calpa HRA 2022/23**

There had been circulated Report No SCC/05/22 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

During discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- an assurance was provided that there was a high level of compliance with the new fire safety legislation in Council houses across Sutherland. It was confirmed the up to date figures would be circulated to Members once available;
- whether in terms of heating options, tenants using solid fuel would continue to be able to opt out of works to renew heating systems. It was explained that the Council would have to take a policy decision going forward on whether this element of tenant choice should be retained or whether a more robust approach be taken to meet climate change and energy efficiency targets and this would feed into Committee papers at a later date; and
- the challenges in rural areas, where tenants with all electric systems had no alternative option available in power outages, and concern at the potential impact on older tenants and those with young families. In addition, there was a need to take into account of the significant increase in the cost of electricity and removal of the energy cap.

The Committee:-

- i **NOTED** the allocation of resources to Sutherland Area as set out at section 5.7 of the report;
- 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 Sutherland 2022-23 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.

9. **Housing Revenue Account: Garage Rents 2022/2023** **Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais: Màil Gharaidsean 2022/23**

There is circulated Report No SCC/06/22 by the Executive Chief Officer Housing and Property.

The Committee **AGREED** that a 1% rent increase be applied to Sutherland Garages and Garage Sites in 2022/23.

**10. Sutherland Place Based Investment Fund
Prògram Tasgaidh Stèidhichte air Àite Chataibh**

Declaration of Interest:- Mr R Gale declared an interest in this item as a Trustee of the Go Golspie Development Trust and left the meeting for the determination of this item.

There had been circulated Report No SCC/07/22 by the Interim Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place.

The Committee **AGREED:-**

- i £10,000 of the Place Based Investment Fund for Ward 1 to Dornoch Firth Group for the Sutherland Cares Counselling Service;
- ii £10,000 of the Place Based Investment Fund for Ward 4 to Dornoch Firth Group for the Sutherland Cares Counselling Service;
- iii £23,500 of the Place Based Investment Fund for Ward 4 to Helmsdale and District Community Association for the Helmsdale Play SPACE project; and
- iv £23,500 of the Place Based Investment Fund for Ward 4 to Go Golspie Development Trust for King George V Playpark Refurbishment.

**11. Poverty in Sutherland
Bochdainn ann an Cataibh**

The Chair gave a verbal report on this item during which he advised that the issues around poverty in Sutherland were being exacerbated by significant increases in the cost of fuel and food, national insurance and a steady rise in the rate of inflation. It was important the Committee retained a focus on all poverty related issues including the impact of the proposed 3% increase in Council tax, albeit this was a lower increase than many other local authorities and the Scottish Government was providing mitigation in terms of bands A to D. There was a need to continue to work with and support the Sutherland Community Partnership locally and for the Council to be aware of what it could do to alleviate the impacts of poverty going forward.

In discussion, concern was expressed at the unprecedented number of children and people in work living in poverty in the area. The Council and Sutherland Community Partnership were doing sterling work on the ground but the power to lift people out of poverty and tackle the underlying problems rested with national government. Sutherland's wealth of natural resources was generating vast amounts of renewable energy, however the area was faced with some of the highest energy charges nationally and there was a need for renewables to contribute significantly more resources to support local communities. It was hoped that the new Committee would continue to work with the Sutherland Community Partnership, raise awareness of the issues and have poverty as a standing item on the agenda.

Thereafter, it was reported that Sutherland Members had allocated funding to the CABx also to be accessed by people in work. The focus of the CABx was on offering help and the need to get this message out to the public and encourage them to access services. The impact of increases in fuel costs was particularly significant in Sutherland, given that people had to frequently travel

great distances by private transport due to necessity to access work and services. It was also suggested that the Council Tax was unfair and should be based on the ability to pay and not on the banding of the property.

The Committee **NOTED** the verbal update.

12. Annual Report 2020/21, Proposed Budget 2022/23 and Quarter 3 Monitoring Statement 2021/22
Aithisg Bhliadhnail 2020/21, Buidseat ga Mholadh airson 2022/23 agus Aithris Sgrùdaidh Cairteil 3 2021/22

There had been circulated Report No SCC/09/22 by the Interim Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place and Executive Chief Officer Resources and Finance.

The Committee:-

- i. **NOTED** the Dornoch Common Good Fund Annual Report and Accounts for 2020/21;
- ii. **AGREED** the Dornoch Common Good Fund Annual Budget for 2022/23; and
- iii. **NOTED** the position of the Dornoch Common Good Fund, as shown in the Q3 monitoring statement against budget.

13. Minutes

There was circulated and **NOTED** Minutes of the Sutherland County Committee held on 22 November 2021 which were approved by the Council on 10 December 2021.

In conclusion, the Chair indicated this was the last meeting of the Committee before the Council elections in May 2022. He thanked the officers who had supported and presented to the Committee and for the standard of reports received. He thanked all Members for their support and paid tribute to Ms K Currie, Mrs D Mackay, and Ms L Munro who had indicated they would not be seeking re-election and wished them well for the future.

In response, Members advised that the Committee had worked collaboratively and collectively and operated in a courteous and respectful manner. Good wishes were conveyed to those Members who were seeking re-election and special thanks extended to the Ward Manager for the support he had provided to Members over the period.

The meeting closed at 12.30pm.