

The Highland Council

Minutes of Meeting of the **Sutherland County Committee** held in the Chamber, Council Offices, Drumbuie, Golspie on Monday 2 June 2025 at 10.00am.

Present:

Mr R Gale
Ms M Hutchison

Mr J McGillivray
Mr H Morrison

In attendance:

Ms F Richardson, Community Development Manager
Mr P Tomalin, Community Development Manager
Ms R Robertson, Bereavement Services Project Coordinator
Ms M Grant, Principal Housing Officer
Mr P Waite, Outdoor Access Manager
Mr M Dent, Access Officer
Mr D Hopwood, Senior Environmental Health Officer
Miss J MacLennan, Joint Democratic Services Manager

Also in attendance:

Station Commander Mr D Bell, Scottish Fire and Rescue

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 Gale in the Chair

Business

1. Apologies for Absence Leisgeulan

There were apologies for absence from Mr M Baird and Ms L Niven.

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

There were no declarations of interest or transparency statements.

3. Good News Naidheachdan Matha

Members were advised that Brora Primary School had received an excellent report following an inspection by HMIE and staff and pupils were congratulated on this achievement. Melvich Community Care Unit (Care Home) had also received an excellent report following an inspection by the Care Inspectorate and the staff were congratulated in this regard.

The Committee **NOTED** the good news.

At this point, concern was expressed that Edderton Primary School was likely to be mothballed for the next academic session and that this reflected issues of depopulation across Sutherland. It was suggested the Scottish Government's Addressing Depopulation Action Plan was having a lack of impact in the area.

Thereafter, the Chair of the Education Committee and Assistant Chief Executive – People were thanked for their assurances that Edderton Primary School would be

maintained in a proper condition to allow it to re-open immediately the school roll increased and that the School would be strongly marketed and promoted for enrolment of new pupils.

Following further discussion, the Committee **AGREED** to write to the Deputy First Minister of Scotland expressing its deep concern at the ongoing level of depopulation in Sutherland and the impact it was having on schools in the area.

Following on from the above, it was suggested there was a need to be mindful of the decision to close Durness Primary Nursery for one year, resulting in the loss of staff. The premises were in a position to re-open for the next academic year if staff could be recruited. There were similar issues with care home staffing on the North Coast, and highlighting the need for housing to accommodate the staff required for the new care home development in that area.

In regard to the above, it was suggested the Council had to be more forward thinking and consider ways around these issues. It was reiterated that jobs and housing were key to addressing depopulation in the area. There was also a need for additional investment in new housing development in rural areas, specific reference being made to a funding issue with a new build development in Edderton.

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/12/25 by the Local Senior Officer for Highland.

In discussion, Members raised the following main points:-

- the need for the Council to learn lessons from the high numbers and lack of spacing between campervans parking in its invitation to pay car parks in the area;
- whether the Council had submitted any site fire safety risk assessments for its car parks. It was confirmed the matter would be followed up with the Service's fire safety enforcement team and a response provided;
- the potential for the recruitment process for retained firefighters to be expedited more quickly to retain the interest of new recruits and help ensure they completed the process. It was confirmed this point would be fed back to the Service's recruitment team;
- concern at the high number of vacancies across stations in Sutherland and that this reflected the lack of young people in rural communities;
- it would be helpful if information on the new contracts for retained staff could be shared with communities as the new flexibility around availability may generate more interest from potential recruits. It was confirmed the opportunity to share this information on social media would be considered;
- further clarity was sought and provided on the causes of deliberate fires in relation to grasslands;
- confirmation was sought and provided that all the unwanted fire alarm signals at the significant risk premises detailed in the report had been attended by the Service. The Service's fire safety enforcement team also engaged with premises to educate and provide guidance;
- an explanation was sought and provided on the changes to the referral process for home fire safety visits;

- in relation to the Wildfire Strategy, it was explained that Dornoch Fire Station had been designated as a Tier 2 station and would be provided with specialist equipment and support vans; additional staff training was also currently ongoing; and
- the Service be thanked for their excellent response to recent serious fires in Sutherland.

The Committee **NOTED** the Sutherland Performance Report.

**5. Dornoch Common Good Fund – Grant Application Dornoch Firth Independent Lifeboat (East Sutherland Rescue Association)
Maoin Math Coitcheann Dhòrnaich – Iarrtas Tabhartais Bàta-teasairginn Neo-eisimeileach Caolas Dhòrnaich (Comann Teasairginn Chataibh an Ear)**

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

During discussion, the Association was commended on the significant amount of funds it had raised towards the overall cost of the project and further clarity was provided on the firefighting element of the project as a condition of planning consent.

The Committee **APPROVED**:

- the revised budget for Dornoch Common Good Fund; and
- the grant of £25,000 from Dornoch Common Good Fund to Dornoch Firth Independent Lifeboat (East Sutherland Rescue Association).

**6. Sutherland Area Place Plan
Plana Àite Sgìre Chataibh**

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

During discussion, Members welcomed the Plan and commended the Kyle of Sutherland Development Trust on the work undertaken to review the priorities for Sutherland. The fact that priorities included employment and housing was also welcomed and it was hoped the Plan would take priority over the current planning system in addressing depopulation in the area.

Further comments included that the Plan highlighted areas for improvement and continuing action and Members looked forward to receiving the bespoke action plan that would set out the route for the delivery of the priorities. A further point was raised as to the importance of communities being heard in relation to renewables and the impact they had on their areas.

The Committee:

- AGREED** to adopt the Sutherland Area Place Plan, using it as a tool to inform and support decision making about Sutherland;
- 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 Sutherland area; and
- NOTED** the next steps for progressing the work set out in the plan.

7. Bereavement Services - Project Updates **Cunntas às ùr mu sheirbheisean bàis**

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

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- thanks were conveyed for the works carried out in respect of the Proncynain Burial Ground extension;
- confirmation was sought and provided that no new lairs were being sold in Melness Burial Ground to preserve as many as possible for time of need and until such time as an extension could be provided;
- in relation to the remaining capacity in Golspie Burial Ground, it was confirmed that all options were being explored and any suggestions from Members, the community council and others would be welcomed and added to the list of investigations; and
- the progress being made to repair a wall at Clynekirkton Burial Ground, Brora and confirmation a response would be provided directly to the Chair on this issue.

The Committee **NOTED**:

- i. the current capacities and progress of burial ground extensions in the Sutherland area; and
- ii. the challenges identifying and developing suitable land for burial ground development.

8. Housing Repairs Performance Report **Aithisg Coileanaidh Càraidhean Taigheadais**

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

In discussion, the Service was commended on performance on rent arrears in Sutherland, gross rent arrears as a percentage of annual rent due being well below the Highland average. In addition, Members thanked the Housing Team in Sutherland for their hard work in supporting tenants in the area.

Thereafter, it was queried as to the proportion of rent arrears of £500 or less that were due to benefits being paid in arrears as this may skew the figures and cause undue stress for tenants. It was confirmed a response would be provided directly to the Chair on this issue.

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

9. Sutherland Access Rangers CRF Funding 2024/25 Progress Report **Aithisg Adhartais Maoineachadh Ath-bheothachadh Coimhearsnachd Maoir-dùthcha Chataibh 2024/25**

There had been circulated Report No SCC/17/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

During discussion the following main points were raised:-

- confirmation was sought and provided that Members would be provided with a contact list for the Access Rangers in post in each area;
- the potential for Access Rangers to attend a community council chairs meeting to establish a first point of contact with them and the Police, given the importance of appropriate liaison and a coordinated approach. It was confirmed this matter would be taken forward;
- the need for discussions involving all relevant parties to be held at the earliest opportunity on resolving the issues at the Wailing Widow Falls;
- the range of work undertaken by the Access Rangers was greatly valued and appreciated and thanks be conveyed to all staff;
- the fact the Council had agreed to fund the Service was welcomed and it was hoped this would continue into the future;
- confirmation was sought and provided that it was hoped to retain a number of staff on a part-time basis over the winter months; and
- the need for the extension of the tourist season to be taken into account in terms of providing a full Ranger service next year.

The Committee **NOTED** the information provided by the report and within Appendix 1 as the final claim to the Community Regeneration Fund for this project.

10. Environmental Health - Annual Report and Activity 2024/25

There had been circulated Report No SCC/18/25 by the Assistant Chief Executive – Place.

During discussion, the following main points were raised:-

- highlighting the broad range and volume of work being undertaken by the Environmental Health Team;
- an update was sought and provided on the staff resources available to deal with the high volume of service requests the Team received, including short term let licensing consultations;
- confirmation was sought and provided that no fixed penalty notices for dog fouling had been issued in the previous financial year. There was an increased focus within the Team on education, staffing remits and refreshing processes and procedures with a view to securing more fixed penalties in future; and
- the appointment of a new dog warden in the area was welcomed and emphasising the importance of both education and enforcement in relation to dog fouling.

The Committee **NOTED**:-

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

11. Ward Discretionary Awards Duaisean fo Ùghdarras Uàird

North, West and Central Sutherland Ward Discretionary Budget applications approved 1st April 2024 – 31st March 2025

NOTED the following Ward Discretionary Fund payment that have been approved since the previous meeting of the Committee

Assynt Dev. Trust – Menopause Chats	£1,425.00
Community Food Initiatives North East – FareShare in Highland	£5,050.00
Bradbury Centre – Medical Bath Replacement	£500.00
North Sutherland Community Forestry Trust – First Aid Training	£500.00
Kyle of Sutherland Development Trust – Kyle Feeds	£500.00
Lairg & District Community Initiatives – Lairg War Memorial Upkeep	£377.92
North West Training Centre – Learning programme 24-25	£500.00
Lairg & District Community Initiatives – Lairg Lunch Club	£840.00
Lairg in Bloom – Village Floral Planting	£2,000.00
Bonar Bridge Football Club – Playing Field Dugouts on Wheels	£2,707.08
Poppy Wreaths	£92.38

East Sutherland and Edderton Ward Discretionary Budget applications approved 1st April 2024 – 31st March 2025

NOTED the following Ward Discretionary Fund payment that have been approved since the previous meeting of the Committee

Community Food Initiatives North East – FareShare in Highland	£2,179.00
Embo Trust – Old School Transition – Final Step	£780.00
The Dornoch Area CIC – Dornoch Transport Project	£999.00
Bradbury Centre – Medical bath Replacement	£1,500.00
Dornoch Cricket Club – Practice Nets Extension	£500.00
Dornoch Youth Service Summer Programme	£1,000.00
Embo Football Club – Essential Works to Changing Rooms	£900.00
Engaging with Activity CIC – Hub Outings	£1,000.00
Timespan – Gutting Girls	£1,000.00
Rogart Community Council – Rogart Hub	£1,866.00
TimeSpan Title Check	£191.67
Brora Development Trust – Christmas Outing for Youth Room	£1,202.00
Helmsdale Primary School Parent Council – A9 Crossing Hut	£238.00
Brora Development Trust – Food Provision for Youth Room	£96.00
Poppy Wreaths	£92.37

12. Minutes
Geàrr-chunntas

There is circulated for **noting** Minutes of the Sutherland County Committee held on 17 February 2025, which were approved by the Council on 27 March 2025.

The meeting concluded at 12 noon.