

27 November 2014

LEADER'S REPORT

1 SUMMARY

- 1.1** This report outlines key activities undertaken within the role of Council Leader since the last Council Meeting on 25th September, through participation in meetings, as follow; COSLA HR Executive, COSLA Leaders, COSLA Resources and Capacity Executive, Argyll and Bute Economic Summit, COSLA Convention, and a Video Conference with MEPs.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1** It is recommended that the Council notes the report and also notes that additional documents are available in a Leaders Report Pack through the Leadership Support Officer.

3 23/09/2014 COSLA Strategic Human Resources Management Executive Group**3.1 Agenda**

I attended the above meeting which was held in Edinburgh.

Items taken in Public Session included:-

- Presentation by Julie McGahan, Living Wage Accreditation Adviser, The Poverty Alliance
- Scotland's Strategy to Address Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG)
- Zero Hours Contracts Survey
- General Update Paper

Items taken in Private Session included:-

- European Update on Working Time Directive (WTD)
- General Pay Update
- Holiday Pay
- Pensions
- Single Fraud Investigation Service (SFIS)
- Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teacher (SNCT)

Whilst I am unable to report on the items taken "in Private Session", an overview of the items taken in public session is included below.

3.2 Equally Safe - Scotland's Strategy to Address Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG)

The purpose of this report was to provide an update for Executive Group members on the work progressing between COSLA Employers and colleagues in the Trade Union Side on the Equally Safe Strategy to Address Violence against Women and Girls.

The recommendations of the paper asked the Executive Group to:

- i. Note the report; and
- ii. Provide a political response to the action plan identified by the SJC Working Group addressing the requirements of the Strategy as outlined in paragraph 10 and within the appendix.

Argyll and Bute Council Position

Our position was to agree with the recommendations of the paper

Outcome

The Executive Group agreed with the recommendations of the paper.

3.3 Zero Hours Contracts Survey

This report was a response to a request by the Executive Group for further information on the use of what has been termed "Zero Hours Contracts" (ZHCs) in Scottish Local Authorities.

The Executive Group was requested to discuss and note the report.

Argyll and Bute Council Position

Our position was to note the report

Outcome

The Executive Group agreed the need for a further, more policy orientated report. COSLA's general approach to the issue was agreed.

3.4 General Update Report

The purpose of this report was to provide information to the members of the Executive Group on a range of issues relating to the workforce of Scottish Councils.

It was recommended that the Executive Group note the information provided in the report.

Argyll and Bute Council Position

Our position was to note the report

Outcome

The Executive Group agreed with the recommendations of the paper.

4.0 26/09/2014 – COSLA Leaders Meeting

4.1 Agenda

Chief Executive, Sally Loudon and I attended the above meeting which was held in Edinburgh.

Items taken in Private Session included:-

- Land Engineering; Grounds Maintenance Proposals – Report and Presentation
- Local Government Settlement 15/16 – Oral Update
- Charging for Non-residential Social Care Services
- Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce
- Pensions

Items taken in Public Session included:-

- Mental Health (Scotland) Bill
- Distribution Issues
- Use of Armed Policing in Scotland
- Gender Balance Task Group Update

I have summarised the items taken in public session below.

4.2 Mental Health (Scotland) Bill

The purpose of this paper was to update Leaders on the policy and financial implications of proposed changes to mental health legislation in Scotland, and seek endorsement of a draft response to the Finance Committee's call for evidence in relation to the Mental Health (Scotland) Bill.

As part of the recommendations within the paper, Leaders were invited to:

- i. Note that the Scottish Parliament was considering the Mental Health (Scotland) Bill and that this would have financial implications for councils;
- ii. Note that the paper highlights a discrepancy between how the scope of the Bill is described in its explanatory notes and then in the financial memorandum;
- iii. Agree the proposed COSLA position
- iv. Agree the draft response to the Finance Committee's call for evidence, which was also presented within the paper.

Argyll and Bute Council Position

Our position was to agree with the recommendations of the paper

Outcome

Leaders agreed with the recommendations of the paper and to the proposed draft response.

4.3 Distribution Issues

The purpose of this report was to ask Leaders to consider and agree recommendations from the Settlement and Distribution Group (SDG) in relation to the distribution of two European funding areas.

Within the recommendations of the paper, Leaders were asked to agree the distribution for:

- i. the European Social Fund (Employability) as set out in within the paper
- ii. the European Social fund (Poverty and Social Inclusions) also, as set out within the paper

Argyll and Bute Council Position

Our position was to agree with the recommendations of the paper.

Outcome

Leaders agreed with the recommendations of the paper.

4.4 Use of Armed Policing in Scotland

The purpose of this report was to invite Leaders to consider the concerns being expressed from a variety of sources regarding police officers performing routine duties while carrying firearms.

In the recommendations of the paper, Leaders were invited to:

- i. Provide comment on Police Scotland's approach to the deployment of armed police;
- ii. Agree to the principle that police officers should not carry firearms on regular duties and to the proposed COSLA position based on that, set out within the paper;
- iii. Agree to write to Police Scotland to seek clarification in relation to the standing firearms authority;
- iv. Agree to respond to three separate reviews of the policy launched by Police Scotland, HMICS and the SPA; and
- v. Consider making representations to the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and the Justice Sub-Committee on Policing on the matter.

Argyll and Bute Council Position

Our position was to agree with the recommendations of the paper

Outcome

Leaders agreed to the recommendations of the paper.

4.5 Gender Balance Task Group Update

The purpose of this report was to bring Leaders up to date with developments, since they looked at the COSLA Constitution at the end of May, on the issue of gender balance within COSLA's political structures.

The recommendations of the paper asked Leaders to:-

- i. note that the Gender Balance Task Group has now been constituted and has met;
- ii. understand the issues raised at the first meeting of the Task Group; and
- iii. Provide feedback on the issues raised.

Argyll and Bute Council Position

Our position was to note the recommendations of the paper

Outcome

Leaders agreed with the recommendations of the paper.

5.0 01/10/2014, COSLA Resources and Capacity Executive Group

5.1 I attended the above meeting which was held in Edinburgh.

Items taken in Private Session included:-

- i. Local Government Budget 2015/16 – **oral update**
- ii. Holiday Pay
- iii. Fiscal Empowerment Task Group
- iv. European Update on Working Time Directive (WTD)
- v. Teachers' Pension Scheme governance

Items taken in Public Session included:-

- i. Welfare Reform Committee Evidence
- ii. Single Fraud Investigation Service
- iii. Corporate Fraud
- iv. Third Sector Pilot Scheme Proposal
- v. COSLA response to Scottish parliament's call to evidence on Financial Memorandum for the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill
- vi. HRA Asset Disposals Proposal

Although I am unable to comment on the items taken in private session, I have summarised the items taken in public session below.

5.2 Welfare Reform Committee Evidence

The purpose of this paper was to seek the Executive Group's endorsement of key messages for a forthcoming evidence session to the Scottish Parliament's Welfare Reform Committee.

Within the recommendations of the paper the Executive Group was invited to:

- i. Endorse the key messages set out within the paper as a basis for a written submission and oral evidence to the Welfare Reform Committee; and
- ii. Mandate the Spokesperson to sign off the final evidence submission.

Argyll and Bute Council Position

Our position was to agree with the recommendations of the paper.

Outcome

The Executive Group agreed the recommendations of the paper.

5.3 Single Fraud Investigation Service

The purpose of this paper was to update the Executive Group on progress of the implementation of the Single Fraud Investigation Service.

In the recommendations of the paper, the Executive Group was invited to:

- i. Note the progress in relation to the implementation of the Single Fraud Investigation Service and that officers were continuing to respond to issues arising for councils, with support from Directors of Finance and practitioners;
- ii. Endorse the officer responses to date as outlined in the report;
- iii. Agree that officers continue to respond as SFIS is implemented, in line with the overall agreed political direction, that being to secure Scottish local authorities' interests as far as possible and for protections to be in place for staff transferring to SFIS; and
- iv. Agree that officers provide further updates as progress continues and, if necessary, seek political direction either through the Executive Group or, as mandated, from the Spokesperson.

Argyll and Bute Council Position

Our position was to agree with the recommendations of the paper

Outcome

The Executive Group agreed the recommendations of the paper

5.4 Corporate Fraud

The purpose of this report was to update the Executive Group on the work that has been undertaken by officers on corporate fraud and to seek views on the focus of the work.

In the recommendations of the paper the Executive Group was invited to:

- i. Agree the focus of the work undertaken on corporate fraud; and
- ii. Agree that a detailed practitioner level report on corporate fraud will be taken forward with Directors of Finance, for councils to develop locally.

Argyll and Bute Council Position

Our position was to agree with the recommendations of the paper

Outcome

The Executive Group agreed the recommendations of the paper

5.5 Third Sector Pilot Scheme Proposal

The purpose of this report was to seek political endorsement from the Resources & Capacity Executive Group on a joint COSLA, Scottish Government and Third Sector proposal on cross sector working. Specifically, the proposal sought to establish a pilot scheme to develop and foster relationships and build networks between Local Authorities and the Third Sector that would demonstrate that successful co-production, innovation and joint working can create better outcomes.

In the recommendations of the paper, the Executive Group members were invited to:-

- i. Note the continuing engagement of COSLA officers with SCVO and Scottish Government in developing the pilot scheme proposal;
- ii. Agree COSLA's pilot scheme proposal;
- iii. Agree that any Local Authorities keen to be involved in the pilot scheme contact COSLA officers; and
- iv. Note that, should members agree the pilot scheme proposal, an update report will be brought to a future meeting of the Resources & Capacity Executive Group.

Argyll and Bute Council Position

Our position was to agree with the generality of the recommendations of the paper but to raise concerns in relation to; a) the timescale for identifying pilot areas and b) the proposed issues to be covered.

Outcome

Rather than agreeing to the recommendations of the paper, The Executive Group agreed to write to John Swinney for further clarity in relation to issues with the pilot, particularly the funding of it.

5.6 Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill - Financial Memorandum

The purpose of this report was to seek agreement from the Resources & Capacity Executive Group on COSLA's response to the Financial Memorandum to the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill.

The recommendations of the paper, invited the Executive Group to:-

- i. Note COSLA's written evidence on the policy aspects of the Bill, submitted to the Local Government & Regeneration Committee;
- ii. Note the concern around the inability to quantify the resources required by Local Authorities to implement the proposed Legislation;
- iii. Agree that Cllr Kevin Keenan write to the Finance Committee on the Financial Memorandum pertaining to the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill outlining these concerns; and
- iv. Agree that further work be undertaken to better quantify these costs in advance of the Bill being passed.

Argyll and Bute Council Position

Our position was to agree with the recommendations of the paper.

Outcome

The Executive Group agreed the recommendations of the paper.

5.7 HRA Disposal of Assets

The purpose of this paper was to ask the Executive Group's agreement of a proposal from the Scottish Government to remove the requirement for councils to apply for consent to dispose of HRA assets.

In the recommendations of the paper, the Executive Group was asked to:

- i. Agree in principle the Scottish Government's proposal to no longer require councils to apply for consent to dispose of HRA assets; and
- ii. Note that the detail of the proposal will be consulted on with Directors of Finance and Heads of Housing as part of the Scottish Government's consultation process, prior to finalisation of guidance for implementation of the change for the next financial year.

Argyll and Bute Council Position

Our position was to agree with the recommendations of the paper.

Outcome

The Executive Group agreed the recommendations of the paper.

6.0 29/10/2014 Economic Summit

- 6.1** I was delighted to take part in and to deliver the opening speech, at a high level economic summit which took place at the Queens Hall, Dunoon at the end of October. The event successfully highlighted the point that Argyll and Bute has 'an economy full of opportunities' which can be harnessed by forging better connections in all sorts of areas in order to turn them into real successes.

Key players from Argyll and Bute's business community came along with local and national public sector representatives and national politicians. All engaged fully in the event. There was dynamic and positive discussion which identified clear routes forward to boost the local economy and increase the area's population.

The summit, hosted by Argyll and Bute Community Planning Partnership and chaired by journalist Mark Stephen, welcomed the Rt Hon Alistair Carmichael, Secretary of State for Scotland and Mr. John Swinney, Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Sustainable Growth, as keynote speakers.

Other important speakers included; Argyll and Bute-based business representatives and young people, Argyll and Bute Council and Community Planning Partnership, Visit Scotland, Scottish/Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Argyll and the Isles Tourism Co-operative and Scotland's Rural College. The summit's focus was driving forward the economic and population growth that will secure a prosperous future for Argyll and Bute. As the summit progressed the theme of connectivity became clear; in the traditional sense of road, rail and sea transport, as well as through the digital pathways of the future and improved broadband coverage, sharing ideas, practices and learning between the public and private sector and by working together as 'team Argyll and Bute'.

The main message which I aimed to reinforce was that everyone has a part to play in backing Argyll and Bute and building the prosperous future they know it can have. In doing so, I outlined Argyll and Bute's ambitions, ideas and opportunities which could be built with an increasing population and

spoke about how we needed the commitment of all of our partners; their expertise and energies to develop these opportunities and turn them into action. I am grateful that the contributions made by businesses, academics, young people and politicians alike strongly backed this thinking and my colleague, Depute Leader, Councillor Ellen Morton went on to introduce the Argyll and Bute Sustainable Economic Development Forum (ABSEF), a public/private partnership which will drive forward economic change in Argyll and Bute, ABSEF will shape that strategic vision for the future and will, crucially, be business led.

I am most grateful to all who took part in this crucial step in progressing the ambitions of the people and businesses of Argyll and Bute.
Much more detail is available within the Leaders Report Pack.

7.0 31/10/2014, COSLA Convention

- 7.1** I attended the above meeting with Depute Leader, Councillor Ellen Morton and our Chief Executive, Sally Loudon. The meeting was held in Edinburgh.

Agenda

All items apart from one concerning the Smith Commission and discussion of minutes were taken in Public Session and included:-

1. Management of COSLA's Strategic Activity
2. Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy Report
3. Police Scotland: Governance and Scrutiny
4. Gender Balance Task Group Update

7.2 Management of COSLA's Strategic Activity

The purpose of this report was to provide Convention members with a framework within which they could develop plans to carry out the Convention's responsibility as the primary forum for the management of COSLA's strategic agenda.

It was recommended that Convention members use the strategic overview provided within the report as a starting point for their discussions on the management of COSLA's strategic agenda. It was also recommended that the Convention aim to give officers sufficient guidance from these discussions to inform a further paper which would be produced for the December Convention meeting in a more final form.

Argyll and Bute Council Position

Our position was to agree with the recommendations of the paper

Outcome

Members accepted the detail in the paper and the recommendations.

7.3 The Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy

The purpose of this paper was to invite the Convention to consider the

Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy's final report. The paper was accompanied by a presentation at the meeting from a number of members on the Commission.

The recommendations invited the Convention to:-

- (i) Consider and provide feedback on the Commission's final report;
- (ii) Welcome the contribution that the Commission has made to date in bringing a local dimension to the debate about Scotland's democratic future;
- (iii) Agree to maximise this momentum through a campaign and lobbying strategy based around the Commission's key principles; and
- (iv) Identify aspects of the Commission's findings that merit particular priority in pursuit of this objective, to enable a detailed strategy to be brought to Convention in December 2014.

Argyll and Bute Council Position

Our position was not to disagree with the recommendations of the paper but to note the risks around the Commission's findings.

Outcome

Members agreed the recommendations of the paper.

7.4 Police Scrutiny and Governance

The purpose of this paper was to invite Convention members to consider the scrutiny, governance and representative roles of Local Government in relation to Police Scotland, given concern surrounding a number of recent policy and operational matters.

The recommendations of the paper invited Convention members to:-

- i. Note and comment upon the local impact of Police Scotland's national policies;
- ii. Agree the need for a more robust means of liaison between councils and Police Scotland at a national level, with clearer lines of escalation being required;
- iii. Consider making formal representations to the SPA, the Cabinet Secretary for Justice and the Scottish Parliament's Justice Sub-committee on Policing as outlined in the paper; and
- iv. Agree that Police Scotland's approach to current and emerging issues will be a measure of their commitment to local engagement and to receive future reports on progress in this area.

Argyll and Bute Council Position

Our position was to accept the recommendations of the paper.

Outcome

Members accepted the recommendations of the paper.

7.5 Gender Balance Task Group Update

The purpose of this report was to bring Convention members up to date with

developments, since they looked at the COSLA Constitution at the end of June, on the issue of gender balance within COSLA's political structures.

The recommendations of the paper asked members to:-

- i. note that the Gender Balance Task Group has now been constituted and has met, with another meeting planned in the week of the Convention meeting; to consider the issues raised at the first meeting of the Task Group;
- ii. receive an oral report on the second meeting of the Task Group;
- iii. and provide feedback on the issues raised.

Argyll and Bute Council Position

Our position was to agree with the recommendations of the paper.

Outcome

Convention members agreed the recommendations of the paper.

8.0 12/11/2014 Video Conference between HIEP (Highlands and Islands European Partnership) Membership and MEPs

- 8.1** Councillor Maurice Corry - Depute Policy Lead for European Affairs, Sustainable Economic Growth and Strategic Transportation, Sally Loudon – Chief Executive, Ishabel Bremner – Economic Development Officer and Mary-Louise Howatt – Senior Development Officer and I attended the above meeting which had been arranged by HIEP as an opportunity to speak with MEPs in Brussels with regard to issues affecting the region over which the EU has policy and funding influence. Other HIEP member Councils in attendance were; Highland, Western Isles, Orkney and Shetland although the consultation in relation to the questions to be asked on the day also included North Ayrshire and Moray Councils. The MEPs participating from Brussels were; Catherine Stihler (Labour), Ian Duncan (newly elected, Conservative) and Ian Hudghton (SNP). Also in attendance was Jamie McGrigor, Highlands & Islands Conservative MSP who was visiting Brussels at the time.

The meeting began with “round table” introductions. This was followed by HIEP Chair, Drew Hendry providing background information on the work of HIEP in relation to the regions opportunities and challenges. Following this there was an introduction to the work portfolios and interests of the participating MEPs.

A range of questions had been forwarded by participating Councils to HIEP, for raising with MEPs although time permitted that only some of these questions were raised and discussed at the meeting itself. The remaining questions have been forwarded to MEPs in written form for consideration. The topics raised include; Marine Protection Designations, Transmission charging, Communications Infrastructure, Fisheries Discards, Environmental Designations, State Aid, Education and research. The question being posed by Argyll and Bute Council relates to Critical Infrastructure and the following

text has been sent on to HIEP for a response from MEPs:-

8.2 Critical Infrastructure Question

The Highlands & Islands and indeed many of the peripheral regions of the European Union remain challenged by poor communications infrastructure and infrastructural bottlenecks. This lack of connectivity is proving to be a major brake on future socio-economic development in the region's key sectors such as food and drink, tourism, renewables, forestry, and marine science industries and tackling social exclusion.

The effects of poor infrastructure is easily exemplified by:

- the recent and increasingly regular closure of the A83 at the Rest and be Thankful and the A890 at Stromeferry;
- the poor condition of the A82 and A9 both key corridors from the region to the markets in the south;
- the six week loss of car transport from Stornoway to Ullapool;
- the slow speed and low capacity of the rail links to the south; and
- the high cost of air and sea travel to and from the island communities, including lifeline services.

There is a need, to redress the current policy focus and to prioritise investment in the periphery which HIEP believes is in line with Commission policy objectives of territorial cohesion, social justice and ensuring the European Union has the capacity to capitalise on the development strengths of all its territories – Smart Specialisation Strategy.

The campaign to ensure this focus on the periphery has been taken up by the CPMR but the Partnership wishes to learn more of the assistance MEPs can give to ensure that this policy and funding shift is adopted by the European Union.

- 8.3** In addition to the two questions above, I have requested more regular dialogue with MEPs in order to ensure that opportunities to influence priorities, policies and funding decisions are optimised by the MEPs who represent our interests. HIEP (Highlands and Islands European Partnership) is planning a visit to Brussels and I intend to keep colleagues informed on the outcomes from the above written questions as well as on our progress with forging closer relationships with our new and established MEPs.

9.0 Progress and Developments in relation to Council Tax, Scottish Welfare Fund, Discretionary Housing Payments, Universal Support Services Delivered Locally, Empty Homes Policy, Information Management, Customer Service Centre, Registration, Digital Agenda and Admin Review.

9.1 Local Tax Collections

Collections of Council Tax to the end of October stand at 66.23%, which is 0.46% down on last year at this time. As previously reported at the end of August, the collection figure was down 0.27%, so there has been some deterioration here. Sheriff Officer collections for 2014/15 are down by £207k (0.36% on collections) because the first summary warrant was issued three

weeks behind schedule this year, due to a delay in awarding the new Sheriff Officer contract, and because more of their collections are being allocated to 2013/14 where these are up by £170k. Despite the Band D charge remaining the same as last year, the total net council tax charge has increased by £1.1m and we have collected in absolute terms in excess of £0.5m more than at this time last year. The main reasons for the increase in charge is the premium on long term empty homes of £0.68m and a reduction in council tax reduction scheme relief of £0.18m (due to more people coming off benefit during this year), and only £0.2m is due to growth in gross billed due to new properties.

In contrast, collections are going well on the 2013/14 year, where 97.15% have been collected, which is 0.20% up on last year at this time. This is better than at the end of August, when the figure was 0.14% up. Because of the handover from the previous Sheriff Officer contract, more of these collections are allocated to older years than in the past and this is affecting collections of the current council tax year. This will not change until January, at which point we will have fully completed migration from the previous sheriff officer.

A contract has recently been awarded to Datatank to carry out a single person discount review. Around 1800 letters will be issued by them in November to those occupiers where other data suggests there is a need to confirm the single occupancy. Thereafter, there will be a review of new single person discounts twice throughout the year, followed by a further full review in 12 months' time. Payment is on a results basis, based on discounts removed. All queries will be handled directly by Datatank throughout the review process and a special local telephone number will be available.

Collections of non-domestic rates are 74.22% at end of October, which is down by 0.57% on this time last year. This is in contrast to the position at end of September which was 0.42% up. These figures are always somewhat volatile. The first summary warrant has now been run in November but is not reflected in these figures.

9.2 Scottish Welfare Fund

In October, £32,011 was spent from the Scottish Welfare Fund, compared to the monthly profile of £36,796. Cumulatively, £206,492 has been spent for this year's applications compared to £217,448 profiled spend (95% of profiled spend). We also have a balance of £38,115 unused from last year's carried forward underspend. Low priority items are also currently being funded and have been since June. 17 community care grants currently await processing and a further 47 were part paid at the end of October. November and December are expected to be high spending months based on last year's experience and is likely to utilise the remaining underspend.

9.3 Discretionary Housing Payments

£559,731 has now been either paid out or committed to the end of October. This has utilised all of the Department of Work and Pensions allocation of

£409,580 and used £150,151 of the Scottish Government allocation of £375,838. The vast majority of the under-occupancy cases have now had awards, although 56 cases still await processing. We are supporting medium and high hardship cases for all other priority groups. We expect to receive a much reduced sum from the Scottish Government next year, as distribution will be based on spend only on the under-occupancy cases. This is likely to affect our ability to support other priority groups next year. A report will be brought forward, recommending that any underspend this year should be carried forward to next year to enable us to support more of these cases in 2015/16.

The Discretionary Housing Payments (Limit of Total Expenditure) Revocation (Scotland) Order 2014 comes into force on 9 December 2014 and removes the cap on local authority expenditure on DHPs. This has no practical implication for us as we have not been close to the cap.

9.4 Universal Support Delivered Locally

Our trial was formally launched at the Oban Job Centre on 30th October. Building on existing partnerships, Argyll and Bute Council will liaise with local registered social landlords, the Department for Work and Pensions, NHS Highland and organisations such as Citizens Advice to reach a wide range of people who may need support ahead of the introduction of Universal Credit sometime next year.

Universal Credit will replace a number of current benefits. There will also be changes in the way that claims and payments are handled. It has to be claimed and managed online. Instead of receiving a number of different benefits – for example Job Seekers Allowance and Housing Benefit – people will receive one payment, made monthly in arrears. This means that those who make claims will need to have some computer skills, access to the internet and a bank account in order to receive their money. To cope with these changes to benefits, some people may also need IT support, budget and money management advice – and the Universal Support Delivered Locally scheme will help to provide this across Argyll and Bute.

Depending on individual needs, people will be able to access computers and IT training courses to help them manage their benefits and other tasks like creating a CV or applying for jobs online. They can get help to open a bank account if they don't have one, or work with a support worker on saving, budgeting and dealing with debt. The aim is to ensure that within a few weeks, people are fully equipped with the skills they will need to manage Universal Credit when it is introduced. Money management and computer skills are also useful for helping people back to work.

To meet the needs of the rural and remote communities across the area, Argyll and Bute Council has employed some innovative solutions for Universal Support Delivered Locally. Where broadband coverage is challenging, or where people cannot travel easily to a main town to use computers in libraries or job centres, the council has changed its IT infrastructure in other premises like school buildings so that they can be used

to provide training courses. More community learning tutors have been recruited and laptops made available for people to use.

I am pleased with the work our council is carrying out, jointly with our community planning partners and DWP on the Universal Support Delivered Locally trial. This will help to identify the most efficient ways of helping people in Argyll and Bute to gain any IT and financial budgeting skills they may need for Universal Credit, so that they are as well prepared as possible in advance of its introduction.

Argyll and Bute is one of two Scottish areas selected to run a pilot Universal Credit support service. Dundee is piloting a scheme aimed at people in urban areas while Argyll and Bute's scheme is meeting the needs of people in a mix of rural and remote communities.

9.5 Benefits processing

New claims processing year to date to end of October has taken on average 21.35 days which is well within the Scottish average of 27 days for 2013/14. Changes in circumstances in the year to date, to end of October, have taken on average 7.84 days which is also below the Scottish average of 9 days for 2013/14. In the last 3 months we have met our accuracy target of 95% although year to date we have only achieved 92.5%.

9.6 Empty Homes Policy

I previously reported that Argyll and Bute Council's work with Community Services on empty homes was short-listed for a national IRRV award in innovation. I am pleased to report that we secured a Silver award for this category against stiff competition from across the whole of the UK. As at end of October, our council had billed an additional £680,710 in double Council Tax charge. This has increased as many properties have now come to the end of their 6 months' transitional exemption period. There are a small number of double council tax cases going to the next Valuation Appeal Committee (VAC) in December.

9.7 Information Management

Good progress has been achieved with developing the Information Asset Register for Children and Families. This will now be rolled out to all other service areas. A presentation was made at the Chief and Senior Officers meeting in Oban in November in order to brief all about the requirements for this. This will support the Information Management Strategy which has now been reviewed by DMT and SMT and will be brought forward to the Policy & Resources Committee for approval in due course.

9.8 Customer Service Centre (CSC)

Co-mingled Waste has now gone live in one area. As a result in October the CSC answered 1,249 more calls on the roads & amenity services golden number than in September. In total 10,827 calls were answered in the month. The increase in call volumes pushed the call abandon rate up to 11.35% but this is expected to settle back down in November.

We are carrying out a consultation as part of the work in developing a new Customer Services Strategy. The outline proposals will be presented to members at a seminar on 1 December and their comment and input will be very much welcomed. This will then come to the Policy & Resources Committee in due course for approval. Members previously approved us joining in a collaborative procurement for a new CRM system to be led by Highland Council. Aberdeen City and Western Isles councils have both also indicated a desire to join in. A draft business case has been developed and has been reviewed by the Customer Service Board.

9.9 Registration

We are now starting to get some enquiries about same sex marriages although officially December 15th will be the first day for these to be taken, with the first same sex marriages able to be carried out on 31 December.

9.10 Digital Agenda

The Socitm “Better Connected” assessment was carried out at the end of October just before we had to take the website down for much of 31 October due to a Drupal security alert. As a result of the alert to the potential for our website being compromised, we rolled it back to a version from 14 October and lost two weeks’ work which is now being restored. This was done as a safeguard even though there was no evidence that our website had in fact been compromised. This affected about 5% of all websites worldwide and is the first time such an event has potentially affected our website. In order to minimise this occurrence in future, we will investigate options for external hosting of the website, although this will undoubtedly be at an added cost. This also affected the new Islay High School website which had just gone live, but little content was lost. We will not hear the results of the Socitm assessment until early next year.

The Chief Officer and Senior Officers (COSO) meeting in Oban on 5 November was themed around ICT and digital. This was an important part of progressing the decision by Policy & Resources to adopt “digital first” and highlighting opportunities to do “more with less” and “new with less”.

9.11 Admin Review

The centralised mail handling project is now live for all of Customer Services in Kilmory and went live for Manse Brae on 8 October. Whitegates is due to go live towards the end of November. The mail handling and scanning is being carried out by two Modern Apprentices based in Kilmory.

School spend through the education purchasing team is starting to increase. A review is being undertaken of the level of spend through purchase cards and on the level of retrospective ordering, both of which look to be high and with potential for improvement. The saving in quarter 2 for the travel team was £15,160 and for the construction team it was £26,395.

9.12 Procurement Update

Our Procurement and Commissioning team was shortlisted for two Government Opportunities (GO) Scotland awards. The IT recycling and

disposal contract reached the Sustainability/Corporate Responsibility category shortlist, and their work on setting up small centralised purchase ordering teams made them a finalist for the Local Authority Procurement Team of the Year award.

The Council had its annual Procurement Capability Assessment in October and scored 72%, up from 63% last year. This shows the team has continued to improve our procurement processes to achieve best value for the council and is a huge improvement from the first score of 21% in 2009. Particular strengths are strategy and objectives, defining the supply need and people. Formal contract management is being introduced for all large or high risk contracts. The Council now has a Sustainable Procurement Policy in place, with community benefits being formally considered for all contracts with a value of over £350,000.

Councillor Dick Walsh, Leader.
18 November 2014