

## **The Highland Council**

Minutes of Meeting of the **Caithness Committee** held **remotely** on Monday, 20 January 2025 at 10.00 am

### **Present:**

Mr R Gunn  
Mr A Jarvie  
Mr S Mackie  
Ms J McEwan

Mr M Reiss  
Mr K Rosie  
Mr W Mackay

### **In attendance:**

Mr P Tomalin, Community Development Manager  
Ms A Jansson, Interim Chief Officer Education, Early Years and Primary  
Mr J MacKay, Amenity Services Manager  
Ms J Sutherland, Roads Operations Manager  
Mr E Marsh, Repairs Manager  
Mr C Sutherland, Principal Repairs Officer  
Miss J MacLennan, Joint Democratic Services Manager

### **Also in attendance:**

Station Commander G Cringles, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service

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

**Mr R Gunn in the Chair**

### **Business**

#### **1. Apologies for Absence Leisgeulan**

An apology for absence was intimated on behalf of Mr R Bremner.

#### **2. Declarations of Interest/Transparency Statement Foillseachaidhean Com-pàirt/ Aithris Fhollaiseachd**

The Committee **NOTED** the following:-

Items 15: Ms J McEwan & Mr W Mackay (Transparency Statements)

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

There had been circulated Report No CC/01/25 by the Local Senior Officer for Highland.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- the Service be thanked for the good work undertaken in the area and on the open day event held in Thurso. The Station Commander confirmed he would follow up on the potential for a similar event to be held in Wick;

- further clarity was sought and provided on the Service's policy not to respond to unwanted fire alarm signals from commercial business and workplace premises unless a fire had been confirmed;
- the Service be commended on the number of home fire safety visits conducted in the area and highlighting the importance of this preventative work;
- an update was sought and provided on the level of cover Thurso Fire Station was providing to the north coast of Sutherland and the ongoing work around recruitment and joint mobilisation in this area; and
- an explanation was sought and provided on the Service's current position and requirements in relation to battery energy storage systems, highlighting there were a number of potential developments in the pipeline for Caithness. It was confirmed that any advice provided to developers was in line with the guidance issued by the National Fire Chiefs Council.

The Committee **NOTED** the attached Area Performance Report.

#### 4. **Scottish Government Play Park Funding** **Maoineachadh Phàircean-cluiche Riaghaltas na h-Alba**

There had been circulated Report No CC/02/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

In discussion, Members provided an assurance to the public that there were no plans to close play parks in Caithness and welcomed the funding received from the Scottish Government and the refurbishment and upgrade proposals outlined in the report. Members also commended the staff for their work in maintaining play parks in the area and prompt responses to queries.

Thereafter, Members raised the following main points:

- the focus going forward should be on new design of equipment and engaging with communities on how to improve the offering across Caithness so these facilities were intergenerational;
- engagement with communities going forward should be as wide as possible and include community councils and groups, development trusts and other community organisations and seek to identify other sources of capital and revenue funding for investment in play parks;
- it was important to have discussions with communities on the lifespan of their play parks well in advance of this becoming an issue;
- the monthly meetings involving local Members and the Amenities Service were extremely helpful in understanding and responding to any issues around play parks;
- community benefit funding and the work of voluntary organisations in attracting match funding and through asset transfers had delivered excellent and sustainable facilities in the area; and
- the need for ongoing discussions on the future funding of play parks was recognised and a further update from officers would be arranged for a future meeting.

The Committee **AGREED** that in:

- Ward 2, the sum of £146,824 be allocated to the agreed projects as outlined at section 6.5 of the report; and

- ii. Ward 3, the sum of £145,338 be allocated to the agreed projects as outlined at section 6.6 of the report.

## **5. Area Roads Capital Programme Update - 2024-25** **Cunntas mu Phrògram Calpa nan Rathaidean Sgìreil – 2024-25**

There had been circulated Report No CC/03/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Place.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:

- in response to a query, further clarity was provided on the variances in cost of works per square metre in terms of plant, labour and materials in comparison to previous years;
- concern at the significant reduction in the Strategic Timber Transport Fund and noting that confirmation had not yet been received as to which of the bids for schemes in Highland in 2025/26 had been successful. Members were advised to refer specific queries to the Council's Timber Transport Co-ordinator, contact details to be provided. Further information on the work of the Highland Timber Transport Group would also be shared with Members;
- a query as to whether the works at Primrose Avenue, Thurso had been completed. It was confirmed a response would be provided directly to Mr M Reiss on the matter;
- an explanation was sought and provided on the challenges in undertaking an analysis of the percentage of schemes completed per annum, noting that other factors had to be considered such as the percentage of roads mileage surfaced;
- it was important to recognise the recent significant increase in investment in roads in the area to over £3m in the current financial year and the improvements in machinery and equipment also delivered; and
- the above investment and work of the Roads Teams was making a difference in Caithness, however there was a lot more work to be done a need for a continued focus on increasing investment going forward.

The Committee:

- i. **NOTED** the final budget allocation for Caithness area for 2024/25;
- ii. **NOTED** the works completed on the approved prioritised list to date;
- iii. **NOTED** the additional works identified and prioritised throughout the year; and
- iv. **APPROVED** the works still proposed for the 2024/25 financial year.

## **6. Area Roads Capital Programme 2025-26** **Prògram Calpa Rathaidean Sgìreil 2025-26**

There had been circulated Report No CC/04/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

In discussion, Members advised that the regular monthly meetings held with Roads officials were extremely informative and highlighted that the condition of the road network was subject to change due to seasonal and other factors and that priorities had to be kept under continual review.

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

**7. Housing Revenue Account: Garage Rents 2025/26**  
**Cunntas Teachd-a-steach Taigheadais: Màil Gharaidsean 2025/26**

There had been circulated Report No CC/05/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

The Committee **AGREED** that a 8% rent increase be applied to Caithness Garages and Garage Sites in 2025/26.

**8. Housing Repairs Performance Report – 1 April 2024 to 30 September 2024**  
**Aithisg Coileanaidh Càraidhean Taigheadais - 1 Giblean 2024 gu 30 Sultain 2024**

There had been circulated Report No CC/06/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Place.

In response to a query, it was explained there was an equipment and adaptations budget that was used to meet the assessed needs of individual tenants, for example to ensure bathrooms were fit for purpose. It was suggested there was a need for more forward planning and smarter working in relation to such works, concern being expressed at the time tenants had to wait for assessments and works to be completed and at the underspend on the budget at this stage of the financial year.

In response, Members were advised that officers would have further discussions in response to the concerns raised on this matter and confirmed the underspend on the budget could be carried forward to the next financial year.

Thereafter, confirmation was sought and provided that the Chair would be updated on the heating project due to commence in Thurso in the near future.

The Committee **NOTED** the information provided on housing performance in the period 1 April 2024 – 30 September 2024.

**9. Education Associated School Group Report**  
**Aithisg Foghlaim Buidheann Sgoiltean Co-cheangailte**

There were circulated Report Nos CC/07/25 to CC/08/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive - People.

The Chair congratulated the staff and pupils at Miller Academy Primary School, Thurso on being ranked by the Press and Journal as one of the top scoring Highland primary schools based on Achievement of Curriculum for Excellence levels 2023-24 data published by the Scottish Government.

Thereafter, further clarity was sought and provided in relation to the significant improvement in pupil destinations for 16+ at Thurso High School. It was explained the data presented a historical picture and more current data for both ASGs would be brought to Members in the near future. A further point was raised in relation to leaver destinations and links being made with industry such as Dounreay and the Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport.

Following further discussion, Members indicated that they were content for the above matters to be brought to an Area Business Meeting and for the Head Teachers of Thurso and Wick High Schools to be invited to attend.

The Committee **NOTED** the content of the reports.

**10. Caithness Place Based Initiative Fund Update  
Cunntas mu Mhaoin Iomairt Stèidhichte air Àite Ghallaibh**

There had been circulated Report No CC/09/25 by the Chief Officer Community and Housing.

In discussion, the importance of progress reports of this nature being on the Caithness Committee's agenda was highlighted, reference being made to the time lapse between Members approval of funding and that required to deliver projects on the ground.

The Committee:

- i. **NOTED** progress made on PBI supported projects in the current financial year; and
- ii. **HOMOLOGATED** re-purposing of £1,556 underspend of Ward 3 PBI funding to support Wick town centre regeneration projects.

**11. Wick Common Good Fund – 2023/24 Annual Accounts and Final Monitoring, 2024/25 Quarter Three Monitoring Report and 2025/26 Proposed Budget  
Maoin Math Coitcheann Inbhir Ùige – Cunntasan Bliadhnail agus Sgrùdadh Deireannach 2023/24, Aithisg Sgrùdaidh Ràith Trì 2024/25 agus Buidseat a Thathar a' Moladh airson 2025/26**

There had been circulated Report No CC/10/25 by the Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place and Head of Corporate Finance.

The Committee:-

- i. **AGREED** the Wick Common Good Fund Statement of Accounts (Appendix 1) and Quarter 4 monitoring report for 2023/24 (Appendix 2),
- ii. **NOTED** the position of the Wick Common Good Fund, as shown in the Q3 monitoring statement (Appendix 3) against budget for 2024/25, and
- iii. **APPROVED** the Wick Common Good Fund Annual Budget for 2025/26 (Appendix 4).

**12. Thurso Common Good Fund – 2023/24 Annual Accounts, 2025/26 Budget  
Maoin Math Coitcheann Inbhir Theòrsa – Cunntasan Bliadhnail 2023/24, Buidseat 2025/26**

There had been circulated Report No CC/11/24 by the Executive Chief Officer Communities and Place and Head of Corporate Finance.

In discussion, officers were thanked for their work in relation to the Fund and the fact standardised reports could now be brought to the Committee. It was important to recognise this was the first step towards a strategy being put in place to try to maximise the Common Good for the benefit of the people of Thurso. In particular, it was important that opportunities for income generation be explored.

The Committee **AGREED** the:

- i. Thurso Common Good Fund Statement of Accounts for 2023/24. (Appendix 1); and
- ii. Thurso Common Good Fund Annual Budget for 2025/26 (Appendix 2).

### 13. Ward Discretionary Awards Duaisean fo Ùghdarras Uàird

The Committee **NOTED** that the following Ward Discretionary Budget applications were approved for the period to 31 December 2024.

#### **Thurso and Northwest Caithness Ward Discretionary Budget applications approved 1<sup>st</sup> April 2024 – 31<sup>st</sup> December 2024**

Community Food Initiatives North East – Fareshare in Highland	£1,690.00
Caithness Chamber of Commerce – Caithness Transport Forum	£500.00
Pentland Firth Yacht Club – Replacement Windows	£1,450.00
Highlife Highland – Active School Coaching & Equipment	£1,500.00
Sidh Chailleann Art – “Industrial Caithness” Exhibition	£1,000.00
Thurso Youth Club SCIO – Holiday Activities	£1,000.00
Thurso Community Council – Thurso Town Centre initiative 2024	£400.00
Association of Caithness Community Councils – Village Officer	£3,200.00
Connecting Carers Caithness	£1,916.00
Total Spend to Date	£12,656.00
<b>Current Available Balance</b>	<b>£1,744.00</b>

#### **Wick and East Caithness Ward Discretionary Budget applications approved 1<sup>st</sup> April 2024 – 31<sup>st</sup> December 2024**

Community Food Initiatives North East – Fareshare in Highland	£2,763.00
Caithness Chamber of Commerce – Caithness Transport Forum	£500.00
Highlife Highland – Youth Session Resources	£999.00
Argyll Square Area Association – Replacement Litter Bin	£561.60
Association of Caithness Community Councils – Village Officer	£5,300.00
Total Spend to Date	£10,123.60
<b>Current Available Balance</b>	<b>£4,276.40</b>

### 14. Minutes Geàrr-chunntas

There were circulated and **NOTED** Minutes of the Caithness Committee held on 11 November 2024 which were approved by the Council on 12 December 2024.

### 15. Caithness Disability Access Panel Pannal Ruigsinneachd Ciorramachd Ghallaibh

**Transparency Statements: Ms J McEwan and Mr W Mackay made Transparency Statements in respect of this item on the grounds they were members of the Caithness Disability Access Panel. However, having applied the objective test, reviewed their position in relation to the item and any personal connection, they did not consider they had an interest to declare.**

Members were advised that Disability Access Panels were made up of people of all ages and abilities who share a passion for the issues faced by disabled people. With the help of Disability Equality Scotland as the national umbrella body, Disability Access Panels support their communities to become as accessible as possible, particularly in relation to the built environment, healthcare, employment, education, and transport. By raising awareness they can also help to change attitudes among the general public about the need for inclusive access.

The Highland Council has a protocol with Disability Access panels across Highland and consults them on proposals for public buildings e.g. schools or libraries etc. In addition to this Disability Access panels can receive and review weekly Planning lists and can request a consultation or make comment on a particular application.

The Caithness Disability Access Panel is an active group who meet approximately once a month to discuss local access issues, disability legislation and general matters relating to disabled access, both in buildings and on public transport. They also highlighted examples of both good and poor practice to service providers and may comment on a variety of issues, reflecting issues relating to accessibility within Caithness, for example the standard of specific disabled toilets, or the frequency of accessible public buses. They are also compiling a Caithness Public Services Access Guide (after receiving access audit training) which aims to list the accessibility status of all local businesses. They are currently working very hard to develop a project to provide disabled access on to a local beach for wheelchair users.

The Committee acknowledged and **NOTED** the work of the Caithness Disability Access Panel.

The meeting concluded at 12.10pm.