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**24th November 2016**

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**LEADER'S REPORT**

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**1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1** This report provides members with an update on my activities as Leader of the Council during the period 15<sup>th</sup> September to 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2016. These are outlined below in chronological order for members' information and interest.
- 1.2** I have also provided updates in respect of my role as Policy Lead Councillor for Finance, IT, HR and Governance and Law.

**2. RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 2.1** Members are asked to note the report,
- 2.2** Members are asked to note that the full Leader's Report Pack is available in the Leader's office. This includes COSLA papers and briefings as referenced in the report. Any COSLA items heard in public session can be provided to members electronically; the papers for items taken in private session can be reviewed in the Leader's office.

**3. GOUROCK-DUNOON STAKEHOLDERS GROUP, 27<sup>th</sup> September 2016**

- 3.1** The Gourock-Dunoon Stakeholders Group held its first meeting in Glasgow on Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> September. This inaugural meeting focused on the history of the Dunoon-Gourock ferry service and the process going forward in relation to procuring a new service.

Since this meeting, media reports state that four operators have been invited to tender for the contract, although these have not yet been named as the tendering exercise is still live.

#### **4. ARGYLL AND BUTE COUNCIL EXCELLENCE AWARDS, 28<sup>th</sup> September**

- 4.1** Like all Scottish councils we face times of significant challenge. That is why it is important to take every opportunity we can to identify and celebrate success. The annual Argyll and Bute Council Excellence Awards is one such opportunity, and I was delighted to join member and officer colleagues to acknowledge, recognise and celebrate the achievements and successes of this council's hardworking and dedicated staff.

To meet the challenges we face, we must change what we do. This needs a spirit of innovation, of determination, of commitment and of striving for improvement. After many years in local government I am encouraged by what I see in our organisation. I see how our valued and committed staff work together to adapt, to overcome, to find new ideas, work smarter, faster and harder, to keep delivering the services which are so important to the people and communities of Argyll and Bute.

It was a real privilege and encouragement to hear about the nominations from services across the council, all of which are working hard every day, not to win awards but to deliver excellence. Thanks are due to all of them and congratulations to all the winners.

#### **5. ISLANDS STRATEGIC GROUP, 28<sup>th</sup> September**

- 5.1** In August, the Scottish Government announced the progression of legislation to empower Scotland's island communities. Part of the government's activity included the establishment of the Islands Strategic Group, which met for the first time on 28<sup>th</sup> September.

It is a very welcome step that Argyll and Bute Council has been included in this new group as a council with islands. The group's remit is to focus on the development of a National Islands Plan, taking into account the challenges and opportunities of island life. With 23 inhabited islands – more than any other island authority – it is essential to be included at this level of strategic planning.

This first meeting looked at the terms of reference for the group as well as an update on the Islands Bill. At the time of writing, preparations for the second meeting are in hand, with a view to holding the meeting on Bute and if any more information about the proposed agenda items is available, I will be happy to provide that at the council meeting itself.

## **6. HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS LEADERS GROUP, 29<sup>th</sup> September**

**6.1** I was unable to attend this meeting but was represented by the Chief Executive. The agenda items covered were:

- Discussion of forthcoming Convention of the Highlands and Islands Agenda and key priorities for the Highlands and Islands post 2020
- A session on the Programme for Government, in particular the economy, education and issues around the EU referendum result, with Deputy First Minister John Swinney.

Given the commonality between this group, COHI and the Islands Strategic Group mentioned above, it was agreed at the meeting that a consolidated work plan should be produced to avoid duplication. This will be very beneficial.

There is more detail in the Leader's Report pack, including a note on the discussion with Mr Swinney, available for members to consider.

## **7. COSLA LEADERS, 30<sup>th</sup> September 2016**

**7.1** The September COSLA Leaders meeting took place in Edinburgh on Friday 30<sup>th</sup> September, at the close of a busy week which included our own council meeting plus a number of other important external engagements as noted above.

All agenda items on this occasion were taken in private session, so I cannot report on them in full here, but all papers and associated briefings are available to view in the Leader's Report pack.

The agenda items were:

- Scottish Youth Parliament presentation
- Living Wage for Care Workers in Adult Social Care
- Education Delivery Plan
- Consultation on a Child Poverty Bill for Scotland
- Spending Review (no papers – verbal update)
- Welfare Reform
- Consultation on Social Security
- Fire and Rescue Service
- Enterprise and Skills Review
- Broadband and Digital
- Trading Standards – Strategic Service Review
- Distribution

## **8. MEMBERS SEMINAR WITH ECONOMIC FORUM, 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2016**

- 8.1** Our scheduled Members Seminar on 3<sup>rd</sup> October saw us joining forces with members of the Argyll and Bute Economic Forum for part of the session.

This was a great opportunity to hear an update on the Forum's work so far as well as offering colleagues a chance to meet with local business representatives who are involved in this private-sector led initiative which shares the same priority we have – securing a growing economy built on a growing population.

The Forum members, along with our own officers, presented on a number of topics and updated on specific areas of work, including:

- Youth and Education
- Oban as a University Town
- Developing Argyll and Bute's Young Workforce

After the morning session, the Economic Forum held a business meeting elsewhere in Kilmory, while the seminar continued with sessions on:

- Strategic Housing Investment Plan
- Scottish Care Leavers Covenant and looked after children
- Digital tools for participatory budgeting

Once again this members seminar was a very useful, interesting and well organised session. The next seminar is on Monday 5<sup>th</sup> December and will focus on broadband and mobile improvements across Argyll and Bute and other topics.

## **9. JOINT REPRESENTATION TO IJB, 4<sup>th</sup> October 2016**

- 8.1** Following recent council considerations and then very productive telephone discussions with our constituency MSP Michael Russell, it was agreed that he and I, in conjunction with Brendan O'Hara MP, would represent to Shona Robison, Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport, and the Chair of the Argyll and Bute Integrated Joint Board, asking for consideration of suspension of the recent decisions in relation to Struan Lodge in Dunoon and Thomson Court in Bute.

Colleagues will be aware that the IJB has met since those representations and has agreed to pause those decisions for six months to allow for enhanced engagement with local people and staff.

This is welcome news and is evidence of how in Argyll and Bute it is possible to put political differences aside when issues are clearly important to the communities we are all elected to serve.

Copies of the correspondence signed jointly by myself, Mr Russell and Mr O'Hara are available in the Leader's Report Pack.

## **10. COSLA CONVENTION, 7<sup>th</sup> October 2016**

### **10.1** COSLA Convention was held in Crieff on Friday 7<sup>th</sup> October.

Angela Constance, Cabinet Secretary for Communities, Social Security and Equalities, gave the opening address before Convention moved into private session.

The agenda items were:

- Programme for Government
- Public Service Reform
- Developing COSLA's response to leaving the EU
- Governance of the Business Gateway Service
- COSLA Review update

Because these items were considered in private session, I am not able to report in more detail here, but would encourage colleagues to access the detail in the papers and briefings from the Leader's Report pack, given the importance and impact of the issues discussed.

## **11. CONVENTION OF THE HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS (COHI), 31<sup>st</sup> October**

### **11.1** The latest COHI took place in Inverness on 31<sup>st</sup> October. As usual this offered an opportunity to engage with other Highlands and Islands councils and the Scottish Government on the unique issues and challenges we face. The agenda items were:

- Priorities for Government, including EU referendum response and Enterprise and Skills Review

The headline issues here are:

- An education system providing opportunities for all
- An economy with more jobs and fair work
- Public services fit for the future which empower people and communities

The government's focus is on closing the attainment gap – including the expansion of early learning, childcare and nursery capacity. Engagement will continue with industry, education and other partners on Developing Scotland's Young Workforce. There will also be activity on maintaining at least 116K FTE further education places and developing access to university for students from deprived backgrounds.

Scotland's economic strategy has a twin focus – boosting competitiveness and tackling inequality. Alongside this sits activity to mitigate against the impact of the United Kingdom leaving the European Union, including a £100m Capital Acceleration Programme to stimulate the economy and various other measures. Work is being done to maximise international opportunities for Scotland. But also, given that rural areas account for 98% of Scotland's land mass and almost 20% of its population, the Scottish Rural Development Programme will continue to provide funding in the next year and there will be a series of summits to explore how best to deliver investment, growth, jobs and opportunities in rural and island communities.

- Highlands and Islands beyond 2020
- Fuel Poverty and National Network Pricing – update from Ofgem
- Digital Connectivity – progress and opportunities
- Skills Investment Plan
- Realising UHI Strategic Vision

Draft outcomes have been made available since then and if these are finalised in time for the council meeting I will be happy to provide more information to members.

## **12. ARGYLL AND BUTE COMMUNITY PLANNING PARTNERSHIP FULL PARTNERSHIP, 2<sup>ND</sup> November 2016**

- 12.1** It was a pleasure to visit Oban on Tuesday 2<sup>nd</sup> November for this year's Full Partnership – Argyll and Bute Community Planning Partnership.

Once again this was a very positive day and an opportunity to join with our community planning partners, share ideas, reflect on what has worked well in Argyll and Bute over the past year and focus on how we can build on that for the future.

Since the full partnership last got together, working together we have made significant progress on each of the six outcomes embedded in our Single Outcome Agreement. The CPP annual report, issued to delegates on the day, provided a number of case studies and examples of this from our work over the past year.

During the day we had a number of very interesting sessions, including a very heartening presentation on our Refugee Resettlement Programme; very fitting because we are approaching the first anniversary of the arrival of Syrian families in Rothesay.

Other topics on the day included:

- Charrettes – community led action planning
- Alcohol and drugs prevention work in schools
- Launch of Argyll Enterprise Week
- Economic growth
- Tools for the future – planning and prioritising

At the close, many delegates took the opportunity to visit the Trade Fair in the town's Corran Halls, part of Argyll Enterprise Week which launched on 31<sup>st</sup> October. Enterprise Week is drawing to a close as I write, and I am sure our Policy Lead for Economic Development will be reporting on this in due course.

## **16. POLICY LEAD UPDATE –**

### **16.1 Local Tax Collections**

Collections of council tax for 2016/17 were 66.60% at end of October, down 0.07% on last year. Collections are down due to the second home discount review with discounts removed from 175 households and double charge applied instead. This is affecting collections by 0.3%. Collection for 2015/16 at end of October is 96.47%, up 0.41% on previous year at this time. Collections on the 2014/15 year continue to be slow as previously reported because of the change in sheriff officers that year. The single person discount review is due to start shortly.

Collections of non-domestic rates for 2016/17 are 74.50% at end of October, down 0.25% on last year. The main reason for the decrease is that reliefs granted are around £0.8m less than last year, mainly because of changes in renewables relief. Collections on 2015/16 year are now at 98.65%, up by 0.16% on the previous year at this time.

The Scottish Government has now approved the new statutory instrument to change the proportions of council tax for bands E to H. The legislation to amend council tax on second homes is still in draft and the progress of this is being closely monitored.

### **Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF)**

Programme funding for 2016/17 including carried forward underspend of £24,313 is £424,076 - £35,340 per month. Since the start of April we have been supporting both medium and high priority cases but reduced this to high priority only from 10th October due to the increase in spend. To the end of October we have paid out and committed £288,535 – 116.6% of the profiled amount including brought forward underspend. 37 applications are currently being processed and a further seven were part paid at the end of October. We have seen a very significant increase in numbers of applications for community care grants in August. We suspect this increase may be due to people realising that payments are now made in cash and that is more attractive than when we just provided goods.

### **Discretionary Housing Payments (DHPs) and benefit cap**

The funding allocations for 2016/17 now total £603,675 following receipt of the final 20% of funding for 2015/16 from the Scottish Government in June, and including the carry forward from last year of £35,730 approved by council.

£510,715 has now been either paid out or committed as at the end of October with awards made to 971 cases. There are a total of 102 applications outstanding or requiring further information at the end of October. Nearly all the awards to date (93% by value) have been for bedroom tax cases. We are supporting medium and high priority cases for all non-bedroom tax cases. We continue to support all bedroom tax cases irrespective of hardship. We have estimated that we should be able to support families affected by the benefit cap for at least an initial 13 week period. There are four families currently affected by the existing benefit cap and the reduced benefit cap will be applied to these families with effect from 7 November. There are approximately 40 new benefit cap cases and these will be applied with effect from 14<sup>th</sup> November. We should receive final files for these cases from DWP on 7<sup>th</sup> November. The revised DHP policy for the benefit cap cases was approved by the Policy and Resources Committee and the website has been updated for this.

### **Benefits processing**

New claims processing in the year to date to end of September has taken on average 18.91 days which is well below our target of 23 days. Changes in circumstances in the year to date to end of September have taken on average 4.99 days which is also well below our target of eight days. Our accuracy to end of September is 96.4% which is also better than the target of 95%. October figures are not yet available.



### **Pathfinder North migration to SWAN**

As of 2<sup>nd</sup> November we have 82 out of 132 sites transitioned. Progress is disappointingly slow. Forecasts for installs in November and December have been halved across the partnership and we are awaiting more detailed information to see the impact on our own sites. We have ordered alternative interim circuits for the sites expected to be most delayed. We will be seeking to recover damages from Capita for these additional costs being incurred.

### **Customer Service Centre (CSC)**

I am very pleased to report that the percentage of calls to CSC being abandoned for the month of October was 5.5% - well below our target rate of 7.5%. We have been well below target consistently since start of July. The average answered call time for October was 3.75 minutes – a considerable increase from the previous average of 2.6 minutes. More is being done within the call than previously so there is a reduction in average wrap time.

The percentage of voice automation calls successfully transferred has reduced slightly to 77.9% in October but this is still well above the 75% target.

We are now progressing the next phase of the project for the new customer contact systems which is focussed on taking more advantage of the new functionality in the new systems. Three new voice forms are now live – for falls helpline, direct debit payments and second bin request. These are available 24/7. Sentiment metrics is live and allows us to evaluate our social media impact and manage this through a central hub.

The new marriage site is now live and accessible through the council's main website. This is more promotional than the previous material and aims to help attract more couples to get married in our area.

### **Procurement, commissioning and creditors**

Year to date to end of October, we have paid 94.03% of creditors invoices within 30 days which is slightly above our target of 94%. This is pleasing as we are now back on track after a poor performance in August affected by holidays.

The pilot for the new model of care won a gold award at the Council's recent excellence and recognition awards event. Supplier events have taken place in all localities in relation to the new Integrated Care Fund. Bids for this have now closed.

## **ICT**

All first draft Information Asset registers have been completed for all services. Good progress is being made in implementing specialist document management system for social work. West Dunbartonshire Council use the same system and are assisting with the integration to CareFirst. Lync is now set up for all the schools within the Education pilot. Phase 1 of the cashless catering project is complete and all secondary schools are now equipped with new tills and revaluation equipment. Annual PSN health check is underway and vulnerabilities are being addressed ahead of re-accreditation due next year. A large number of end of life switches are being replaced.

## **Big Lottery Fund (BLF)**

We submitted a bid (ESPD) for the first stage of the BLF's procurement of financial inclusion services funded by European Social Fund monies. The bid was put forward on a collaborative basis along with a number of our third sector partners and is being overseen by the Welfare Reform Working Group. The ITT was due to be issued first week of August however BLF has decided to re-commence the procurement in a single stage and will now issue the revised requirements week commencing 19 September. The main difference is in relation to post codes covered. The intention is still to submit a bid. The contract could be worth up to £3.5m over a three-year period. No match funding is required. Even if the council led bid is not successful, this contract should provide valuable services to our more vulnerable citizens.

## **Consultations recently launched**

The Scottish Government has recently issued a number of consultations. We have submitted responses to the consultation on a child poverty bill for Scotland, the Barclay consultation on rates, social security in Scotland, proposed council tax reforms, on the use of rateable values for water charging, and on transitional arrangements for the 2017 non-domestic rating revaluation.

## **17. CONCLUSION**

**17.1** This report highlights some of the main activities I have undertaken in my role as Leader of the council during the past three months. I hope that this update is helpful for members and will be happy to provide more information wherever possible. The full Leader's report pack can be viewed in the Leader's office at any time.

## **18. IMPLICATIONS**

**18.1 Policy - None**

**18.2 Financial – None**

**18.3 Legal – None**

**18.4 HR – None**

**18.5 Equalities – None**

**18.6 Risk – None**

**18.7 Customer Service – None**

**Councillor Dick Walsh**

**Leader, Argyll and Bute Council**

**Policy Lead Councillor for Strategic Finance, IT, HR and Governance and Law**

**4<sup>th</sup> November 2016**

**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](mailto:aileen.mcnicol@argyll-bute.gov.uk)**