
25th June 2020

LEADER'S REPORT

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1** The Leader of the Council provides a report outlining her strategic activities for consideration at each meeting of Argyll and Bute Council, except the budget meeting in February. A Leader's Report was considered at the council meeting on 28th November 2019, with the next reports due at the council meeting planned for 16th April 2020 and covering activity during that period.
- 1.2** The COVID-19 situation required significant change to council business, including its governance arrangements. At a special meeting of Argyll and Bute Council held remotely on 31st March 2020, the Business Continuity Committee was established to deal with business remotely in the meantime.
- 1.3** After consideration, it was agreed that to ensure all members are kept up to date with leadership activity, and to maintain openness and transparency, a high level update should be provided to the Business Continuity Committee's first meeting on 16th April, given that updates were originally planned for council on the same date.
- 1.4** That report covered the period from 28th November 2019 to end March 2020 – the period after 20th March being concerned mainly with the response to COVID-19. More detail on that activity is reported elsewhere.
- 1.5** This latest Leader's Report provides an update of the Council Leader's activity during April, May and up to 15th June 2020.

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 Leadership Support staff, although it should be noted that some confidential reports provided by external organisations such as COSLA may be restricted.

3. LEADER ACTIVITIES

3.1 Argyll and Bute Council Activities:

COVID-19: Details of the council's response overall as well as other, more targeted activity like economic recovery are featured in specific reports elsewhere.

On 3rd April, at his invitation, I had a conference call with Douglas Ross MP, then Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, who was keen to speak with Scottish local authority leaders about the overall Covid-19 response. This call took place at a relatively early point in the pandemic and fairly soon after the initial lockdown measures – this is reflected in the discussion topics which included questions about PPE, business support mechanisms, the impact on Growth Deals and on benefits administration. This was a helpful and positive call – it was followed up by a detailed summary and note of actions and queries which Mr Ross indicated he would take forward on behalf of Leaders.

Since my last update to members, I have had an opportunity to see for myself one particular aspect of Argyll and Bute's response to the pandemic – the Community Food Project.

This is a great example of partnership working in action to really make a difference to people in our communities – something in which Argyll and Bute has always had a strong track record and which has been particularly evident during the pandemic.

The project has brought together staff from the council and other public sector agencies with community groups, individual volunteers and local businesses to source, prepare and deliver thousands of weekly fresh and dried food parcels from local hubs across the area and to island communities. This has taken place in tandem with the Scottish Government food distribution arrangements for people who are shielding.

I visited the Helensburgh and Lomond area hub at Hermitage Academy on 20th May to join volunteers packing up some of the hundreds of parcels due to go out that day. It was great to see this first-hand – there's more detail about the project in the regular Covid-19 response reports to committee.



Volunteers Week 1st to 7th June 2020:

We have a strong tradition of volunteering in Argyll and Bute, with people stepping forward to help others and play their part in their local community in a myriad of different ways. Their efforts make such a difference and the pandemic has served to illustrate just how vital their contributions are. This year's Volunteers Week seems especially important in that context and I'd like to take the opportunity here, once again, to thank all those who give so generously of their time to help others. Responding to the pandemic would have been incredibly difficult without the contribution of volunteers at a local level. We will all require to continue to work together for some considerable time to come as we get to grips with the changes that Covid-19 will bring to everyday life and everything that you do really does make a difference.

Call with BT Scotland, 7th May:

Officers from our Economic Development team joined me for a conference call with Mark Dames, Head of Policy and Public Affairs for BT Scotland and his colleague Henry Parker of the Public Affairs team. Mark and Henry gave us an update on the new Universal Service Obligation, which came into effect from 20th March, and the implications for Argyll and Bute.

Effective digital connectivity is crucial to Argyll and Bute's future success – this gave us another opportunity to continue our long-running lobbying activity in this respect and to reiterate the need for improvement in many

different corners of the region. We wanted to ensure that they are doing everything they can to support people in Argyll and Bute to access decent broadband or 4G capability. At the moment around 14% of premises in the area still require to be able to access broadband above the USO level.

We were reassured to hear of plans for action and investment to change that situation, working in partnership with both the UK and Scottish Governments. This is an issue on which we will continue to lobby and press for improvements and we will be monitoring progress.

Chief Executive's Briefing, 19th May: Group leaders had another opportunity to meet together with the Chief Executive on 19th May as part of their regular series of briefing sessions. This allowed them to discuss together the council's overall response to the Covid-19 pandemic as well as the Accounts Commission findings covered elsewhere in this report.

The session also offered an opportunity to consider budget pressures – notwithstanding the pandemic and, as is the case for all Scottish councils, there are significant financial challenges ahead for the foreseeable future. The impact of Covid-19 will inevitably add additional, most likely very significant, pressures. Work is ongoing at a national level in relation to the overall cost for councils alongside usual lobbying activity in relation to local government funding in general terms.

Chief Officers and Senior Officers Group (COSO) – 25th May:

With a workforce of several thousand operating in teams right across Argyll and Bute, it is important to bring people together when possible, to share ideas and look at ways of tackling particular challenges together. COSO is a means of doing that, on two or three occasions each year, but the Covid-19 pandemic makes bringing people together in person impossible.

We held a short virtual session on 25th May – a useful opportunity to touch base with staff from services across the council and to provide updates on the organisation's overall response to Covid-19. It also meant I could say thank-you directly to our staff who, working in partnership with other organisations and communities, are delivering a robust and often-swiftly-changing response to the pandemic. They are doing their jobs in very different ways – adapting to highly unusual and pressured circumstances – and, while some elements of our service have had to change, others have faced immense pressure and challenge. As restrictions ease and life begins to look a little more familiar in some ways, our teams are adapting and evolving to maintain or resume delivery of their core business in the best possible way – their contribution overall, like those of our fellow agencies, our communities and our volunteers, is invaluable.

Argyll and Bute Community Planning Partnership Management Committee,
3rd June:

The CPP Management Committee caught up as planned, albeit on Skype, on 3rd June.

We welcomed a new member to the committee – Stan Phillips, representing Scottish Natural Heritage.

Following brief updates from each partner about their agency's response and current position in relation to the coronavirus pandemic, we had a discussion on how it would impact us a partnership – for example, changing our priorities, affecting delivery of outcomes, any impact on individual agency priorities and how that would affect the partnership as a whole.

We also took a look ahead to recovery and how we will continue to work together in that specific context.

Leaving Covid-19 discussions, we had a presentation on suicide prevention from Alison McGrory, Public Health Lead in Argyll and Bute, and Supt Brian Gibson of Police Scotland. This is an issue of vital importance, exacerbated by the toll taken on mental health by the current pandemic, and it was helpful to consider it together as a partnership and look at the ways we can each play a part in tackling this challenge.

3.2 Rural Growth Deal:

Argyll and Bute's Rural Growth Deal is vital for our economic success – and will play a very significant role in recovery from the pandemic, not only within Argyll and Bute but contributing to the national economic strategy. Work on this continues apace; on 23rd April we had a useful update from our Economic Development team in relation to the Strategic Outline Cases which are submitted to government in relation to the different themes and projects of the Deal. Senior officers also took part in the Scottish City Region and Growth Deal Delivery Board meeting on 22nd May – another helpful opportunity to press Argyll and Bute's case and maintain momentum, as we seek to sign Heads of Terms this year.

Members may recall from my report to the April Business Continuity Committee that I had written to Baroness Annabel Goldie, the UK Government Minister with responsibility for Defence Matters, seeking an early discussion on some of the Deal aspects linked to defence. A teleconference was arranged for 6th May.

This was a productive and positive discussion and we have provided more detail about a number of aspects to Baroness Goldie's team. She indicated a willingness to have further discussions and, as we step up political engagement around the deal with both governments, this is very welcome. Her input in relation to the links between the Deal and the Strategic Delivery

and Development Framework (SDDF) partnership with the Ministry of Defence will be particularly useful. We also had an opportunity to hear how the MoD is progressing its accommodation project (for personnel and office workers) at a meeting of the SDDF Board on 13th May.

On 15th June I wrote to both the UK and Scottish Governments pressing for acceleration of our Rural Growth Deal, including a request to progress to signing of Heads of Terms as early as possible. Michael Matheson is the Scottish Government's ministerial lead for Growth Deals; we have had a number of positive discussions with him both by teleconference and in person over the development and submission of our Deal. Alistair Jack has been the Secretary of State for Scotland since the UK Government elections in December last year; while we have exchanged correspondence it has not been possible to meet with him directly or, of course, in the pandemic context, to welcome him to Argyll and Bute.

I have made it clear to both Governments that our Deal has a key role to play in the national economic recovery as well as bringing much needed transformational investment in Argyll and Bute – it links to key national priorities for both governments and can make a very significant contribution to their delivery. That is why we need to see it accelerated and momentum maintained – our officers have continued to work extremely hard with their counterpart officials at both governments to work up the project proposals and follow through the established Growth Deal process. On the political side we are maintaining contact and very proactively seeking engagement with both ministerial leads – we are determined to see the commitment made last year followed through to reality to deliver the success that Argyll and Bute wants and deserves.

3.3 Integration Joint Board and Health and Social Care Partnership:

My last report highlighted some of the changes at a senior level in NHS Highland. On 22nd April we held, via Skype, the second of this year's quarterly Joint Leadership meetings (bringing together senior representatives at political, board and officer level from the council, NHS Highland and the Health and Social Care Partnership). This provided an opportunity to meet with Paul Hawkins, the new Chief Executive of NHS Highland, and also to congratulate Boyd Robertson on his permanent appointment as NHS Highland Board chair.

Predominant on this agenda was the Covid-19 response and the impact on other health and social care services, and the findings of the Argyll and Bute Cultural Review, which arose from the Sturrock investigation into culture at NHS Highland.

NHS Highland also held a development session on 15th May for board and IJB members to explore the findings of the review in detail. While this did

not relate to council staff in particular, I know that the Chief Officer of the Health and Social Care Partnership has made a public commitment to all partnership staff to ensure that the culture and working environment continues to improve.

This important issue will feature as a standing item for future Joint Leadership meetings as the Partnership progresses its action plan.

While our most recent Joint Leadership meeting inevitably focused on Covid-19, in our programme for the rest of the year we will return to looking together at budget and also performance as well as the cultural review action plan noted above.

The Integration Joint Board met virtually on 27th May – agenda items included:

- Covid-19 Mobilisation Readiness Update and Look-Forward to Living and Operating with Covid-19
- Role of Public Health in Covid-19 Response
- Progress update on Sturrock Review Actions and Report on the Argyll and Bute Cultural Survey and plans for launch of healing process
- Employee/Staff Wellbeing and Resilience
- HR Resourcing
- Enhanced Care Home Assurance
- Budget monitoring and budget outlook for the HSCP
- Covid-19 Response and Financial Implications

3.4 Best Value Assurance

The Accounts Commission has now published its findings on Argyll and Bute's Best Value Assurance Report.

Members had an opportunity to consider the findings together at our first entirely virtual webinar on 5th May – a positive session which worked well and demonstrated how we as a council are adapting to doing business differently and ensuring we continue to take care of essential business despite the pandemic challenges.

The Accounts Commission met to consider our report on 7th May and, along with senior officers, I was able to observe (on a virtual basis) the discussion. These were largely positive and this is reflected in the published findings, which recognise the good progress we have made, our effective working relationships and sound approach to financial planning.

As for all Scottish councils there remain difficult challenges ahead – particularly with the added pressures of the Covid-19 pandemic – so we

must, as an organisation, build on all the good work we have done to drive forward improvement and continue to face up to difficult decisions which lie ahead.

Members will have an opportunity to consider the report and associated action plan at a special meeting of the council on 30th June, as the Best Value process requires, providing us with another opportunity to consider how we can carry on working together to use the report's recommendations to best effect and deliver for the communities we represent.

3.5 Ministerial Engagement:

Conference Call with Ben McPherson, 1st May:

Ben McPherson MSP is the Minister for Public Finance and Migration. He invited us to attend a conference call with other local authority leaders in relation to the various funding streams and business support mechanisms provided by the Scottish Government and administered by councils to mitigate against the impact of Covid-19.

As reported elsewhere, Argyll and Bute Council is performing well in terms of our administration of these support funds. Our average processing time of 6.2 days is well below the nationally-set ten-day target. We have approved 85% of applications – again well above the national average of 79% - and have distributed over £30m in support to businesses all over Argyll and Bute.

3.6 COSLA Meetings:

The normal COSLA meetings programme (including for its strategic boards) was initially suspended due to the Covid-19 pandemic and restrictions on travel and gatherings.

COSLA subsequently proposed alternative arrangements, calling a meeting on 17th April and outlining a programme of fortnightly virtual meetings with a particular focus on Scottish local government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Agenda details are listed below for each of the meetings that have taken place under the new arrangements.

17th April:

- Governance Arrangements for Leaders and Policy Board Meetings During Covid-19 Pandemic
- Finance Update
- Emergency Legislation – Education Closure Direction and Placing Requests
- Emergency Leave to Volunteer to Assist in NHS and Social Care
- Employability

- Vulnerable Communities
- Casual Workers

1st May:

- Finance Update
- Guidance for Direct Payments During COVID-19
- COSLA Nominations for Public Health Scotland
- Education Update
- Emergency Childcare Funding
- Information Dashboard
- Early Release of Prisoners
- Digital Exclusion – No One Left Behind Programme
- Unsuitable Accommodation Order
- Communications Update
- Distribution Update

15th May:

- Finance Update
- Distribution Update
- Education Update
- Recovery Special Interest Group TOR
- Social Care Provider Sustainability
- The Coronavirus (Scotland) (No.1) Bill – Monitoring Sections 16 and 17
- The Coronavirus (Scotland) (No.2) Bill – Amendment
- Test, Trace, Isolate and Support
- Emergency Childcare Funding
- Waste Update
- Supporting Communities Fund
- Spaces for People – Transport Scotland Funding Announcement
- Publication of Non Domestic Rates Grant Rejections
- Workforce Issues Group
- Introduction
- European Charter of Self-Government Bill – Update (paper)
- Spaces for People (paper)

29th May:

- Finance Update
- Historical Child Abuse Financial Redress Scheme
- COVID-19 Workforce Planning for HSC Workforce
- Vulnerable Children and Young People
- Education
 - a. Financial Implications of Education Recovery

- b. Guidance on Physical Distancing
- Test and Protect (Formerly TTIS)

12th June:

- Calendar of COSLA Meetings (proposing some specific meetings in July and resumption of normal programme from August)
- COVID-19 Related Consumer Issues
- Finance Update
- UK-EU Negotiations
- ELC Guidance
- Unaccompanied Children Seeking Asylum
- Social Care Support Fund, Enhanced Sick Pay and Death in Service
- Safer Workplaces Assurance Scheme
- Distribution
- Route map Phases: Local and National Decision Making

As you would expect in the current climate, finance is a recurring theme. COSLA is involved in a costs-collection exercise with local government to capture Covid-19 related expenditure and financial impacts. A recent focus was the £155m consequentials and passing those on in full to local government, as well as continuing to press the established COSLA position of lobbying for a fair funding settlement for local authorities.

COSLA Environment and Economy Board 5th June:

The COSLA policy and strategic board programme is reverting to usual business and the first meeting of the Environment and Economy Board took place on 5th June. Agenda items considered were:

- Covid-19 - Economic & Environmental Recovery and Renewal
- Covid-19 - Business Support Update
- Covid-19 - Employability Response
- Covid-19 - Waste Update
- Covid-19- Transport Update
- Covid-19 – Planning Update
- Europe and International Update

3.7 Other external activities:

Along with the Chief Executive I had an opportunity for a conference call with Carroll Buxton, Interim Chief Executive of Highlands and Islands Enterprise, on 23rd April. HIE are a key partner in the Rural Growth Deal and there has been change within the organisation following the retirement of the previous Board Chair Professor Lorne Crerar and the departure of Charlotte Wright, former Chief Executive. It was helpful to catch up with Carroll – I have also been in touch with the new Chair, Alistair Dodds, and hope to arrange a meeting with him very soon.

On 4th June, I spoke with Chief Superintendent John Paterson of Police Scotland, who is the Divisional Commander for Argyll and West Dunbartonshire. Our discussion inevitably focused on the current Covid-19 response and the areas where we are working together, as community planning partners, to promote guidance or ensure compliance with legislation. This was a positive session and plans are in place for a regular series of informal discussions or meetings moving forward.

With an increase in virtual meetings it has been possible to participate in a number of sessions which may not otherwise be possible due to practicalities. It has been helpful to attend various free webinars organised by organisations including the Improvement Service and others, focusing sometimes on Covid-19 issues but also on areas which link to the council's priorities as well as the 'new normal' post pandemic.

These include:

30th April: Improvement Service – *Reallocating road space for walking and cycling* – examining how Scotland could use temporary spaces for safer social distancing.

20th May: Improvement Service – *National Violence Against Women Guidance* – this session aimed to raise awareness of the heightened risk of domestic violence faced by women and children during lockdown, and to discuss ways that elected members can help ensure their meets are met safely.

22nd May: Economic Development Association Scotland – *Emerging Learning and Ideas for Restart and Recovery* – this session looked at skills and employability, urban and town centres and the rural economy, with workshops to discuss learning and ideas.

4th June: Royal Bank of Scotland – *From Resilience to Recovery* – hosted by Susan Fouquier, Business Banking MD, the webinar looked at how Covid-19 is reshaping the economy, society and behaviour as well as protection from fraud.

4. CONCLUSION

- 4.1** This report highlights the activities of the Leader of Argyll and Bute Council for the period from end March to 15th June 2020.

**Councillor Aileen Morton
Leader, Argyll and Bute Council**

15th June 2020

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