

23rd November 2023

LEADER'S REPORT

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Leader of the Council and Policy Lead Councillors routinely provide a report outlining their strategic activities for consideration at each meeting of Argyll and Bute Council, except for the annual budget meeting in February.
- 1.2 This report provides an update on the activities of the council Leader, Cllr Robin Currie, for the period 8th September to 10th November 2023. It also includes notes on activities relating to the Leader's Policy Lead portfolio of Strategic Development.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 Members are asked to consider the report.
- 2.2 Members are asked to note that any reports, briefings or copy correspondence referred to in the report can be requested as appropriate through the Leadership Support Manager, although it should be noted that some confidential reports provided by external organisations such as COSLA may be restricted.

3. LEADER ACTIVITY 8th September to 10th November 2023:

- 3.1 **Storm Agnes/Babet impact, October 2023:** Tackling the impact of the severe weather wrought by Storms Agnes and Babet across Argyll and Bute at the beginning of October has been a priority for the Council in the past few weeks. The detail of the impact and the council's response has been well documented both publicly and by way of updates to elected members, so I do not propose to repeat too much of that here. However, I think it is important to put on record our thanks and appreciation to everyone who has been involved in this very significant emergency response to unprecedented circumstances – it is worth remembering that

we experienced around one month's rainfall in a single day and that, at one point over the course of the two storms, Argyll and Bute was the worst affected Scottish local authority area.

Partnership working with our communities, with local businesses and with our public sector colleagues from various agencies has never been more important than in circumstances such as these. Thankfully here in Argyll and Bute we have an excellent track record in working together and we have strong relationships to build on, as well as robust emergency response procedures in place. As I write this report, I know that work is continuing around the clock at the site of the very severe landslip on the A816. Work is progressing apace on solutions at two of the bridges affected on the same route, and on others in the Cowal area. Those who deliver front line services to people in the affected communities have found ways to adapt and overcome the very considerable obstacles in their way, often at significant personal cost

There are also many elements of the emergency response which are less visible than others but still as vitally important.

To everyone involved, and to the people in local communities who opened their village halls and their homes to help those stranded or in need, may I pass on our gratitude and our sincere thanks for all that you have done and, indeed, continue to do.

The overall response continues far beyond the immediate impact and aftermath and involves more than the practicalities. While we are taking every possible action now to keep Argyll and Bute moving, planning ahead for the future is also a top priority for us. There are many different areas where action is needed to safeguard Argyll and Bute's future resilience.

Our Finance team engaged very quickly with the Scottish Government following the activation of the Bellwin scheme, which provides support to local authorities in emergency situations. The Chief Executive and I have spoken directly with the Scottish Government's Transport Minister as well as highlighting to the UK Government when we attended the UK Government Islands Forum (covered later in this report). We will continue this engagement at both political and officer level. The reality is that, in addition to the considerable actions that this council is taking, Argyll and Bute will need significant investment from both the Scottish and UK Governments to move beyond recovery and secure our future success.

Argyll and Bute makes very significant and valuable contributions to national priorities in numerous ways, from our place high up in the Scottish tourism sector to our world-renowned food and drink exports which bring in millions of pounds each year. These high-value financial boosts to the

treasury depend on reliable routes to market if they are to continue. The many benefits that Argyll and Bute brings to the Scottish and UK economies must be safeguarded and backed up with the support we need to move beyond recovery and to continue to thrive.

3.2 Scottish Government Travelling Cabinet, 2nd October 2023:

The Scottish Government resumed its Travelling Cabinet series with the first session taking place in Inveraray on Monday 2nd October 2023.

It was a privilege to officially welcome the Cabinet to their private meeting and to open the public session later in the afternoon.



While in Inveraray, ministers undertook a number of visits to local projects including a trip to Inveraray Primary School where they met with our Education management team for an overview of our action on attainment and also heard about the progress of the MyTribe initiative which helps to combat period poverty.

We were able to secure a private meeting with the First Minister and Depute First Minister, giving us an opportunity to raise some of Argyll and Bute's current key strategic issues. I have also added at each of these below short updates on our other actions in relation to these matters:

- Biodegradable municipal waste (BMW) ban and the need for a nine-month derogation or funding support;
 - We have also had initial discussions with SEPA and these will continue apace.
- Rothesay Pavilion;
 - Officers continue to engage with various funders and we are also progressing additional political discussions as required.
- Lifeline ferry services and the need to look at flexible solutions to remove or minimise disruption to island communities;
 - I have written to Calmac on a number of occasions about the desperate need for action for island communities who are taking the brunt of reduced or no sailings and where every aspect of life is impacted.
- Seeking clarity on security of funding for the long term solution for the A83 Rest and Be Thankful;
 - I also attended the A83 Taskforce meeting in Lochgilphead just two days after the Travelling Cabinet. We continue to maintain pressure on government – it is imperative that momentum is maintained and that the best possible timescales are put in place and, most importantly, adhered to in order to safeguard the region’s resilience.
- Highlighting the urgent need for action on depopulation as part of national strategy and activity.
 - We have asked government for a focused plan that recognises the critically urgent need to rebalance population and commits to ongoing engagement with the local authority areas most affected, including Argyll and Bute.

This was overall a positive discussion and we were encouraged by both Mr Yousaf and Ms Robison’s constructive approach to both the specific issues we raised and to the working relationship between local and national government as a whole.

Many of the issues we picked up in our private meeting were also raised during the public question time session and it is helpful for government to see that alignment with community views and needs.

3.3 UK Islands Forum, Western Isles, 9th and 10th October 2023:

The latest UK Islands Forum meeting took place in Stornoway. The Forum opened with a presentation from the Dept of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and the UK Infrastructure Bank on opportunities for islands.

Launched in June 2021, the UK Infrastructure Bank is a government-owned policy bank providing £22bn of infrastructure finance and partnering with the private sector and local government to finance a green industrial revolution and drive growth across the country. The Bank

provides a range of financing tools across the capital structure, including loans, credit enhancement, and equity investments. UKIB also provides financing to local and mayoral authorities across the UK, for high-value and complex economic infrastructure projects.

The main Forum meeting itself focused on the theme of connectivity and included presentations on case studies from North Ayrshire and Shetland Islands councils, as well as reflections from the other island authorities present and the Scottish and UK Governments.

It was agreed to set up a new 'task and finish' group to look at island transport connections, and the forum also agreed that further work would be carried out in relation to digital connectivity, supported by both the Scottish and UK Governments.

While discussions were very useful, it was also particularly helpful to have the opportunity to press Argyll and Bute's case to both Michael Gove, as Chair of the Forum, and the Scottish Government Minister for Transport, Fiona Hyslop – especially given the attention on Argyll and Bute in the days immediately preceding the Forum and the impact of the severe weather on our remote and rural connections as well as our islands.

It is also worth mentioning that I raised, in open session with the UK Government, the prospect of them providing a significant multimillion-pound fund for distribution to islands authorities, in the same way that they provided allocations for towns and urban areas, some of which had also received awards through the Levelling Up Fund process. It was somewhat encouraging that one of the UK Government ministers made an informal but positive response to this, saying that it may be worth considering. I believe that its consideration is absolutely vital for areas like Argyll and Bute, where we make significant contributions to the UK economy but where we often face equally considerable challenges and where rural deprivation can, unfortunately, be hidden. I will continue to press this with the UK Government.

3.4 Housing matters:

Prosper (formerly SCDI) Engagement Event – Unlocking Social and Economic Growth in Argyll and Bute: I was delighted to be asked to open the Housing panel discussion at this event in Inveraray on 24th October 2023.

This session, one of a series of similar events around Scotland, saw the former Scottish Council for Development and Industry confirm its new identity as Prosper – reflecting its drive to support economic innovation in Scotland. It brought together a range of partners from the public and private sector, all with the shared ambition of seeing Argyll and Bute

thriving and successful, and looking to explore ways of collaborating and taking action together to make that reality.

As well as initial general discussions there were various focused panel sessions on key issues like transport, energy and digital connectivity, land and marine development and, of course, housing.

I was able to set out the context for our declaration of a housing emergency this summer and outline the various actions we are taking as a council to play our part in addressing this most crucial of challenges to our future growth. I highlighted also the need to attract developers into the area and overcoming any barriers to this – there is a need for a range of different types of housing and the private sector also has a significant contribution to make.

This was a really productive session and the spirit of collective action that characterised the day will, I am sure, continue beyond – I am already setting up meetings with key partners in the renewables and digital areas and will update on my progress in future reports as possible.

Argyll and Bute Strategic Housing Forum, 19th September:

As we progress at pace on tackling the housing emergency, it is more important than ever to bring key stakeholders and partners together and look at issues holistically. The Strategic Housing Forum is a key element of our collective action to boost housing supply and provide homes for those who need them in Argyll and Bute.

Our September meeting included consideration of the Local Housing Strategy annual report, setting in context current housing demand and analysing/commenting on housing transactions and activity in the area. It also includes, of course, the key actions we agreed as vital in terms of the housing emergency, like worker accommodation, the buy-back scheme and implications for other partners, the role of the Community Housing Network and how we can attract private development as well as providing affordable housing.

The September meeting of the Community Housing Network had taken place just a few days earlier, on 14th September, and as well as an overview of our plans in relation to the housing emergency, this session included a presentation from Colonsay Community Development Company and an overview of legislative/policy changes and financial modelling in the community housing delivery context.

I visited Colonsay with officers from the Housing service on 13th September and it was great to see for myself the progress being made with the new affordable development on the island.



Scottish Rural and Islands Housing (RIHAF) Annual Conference, 1st and 2nd November 2023: This year's conference theme was 'Supporting Sustainable Communities' and included sessions on issues like the role of technology in social care and housing, planning for aging and adaptations, future-proofing homes in the aging context, and the role of housing in attracting and retaining diverse populations.

The Scottish Government's Housing Minister, Paul McLennan MSP, was one of the keynote speakers. We had invited him to our own Housing Summit on 27th November, but unfortunately he is unable to attend. There was a discussion about rising costs for development in an area closer to the central belt than many of our remote/rural/island locations – I highlighted that Colonsay in particular has been an issue here, where West Highland Housing Association have been aiming to build much-needed affordable homes for several years but rising costs have created real pressure and restriction. Locations like this desperately need housing in order to retain and attract young families. The Minister did say that he intended to arrange a meeting in this regard very soon and I hope to hear more about that in due course, given the significance of this development to the Colonsay community.

We also had a very constructive discussion about fuel poverty in the rural context and in the north of Scotland where tariffs tend to be much higher – unfairly so. I had also raised this particular issue with Ofgem at an earlier UK Islands Forum meeting in Orkney. RIHAF is now seeking a meeting with Ofgem regarding this. I hope that the door is now half-open for progress on this issue which has affected communities for too long. It is understandable why tariffs were higher in the past, to cover infrastructure costs – but now, as a region which exports very high levels of energy elsewhere, it is high time we were on a level playing field.

3.5 COSLA Meetings:

Since my last report to Council in September, I have attended the following COSLA meetings:

28th and 29th September – COSLA Annual Conference and Excellence Awards, COSLA Convention: The COSLA headline for September is undoubtedly the fact that our Economic Development and Commercial Services teams won a COSLA Excellence Award – taking home a well-deserved prize in the Service, Innovation and Delivery category for their school meal drone delivery project. This is a fantastic initiative which embodies innovation and excellence in local government and is typical of the energy that our officers put in to finding ways of delivering core services in often challenging circumstances. Well done to all involved!

This year's Conference theme was 'Is Scotland Living Well Locally?' with presentations from a range of partner organisations including the academic and private sectors as well as other bodies like the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership, the Soil Association, the Scottish Fiscal Commission, Crown Estates Scotland and many others.

The First Minister's address and the Verity House Agreement were, of course, key areas of focus for local government attendees and indeed the

Agreement also featured on the agenda for Convention, alongside the Fiscal Framework for Local Government.

COSLA Leaders 27th October: The following items were considered at the scheduled COSLA Leaders meeting for October. These were taken in private session so I cannot share full details here but will be happy to answer questions as far as possible:

- Housing Emergency Progress
- National Trauma Training Programme
- Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy Delivery Plan and Workforce Action Plan
- Pay Update
- Local Government Finance
- Council Tax Second and Empty Homes Consultation/Analysis
- Flood Risk Management Affordability
- National Care Service
- Settlement and Distribution
- Proposals to Freeze Council Tax (following local government disquiet in light of the unexpected announcement earlier in October).

Leaders agreed that the Pay Update should be considered at a special meeting of COSLA Leaders, convened for 3rd November. You can find COSLA's statement, issued following that session, at [Statement following a meeting of Council Leaders \(3rd November\) | COSLA](#)

3.6 Convention of the Highlands and Islands, Moray – autumn/winter session: The autumn/winter session of COHI was due to take place on 23rd October in Elgin, hosted by Moray Council. Unfortunately, due to the severe weather which was particularly affecting the north-east of Scotland at the time, the event was cancelled. We are currently waiting to hear from the Scottish Government about a reconvened virtual session and I will report on this in a future Leader's Report.

3.7 Gaelic:
Mod 2024: On 21st October, Provost Maurice Corry represented Argyll and Bute Council at the official handover of the Mod flag from this year's hosts, Renfrewshire Council, to ourselves. We are now in possession of the Mod flag and look forward to it flying in Oban next year. Officers are already working with partners to prepare – this brings a significant economic boost to the area as well as its contribution to keeping the Gaelic culture and language alive and thriving.

Gaelic Gathering 2024: We are also planning for our own Gaelic Gathering which will take place on 27th April next year, again in Oban. This is the fourth Gathering that we have organised – including a virtual event during the Covid pandemic. These are positive and well-received events and we see them as a very significant element of our commitment to Gaelic in Argyll and Bute. They have also attracted interest and support from the Scottish Government, and I have written to Jenny Gilruth MSP, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, inviting her to attend as keynote speaker.

3.8 Islands issues:

Islands Strategic Group and Islands Transport Forum, 5th October: I went to Edinburgh on 5th October for an in-person meeting of the Islands Strategic Group, which session included a meeting of the Islands Transport Forum.

Agenda topics were (all in islands context):

- Islands Transport Forum – aviation, ferries, resilience and terms of reference for the Forum
- Child poverty
- Cost of living
- Migration, skills and labour shortages

Argyll Islands Sounding Board, 19th October: Our own Islands Sounding Board met on 19th October specifically to consider our response to the National Islands Plan Review, as delegated by the Environment, Development and Infrastructure Committee. Board members provided considered and proactive input to the draft response provided by officers, noting particularly that a refresh, rather than a new plan, would be the best approach. This would allow changes resulting in a more focused plan with clear and measurable outcomes and a budget aligned to secure delivery – these being more important for our island communities rather than producing more plans.

3.9 Dunoon – refugee resettlement, 6th October: I was glad to be able to meet with a number of our Ukrainian and Afghan families, along with our Refugee Resettlement Team, in Dunoon on 6th October.



It is always humbling and helpful to hear first-hand the experiences of those who have come to settle in Argyll and Bute. Many have considerable skills and I know that our resettlement team work extremely hard indeed to help them not only adjust to life in Argyll and Bute and overcome the initial challenges of arriving in a new and unfamiliar country, but to move beyond that to thrive and enjoy community life. I was interested to hear from those who are looking to start up their own businesses and to find opportunities of sharing their culture and heritage with other refugees as well as with the communities where they have made their homes. We were treated to a taste of this when we were ably entertained with traditional Ukrainian accordion music by two of our young people.

4. CONCLUSION

4.1 This report highlights the activities of the Leader of Argyll and Bute Council for the period from 8th September to 10th November 2023.

**Councillor Robin Currie
Leader, Argyll and Bute Council**

10th November 2023

For further information or to access the Leader’s Report Pack please contact Aileen McNicol, Leadership Support and Member Services Manager, telephone 01546 604014 or email aileen.mcnicol@argyll-bute.gov.uk