

AGENDA ITEM 7 – OFFICER ASSESSMENT

The following Notices of Motion have been received by the Head of Corporate Governance:-

- (i) “The new Belford Hospital was opened in 1965; 47 years ago.

In 2006, following the Kerr report, the Belford was designated a ‘Rural General Hospital’. In November 2009 the surgical and medical wards were merged to form a combined assessment unit.

In 2015 the site for a new hospital was purchased by Highland Council. The announcement stated that this “would be the site of a new hospital to replace the crumbling Belford in Fort William which is Scotland’s busiest rural general and the main centre for mountain trauma.”

In 2017 – then Health Secretary Shona Robinson said – “The work on a planned new hospital in Fort William is progressing.”

Recently it was revealed by the Scottish Government that the Belford Hospital is not on the current Capital Programme which takes us up to 2026.

Council recognises:

The period of time that has passed since the idea of a new hospital was first discussed and the discouraging effect this delay may have had on the communities which are relying on this.

The excellent work that has been done by the stakeholder group to deliver a project of this size and importance to the area which will greatly improve health outcomes for all residents.

The only clear way that Lochaber communities can be assured that the hospital is going to become a reality and provide upgraded health facilities is through a clear statement from the Scottish Government.

To progress the project it is agreed that:

Council will write to Scottish Government requesting that the building of the new Belford Hospital is included in the current programme of capital projects. That an update report be provided at an early meeting of the Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Committee.”

Signed: John Grafton Ron Gunn

S95 officer assessment of financial implications

This motion is not anticipated to have any financial implication to the Council, save the opportunity cost associated with the production of a report for the Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Committee.

- (ii) “The A9 north is the main arterial route to and from Caithness. In recent weeks there have been two consecutive days when the road between Brora and Helmsdale has been closed for more than 6 hours due to life threatening accidents. This stretch of road consists of many blind bends and a narrow bridge that cannot accommodate two commercial vehicles and as such has a high accident rate.

To be clear, the closing of this road results in the virtual isolation of the north from Helmsdale to Wick, Thurso and indeed Orkney as there are no practical means of diversion. The result is that essential services cannot reach their destinations in either direction.

The A9, Scotland’s second most dangerous road and part of the NC 500, is very busy with tourists and locals.

There are over 6000 appointments in Raigmore for Caithness residents each year, which is an average of 24 appointments per day and in this scenario that equates to 48 people who could not attend their appointment, many of which may have involved a wait of more than a year to get.

The Scottish Ambulance Service have over 500 patient transfers a year between Wick and Inverness. That’s more than one trip a day and these are patients who need transportation in an Ambulance often requiring a ‘blue light’ journey.

Wick has a CMU (maternity unit) but very few mothers give birth there with over 90% of mothers having to travel to Inverness or further to give birth. Last year alone 170 mothers had to travel to Inverness and 5 further afield. The majority, over 60%, have to travel south in a private car as very few go by Ambulance. As a result, any delay could have serious consequences for a woman in labour, as they could be forced to give birth at the side of the road with no medical support.

Given that this vital link is prone to disruption at any time and that Transport Scotland have allocated zero funding for improving this section of road, the Leader of this Council will write to and arrange meetings with Transport Scotland and Scottish Government Transport Ministers and press them to commit to an urgent upgrade of the road between Brora and Helmsdale as a matter of priority.”

Signed: Richard Gale Matthew Reiss Ron Gunn

S95 officer assessment of financial implications

This motion is not anticipated to have any financial implication to the Council.

- (iii) “Energy Crisis

Following the refusal of the Westminster Government to offer any advice to UK residents to help reduce their energy bills, Highland Council;

Regrets that no action is being taken to recoup some of the vast profits being made this year by energy companies;

Notes that the cost of generating renewable energy is the same this year as last year;

Notes that there are more opportunities for households to receive energy advice in Scotland than in England;

Agrees that Highland Council should provide an information campaign over the next four months to advise households of ways of reducing energy bills and to give sources of advice in the Highlands on how to do this, through social media, the press, and information for councillors to disseminate,

And requests that all relevant officers take immediate action to reduce energy use and maximise energy efficiency across the Highland Council buildings estate and report back on progress to Properties and Housing Committee.”

Signed: Chris Balance Kate Willis

S95 officer assessment of financial implications

This motion is anticipated to have the following financial implications:

- The cost of the information campaign, which will be an additional cost to the Council if it cannot be done using existing resources. If existing resources can be used there will be an opportunity cost as staff are diverted from other planned work*
- If deliverable a reduction in energy use should see reductions in the cost of energy. Any behavioural changes to reduce energy use should have no cost implication but other interventions may have costs associated (e.g. investing in energy efficiency measures)*
- There will be an opportunity cost associated with the production of a report to the Property and Housing Committee.*

- (iv) Carers Rights Day is on the 24th November 2022 and aims to ensure carers are aware of their rights, the help and support that is available to them and promote the needs of carers.

This Council meeting notes that:

- Carers – young and old, paid and unpaid whether in receipt of Carers Allowance and Carers Supplement or not do a truly remarkable and vital job. They are an integral part of our Highland community. They deserve our thanks and support, but are far too often forgotten, ignored and unrecognised.
- Carers across the country face big challenges every single day, challenges that have been made even harder by the Covid-19 pandemic and cost of living crisis. Most are having to spend more time looking after loved ones as we emerge from the pandemic and many haven't been able to take a single break since it started and as a consequence are simply exhausted.

- Life changing events requiring care interventions can happen suddenly with little or no warning. Often the care givers have to reduce their working hours or give up work totally to adapt and cope with competing demands.
- The pressures on young carers can negatively impact on their experiences and outcomes in education, having a lasting effect on their life chances.
- All too often carers are unaware of their entitlement to financial support, a carers' assessment or break, and the support services available.
- A significant number of full-time unpaid working-age carers in across Highland rely on Carer's Allowance.
- At just £69.70 a week, Carer's Allowance is totally inadequate.
- Many unpaid carers are facing extreme financial hardship brought on by the cost of living crisis. A recent survey by Carers UK found that Just under half (45%) of unpaid carers reported that they are currently unable to manage their monthly expenses and that any further increases in energy bills will negatively affect their own physical and mental health or that of the person they care for. They are often relying on foodbanks to feed themselves and the people they care for.
- The Carers UK survey found that 43% of carers felt that a rise in Carer's Allowance would help them, given the financial pressures they are facing.

Council resolves to:

- Recognising the importance of embracing the culture and aims of being a Carer Friendly Organisation and Council and undertakes to bring a detailed report to the March meeting of Council on how this can be achieved with support from the Community Planning Partner Organisations.
- Asks the Chief Executive to ensure that Highland Carers are made aware of Carers Rights Day and also made aware of existing support that is available including improving the information available through the council's own website and other resources.
- Write to the Chancellor requesting an increase Carer's Allowance and other benefits so they rise in line with current inflation predictions.
- Write to the Scottish Government and UK Government requesting an immediate extension of the Warm Home Discount scheme to ensure that it include carers on the lowest incomes. This would recognise the additional energy costs often faced by unpaid carers and provide targeted support to those most in need.
- That COSLA be lobbied with a view to achieving a campaign to see a rise in the earnings limit for those claiming Carer's Allowance, so that it is at least equal to 16 hours work at the National Living Wage.

Signed: Ron Gunn Alasdair Christie Richard Gale Angela MacLean
 David Gregg Trish Robertson

S95 officer assessment of financial implications

This motion is not anticipated to have any financial implication to the Council, save the opportunity cost associated with the production of a report for Council and the awareness-raising work requested.