

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Caithness Committee** held **remotely** on Monday, 28 April 2025 at 10.00 am

Present:

Mr R Bremner	Ms J McEwan
Mr R Gunn	Mr M Reiss
Mr A Jarvie	Mr K Rosie
Mr S Mackie	Mr W Mackay

In attendance:

Ms P Tomalin, Community Development Manager
Mr D Hopwood, Senior Environmental Health Officer
Ms M Ross, Principal Housing Officer
Ms E Taggart, Principal Housing Officer
Miss J MacLennan, Joint Democratic Services Manager

Also in attendance:

Chief Inspector C Smith, Police Scotland

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

Miss J MacLennan in the Chair (Items 1-2)

Business

1. Apologies for Absence Leisgeulan

There were no apologies for absence.

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

The Committee **NOTED** the following Transparency Statements:-

Item 5 – Mr R Gunn, Mr S Mackie, Ms J McEwan, Mr K Rosie

Item 8 – Mr S Mackie

3. Appointment of Chair of Caithness Committee Cur Cathraiche Chomataidh Ghallaibh an Dreuchd

The Committee **AGREED** to appoint Mr A Jarvie and Mr K Rosie as Joint Chairs. For the avoidance of doubt, Mr Jarvie would, for the immediate future, Chair Area meetings going forward and, as such, would have a casting vote should there be a tied vote.

Mr Jarvie took the Chair for the remainder of the meeting.

4. Police – Area Performance Summary Poileas – Geàrr-chunntas air Coileanadh Sgìreil

There had been circulated Report No CC/18/24 by the North Area Commander.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- concern at the number of care experienced young people recorded as missing persons and in response to a query, confirmation Members would be provided with further details on the categorisation of the figures and trends in Caithness;
- further clarity was sought and provided that the increase in detection of mobile phone offences reflected legislative changes, a change in tactics and more focused proactive work by the Police;
- noting that Police Scotland were considering the potential to report to the Association of Caithness Community Councils and other community forums on drugs issues relevant to Caithness. In addition, the potential for the Police to attend the Caithness Drug and Alcohol Forum would be explored;
- the opportunity for the public in Caithness to be more vigilant in relation to crime within their communities by becoming involved in neighbourhood watch schemes and joining Rural Watch Scotland;
- concern at the impact of anti-social behaviour on neighbours and complaints being received in this regard and confirmation Members would be provided with the contact details for Police Scotland's link person with the Housing Service in Caithness;
- concern at driver behaviour in the area including frustration caused by different speed limits within communities and incidences of road rage. The Chief Inspector advised that dashcam footage had been extremely helpful in identifying the culprits in this regard;
- concern at anti-social behaviour by younger drivers in the area and commending the Police on the action being taken locally. The importance of there being a focus on education for younger people on road safety was also highlighted;
- the potential for camera vans to be deployed as a deterrent to speeding in the area including on the A836 Forss straight, the alternative route being used by some drivers and in communities close to schools. The Chief Inspector confirmed he would follow up on this matter;
- the potential to have road policing officers based in Caithness on the basis this would have a disproportionately beneficial effect on road safety in the area;
- confirmation was sought and provided that Police Scotland had a robust approach to shoplifting including prevention work with shopkeepers and businesses; and
- members of the public had expressed concern at challenges in contacting the Police through the 101 number. The Chief Inspector confirmed he would raise this matter with the appropriate officers.

5. Caithness Area Place Plan Plana Àite Sgìre Ghallaibh

There had been circulated Report No CC/13/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Place.

Members made the following Transparency Statements in respect of this item, however, having applied the objective test, reviewed their position in relation to the item and any personal connection, they did not consider that they had an interest to declare:

- **Mr R Gunn as a member of the Caithness Citizen's Advice Bureau and Dounreay Stakeholder's Group (Socio Economic Sub Group);**
- **Mr S Mackie as a member of the Focus North Advisory Board and Caithness Transport Forum, due to his position as Chair of Dounreay Stakeholder's Group;**
- **Ms J McEwan as a Director of the Caithness Voluntary Group and Caithness Citizen's Advice Bureau, a member of the Caithness Transport Forum and substitute member on the Dounreay Stakeholder's Group;**
- **Mr K Rosie as a member of the Focus North Advisory Board.**

In discussion, Members welcomed the report and commended officers on the level of work involved. Thereafter, Members raised the following points:

- concern as to how the Plan would be implemented and resourced and linked in with other plans, particularly the Highland Investment Plan (HIP), and the private sector. It was explained the report was a first step and that the consultation in Thurso had been carried out alongside the HIP team. The action plan provided assurance in terms of progress towards delivery and it was hoped would influence how Members allocated community regeneration funding;
- clarification was sought and provided that the document related more to local place plans than development planning albeit the information contained therein may be useful for officers in the assessment of planning applications;
- a crucial next step was around delivery and consideration of how to engage with various partners, sectors and community organisations to effectively increase the pace of delivering meaningful outcomes;
- highlighting that engagement on the Plan had been wide ranging and the fact it included groups that were generally not in the high respondent category was welcomed;
- the level of investment to be made in Caithness through the HIP was generational and it was important to be in a position to leverage additional monies from other partners and sectors;
- parts of Thurso were not well connected by foot and had few walkable services and it was recognised public transport in the area was fragile and therefore the need to consider the location of educational estate in Caithness and co-location of services as part of the Highland Investment Plan. There was also the potential to factor in the work being undertaken by the Council around accessibility to public bus networks;
- highlighting the ongoing work being undertaken to address issues in relation to people, place and prosperity and need for a positive approach going forward with priorities being established in terms of delivering actions;
- the need to engage with the community in relation to the Plan, explain how it related to other plans and set realistic timelines against actions in the interests of transparency so the public could observe actions being brought to fruition; and
- the call for a general fund to be established for community benefit funding through renewable energy development for Caithness and Highland-wide initiatives had unlimited potential for the future and provided the opportunity for funds to be used more strategically across the area.

The Committee:

- i. **AGREED** the Caithness Area Place Plan be adopted, using it as a tool to inform and support decision making about Caithness;

- ii. **AGREED** to support and promote the plan where possible in terms of its consideration within other plans, strategies, development and funding opportunities across or impacting the Caithness area; and
- iii. **NOTED** the next steps for progressing the work set out in the plan.

6. Housing Management Performance Report – 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025
Aithisg Dèanadais Stiùireadh Taigheadais – 1 Giblean 2024 gu 31 Màrt 2025

There had been circulated Report No CC/14/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Place.

In discussion, Members commended officers on the recent Rate Your Estate walkabouts held in the area, noting these had been extremely informative and positively received by all parties involved.

Thereafter, further clarity was provided on the level and extent of engagement undertaken with tenant representatives locally on housing issues, reference being made to the importance of using tenant feedback from different areas in Caithness to help inform the approach going forward. It was confirmed that the Service's Principal Customer Services Engagement Officer would be asked to update Members on plans for tenant engagement going forward.

During further discussion, it was explained that while it was too early to assess whether the pilot Caithness Void-Plus policy was having an impact on tenancy sustainment, it was delivering benefits by improving the condition of properties and tenant satisfaction levels at the point of letting, and to date there had been no refusals of properties included in the scheme. In addition, suitable properties for the scheme continued to be identified.

The Committee **NOTED** the information provided on housing performance in the period 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025.

7. Caithness Void Plus
Void Plus Ghallaibh

There had been circulated Report No CC/15/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Place.

In discussion, Members welcomed the scheme and looked forward to receiving progress updates going forward. It was suggested the properties included in the scheme, in addition to being painted, would be further improved by being finished off with new flooring and drapery and that this be raised with the Service's Senior Management Team. A further point was raised that it would be interesting to consider the impact of the scheme on the turnover of properties going forward.

The Committee **NOTED:-**

- i. the information provided on progress of the Void-Plus Policy in Caithness; and
- ii. that a review would be taken of the Void-Plus approach following the first year of operation to determine the success of the approach. This would assist in determining whether the Void-Plus Policy should be continued beyond the trial period.

8. Environmental Health – Annual Report and Activity 2024/25
Slàinte– Aithisg agus Gnìomhachd Bhliadhnail 2024/25

Mr S Mackie made a Transparency Statement in respect of this item on the grounds he was the owner of a food and drink business that was regulated by the Council's Environmental Health Team. However, having applied the objective test, reviewed his position in relation to the item and any personal connection, he did not consider he had an interest to declare.

There had been circulated Report No CC/16/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive - Place.

In discussion, Members welcomed the overview of the range of activity being undertaken and advised that it would be helpful for the report to be presented to the Committee on an annual basis. Further points raised included the following:

- the opportunity for Members to have follow up discussions with officers on the pilot projects including whether policy changes were required to provide for closer links with communities;
- in relation to dog fouling, a main issue it was explained that video rather than photographic evidence of dog owners from the public could perhaps be considered for formal proceedings. However, the person providing the evidence would have to be willing to give a statement, appear and speak to that evidence;
- confirmation was sought and provided that dog fouling bags left in public places with their contents would be regarded as a littering offence and would require to be supported by evidence from officers or video evidence from the public as described above;
- highlighting the challenges around catching dog owners in communities and noting the Service had increased proactive patrols, signage and community engagement; and
- in response to a query, further clarity was provided that the Council had lead responsibility for dealing with abandoned vehicles, with the Police being responsible for dealing with those vehicles on the A9 involved in road traffic collisions, albeit each case would be treated on its own merits.

The Committee **NOTED** the:-

- i. range and volume of work being undertaken locally by the environmental health team;
- ii. Highland wide issues; and
- iii. report format and content.

9. Ward Discretionary Awards
Duaisean fo Ùghdarras Uàird

Thurso and Northwest Caithness Ward Discretionary Budget applications approved 1 April 2024 – 31 March 2025

The Committee **NOTED** that the following Thurso and Northwest Caithness Ward Discretionary Budget applications had been approved for the period 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025.

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 Council – Village officer Funding	£3,200.00
Connecting Carers Caithness	£1,916.00
Caithness Voluntary Group – Winter Support 24/25	£1,000.00

Wick and East Caithness Ward Discretionary Budget applications approved 1 April 2024 – 31 March 2025

The Committee **NOTED** that the following Wick and East Caithness Ward Discretionary Budget applications had been approved since 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025:

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 Council – Village officer Funding	£5,300.00
Caithness Voluntary Group – Winter Support 24/25	£2,000.00
Dunbeath & District Centre – Back Office Support	£2,276.40

10. Minutes
Geàrr-chunntas

There had been circulated and **NOTED** Minutes of the Caithness Committee held on 20 January 2025 which were approved by the Council on 27 March 2025.

The meeting concluded at 12.40pm