
24th September 2020

LEADER'S REPORT

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1** This report gives colleagues an update on my activities as Leader of Argyll and Bute Council and Policy Lead for Commercial Services and Strategic Priorities from the period 16th June to 7th September 2020. The last Leader's report was provided to council at its meeting in November 2019 and the next scheduled report would have been due at the April 2020 meeting. The Covid-19 pandemic and resulting impact on council meetings and business saw leadership activities for the period being reported to the Business Continuity Committee meetings on 16th April and 25th June.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1** Members are asked to consider the report.
- 2.2** Members are asked to note that additional detail on any particular items of interest can be obtained through Leadership Support staff. This includes COSLA and other papers and briefings as referenced in the report.

3. COUNCIL RESPONSE TO COVID-19

- 3.1** Reports on the council's overall response to the Covid-19 pandemic have featured previously at meetings of the Business Continuity Committee.

These reports have outlined a period of significant shift in council activity, where our own services had to change and where we were involved in providing very different services instead, tailored to the needs of an unprecedented pandemic. These have been well documented and include of course virtual learning for our school students, followed by preparation for students to return to school buildings after the summer, enhanced IT support to enable hundreds of employees to work from home, food parcels

for people who were shielding, a dedicated Coronavirus helpline covering all sorts of queries and issues relating to the pandemic and associated community needs, administering business support and providing guidance and enforcement of national restrictions in partnership with other agencies – and that is only scratching the surface!

At this point many of the services which we had to change or pause at the beginning of lockdown have been restored or are working back to pre-pandemic levels.

The officer and leadership groups which had to be established very early in the pandemic have, to a large extent, stood down as managing the pandemic response becomes very much embedded as 'business as usual'. The cross party Leadership Group set up to handle urgent decisions last met at the end of July although arrangements are in place to allow it to reconvene if required in the event of any urgent requirements.

The main elements of the council's Covid-19 related activity at this stage are economic recovery planning and activity; continued guidance and enforcement of restrictions; designing service delivery in response to changing restrictions, for example operation and management of committee and council business, the planning function, in-school learning, school and public transport, conducting weddings and burials; working in partnership where required with other agencies on test and protect regimes; and being ready to respond as required to any resurgence. Working at home remains the default position for those staff who can and, of course, meetings have continued on a virtual basis, largely working very well.

Sincere thanks are due to all those who have been involved in our overall response to this incredibly challenging time. We have seen tremendous examples of community spirit, of partnership working, of innovation and adaptability, despite the very serious impacts on our daily lives and on how we work as an organisation. I know that our officers are looking to see how we can continue some of the unexpectedly positive elements that have surfaced during this time.

4. CLIMATE CHANGE AGENDA

- 4.1 Climate Change Environmental Action Group, 7th September:** The latest meeting of the CCEAG considered some of the short term impacts that Covid-19 has had in terms of climate change activity. This included discussion on the impact on individual carbon footprint data and reduction in emissions due to reduced travel. A further update will come back on this and also in relation to a strategy for disposal of PPE waste.

The council's action plans and indicators were updated in relation to Covid-19 effects and reported to the group. They also considered the council's proposed Decarbonisation Plan 2021, and this will feature again at the group's next meeting in November. The group should be reporting to the November council meeting with recommendations on how we should move forward towards net-zero CO2 emissions.

5. COSLA LEADERS MEETINGS

- 5.1** As highlighted in the Leadership reports to the Business Continuity Committee, the frequency of COSLA Leaders meetings was changed to fortnightly during the Covid-19 pandemic, although it was agreed in June that this would revert to the normal monthly cycle thereafter.

Meetings attended during this period considered the following topics. Reports and briefings from our officers can be provided by Leadership Support staff:

26th June

- Finance Update
- Distribution
- Digital Exclusion
- Monitoring of the Coronavirus Act
- Local Government Economic and Employability Recovery Position
- Education Update

31st July

- Local Government Finance
- Update from National Clinical Director
- Distribution
- An Employment Response to Covid-19
- EU Fund Suspension and Replacement
- Education Recovery
- Early Learning and Childcare Financial Sustainability
- Community Mental Health Support for Children and Young People
- Health and Social Care Provider Sustainability
- Social Renewal
- Update on Historical Child Abuse Redress Scheme
- National Suicide Prevention Leadership Group Recommendations
- Sports, Art and Culture

28th August

- Covid-19 Recovery and Prioritisation of Business
- Face Coverings in Schools and on School Transport
- Local Government Finance
- Social Care Sustainability
- National Digital Strategy
- Blueprint for Local Government
- UK-EU Negotiations
- European Charter of Local Self Government (Incorporation) (Scotland) Members' Bill
- Lone Working Guidance
- Community Mental Health Support for Children and Young People
- Distribution

6. HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS ENTERPRISE – CALL WITH NEW BOARD CHAIR, 23RD JULY

- 6.1** Following the retirement of Professor Lorne Crerar, Alistair Dodds was appointed as Chair of the Highlands and Islands Enterprise Board. On 23rd July we had the opportunity for an introductory call with Mr Dodds, HIE Chief Executive Charlotte Wright and local area manager Morag Goodfellow. We were able to share updates on our current priorities with, of course, a focus on the response to Covid-19 and the associated economic challenges for the region. We also covered potential for joint priorities for action such as through our Rural Growth Deal as well as how we can continue to engage and work in partnership on areas like depopulation and fragility given the challenges we all face following the pandemic. This was a positive session and follow-up correspondence has continued; this kind of collaboration will serve Argyll and Bute well as we focus on recovery.

7. INTEGRATION JOINT BOARD/HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE PARTNERSHIP

- 7.1 IJB meeting, 5th August:** The scheduled Integration Joint Board meeting took place on 5th August. I had an opportunity to catch up informally with Boyd Robertson, NHS Highland Board Chair, the day before the meeting and to hear an update on NHS Highland's recruitment of a new Chief Executive and plans for Board Member recruitment.

Agenda items at the board meeting were:

- Chief Officer's Report
- Covid-19 Public Health Update
- HSCP Performance Exception Report FQ4

- Culture Programme Update
- Staff Governance FQ4 and FQ1
- Finance – Budget Monitoring and Budget Outlook to 23/24
- Financial Risks 20/21
- Covid-19 Response and Financial Implications

I also had the opportunity to catch up with the council's new Chief Social Worker, Julie Lusk, at the start of September to discuss current areas of priority and recent developments, including the impact of the Covid-19 response on social work services, the restructure of the HSCP management team and the role of the CSWO in reviewing and managing guardianship orders.

8. RURAL GROWTH DEAL

- 8.1** Pressing ahead with our Rural Growth Deal has always been a key priority for this council and particularly so in the overall context of economic recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic.

There have been a number of internal meetings over the past months. As part of our engagement with national governments, Council officers have submitted a number of projects that could potentially be advanced to assist with economic recovery. No council, including Argyll and Bute, has yet received a response to date in terms of specific requests.

Political engagement with both the UK and Scottish Governments remains a key priority, particularly in order to secure signing of Heads of Terms as quickly as possible. The Business Continuity Committee agreed at its meeting on 11th June that I should write again to both governments seeking to accelerate progress. I wrote to both Alister Jack, Secretary of State for Scotland, and Michael Matheson, Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity, as the Lead Ministers, on 15th June, following my correspondence to each in both January and March of this year.

We have been advised by the Scottish and UK Governments that it is likely that Heads of Terms will be signed in winter 2020, with an initial target of November. Both governments have committed to providing all necessary feedback on our project Strategic Outline Cases by mid/late September 2020. The council continues to work with our partners and other key stakeholders to advance projects on a collective basis and there are a number of feasibility studies on-going which will inform the development of Outline Business Cases, for example the energy options study for Islay.

I have also received a letter from Baroness Annabel Goldie, the Minister of State for Defence, on 20th August, following a call with her and her officials on 6th May. Baroness Goldie welcomed our proactive approach to her and indicated that she wishes to maintain momentum and build up the relationship with the council. She reiterated in her letter that our Deal has her full support and that she particularly wishes to see opportunities and potential realised through joint working with the Royal Navy through the Maritime Enterprise Scotland concept.

9. A83 REST AND BE THANKFUL

9.1 Argyll and Bute Council Approach to First Minister, 5th August 2020:

Following a significant landslide at the A83 Rest and Be Thankful and indications of a possible prolonged closure, I wrote again to the First Minister seeking the Scottish Government's commitment to finding, once and for all, a permanent solution for the route. This was the latest in a series of communications to the Scottish Government over the years (including one to the First Minister just six months ago, when a landslide closed the road in January of this year). I repeated the message that we simply need the Scottish Government to get a move on so that Argyll and Bute can keep moving, after sustaining over a decade of disruption.

9.2 United Call for Action, 7th August 2020: Following discussions with the council's own political group leaders and Michael Russell, I wrote a further letter to the Scottish Government on behalf of our cross-party leaders and both constituency MSPs Michael Russell and Jackie Baillie. We pointed out in our joint letter, signed by all parties, that the single issue that never fails to unite politicians of all persuasions is the A83 and ensuring that Argyll and Bute remains connected and open for business via a permanent, robust solution for the A83. We called for an urgent meeting of the A83 Taskforce to be convened, given the prolonged closure and impact on people's work, lives and business, and set out a proposed timescale, developed in partnership with our MSPs, the key element of this being the identification and confirmation of the nature of a permanent solution by March 2021 and completion of construction by the end of 2023 at the latest.

9.3 A83 Taskforce Meeting, 27th August 2020: The Scottish Government responded to this call for action and convened an urgent, virtual meeting of the Taskforce on 27th August. The meeting was attended by several local businesses and community representatives and was chaired by Cabinet Secretary Michael Matheson. Mr Matheson confirmed at the meeting that the Scottish Government had listened to our calls and would commit to finding a permanent solution. We welcome this as a clear step in the right direction but continue to urge further commitment to the urgent delivery of a solution.

We are relieved there is now a recognised case for investment along with a continuation of temporary mitigation measures, as we need to move beyond these measures. We continue to make clear, though, that Argyll and Bute needs clear construction timescales and a date for the new route to open. It is simply not enough to talk about the options and agree a consultation phase. These early signs are encouraging but we must see swift progress maintained until the new route is fully operational.

I heard most recently from Mr Matheson when he replied to my follow-up correspondence, after the Taskforce meeting, on 4th September and said: "I reassure you that your call for action is heard and I am committed to infrastructure investment, to address the region's challenges and will publish recommendations for the preferred corridor in this parliamentary term."

10. SCOTTISH MARITIME CLUSTER AND MARINE RECOVERY PLAN

10.1 Meeting with Scottish Maritime Cluster Executive Director Brian Fulton, 10th August: The Scottish Maritime Cluster was set up following the UK Marine Growth programme in 2016, which recognised the value of the Maritime sector to the Scottish and UK economy as a whole. The cluster comprises of leading companies in shipping, ship management, ship building, marine equipment, maritime legal services, ferry services and marine leisure. The main purpose of the Cluster is to promote the Scottish Maritime sector within the UK and internationally.

On 9th June 2020, Maritime UK launched its 'Maritime Sector Recovery Plan' in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. An electronic copy is available via the following link: <https://www.maritimeuk.org/programmes/maritime-sector-recovery-plan/>

The maritime industry is vital to the economic prosperity of Scotland and is one of the driving forces of the British economy, having helped to keep Scotland and the rest of the UK fed, fuelled and supplied during the pandemic. It has a key part to play in the economic recovery that everyone wants to see as quickly as possible. In Scotland the sector is worth over £3.7billion GVA to the economy and supports some 41,000 jobs.

This was an opportunity for the Cluster to brief the council on its work and identify potential areas of overlap with our own activity, and I know that our Economic Development officers will continue to liaise with Brian and his team over the coming months and as we look forward to recovery.

11. ACCOUNTS COMMISSION – BEST VALUE 3 AUDIT, 18TH AUGUST

11.1 On 18th August, along with the Chief Executive and Depute Leader, I met online with representatives of the Accounts Commission, for a discussion about the council's Best Value 3 Audit. Members will recall that the Audit Scotland report and the council's associated Action Plan were reported to the Business Continuity Committee in June.

This was a positive, informative and helpful discussion and the Accounts Commission welcomed in particular discussion about the approach to working with all members in relation to budget and transformation, and the council's ambition to build on the rapid changes made in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The session also offered us an opportunity to provide feedback on the Best Value Audit process itself.

12. BUDGET WORKING GROUPS

12.1 Cross-party budget working groups were established at the Business Continuity Committee August meeting – an informal group focusing on the 20/21 period and the impact of the pandemic, and an additional group to look at longer term financial planning. The first meeting took place on 24th August and officers have been asked to do further work on proposals and budget planning – this will be the focus of a future members seminar as part of the overall budget process for this year. An interim update on the 20/21 budget position is included separately on the agenda for this meeting.

13. COSLA ENVIRONMENT AND ECONOMY BOARD, 4TH SEPTEMBER

13.1 The COSLA Environment and Economy Board meetings resumed for the year with this first post-lockdown session on 4th September, where the following topics were discussed:

- North Ayrshire Council – presentation on Community Wealth Building
- Verbal update on Broadband
- Waste Update
- Transport
- European and International Update

14. EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RECRUITMENT, AUGUST 2020

14.1 The pandemic put a pause on the process to recruit a new Executive Director with responsibility for Development and Infrastructure, following the promotion of Pippa Milne to Chief Executive at the beginning of the year. On 13th and 14th August it was possible to resume the process for this key post within the organisation. A very strong field of candidates

applied for the job, no doubt attracted by the real opportunities it offers in a great place to live, work and visit. After this very competitive process it was a real pleasure to see Kirsty Flanagan appointed to the role. Kirsty is one of Argyll and Bute Council's 'Growing Our Own' success stories; having started as a clerical assistant after school, she studied for accountancy qualifications, after qualifying progressing through various roles in the Strategic Finance team before being appointed as Head of Service and Section 95 Officer. She had been providing cover in the Director role on an acting-up basis during the challenging pandemic period and it is to her credit that she fought off such stiff competition to be appointed to the substantive role.

15. MEETING WITH ARGYLL COLLEGE UHI, 25TH AUGUST

- 15.1** The Chief Executive and I were delighted to catch up with Martin Jones, Principal of Argyll College UHI, on 25th August. This was a very positive discussion about the potential for greater co-operation and a shared approach to education for Argyll and Bute's secondary age pupils. We also covered the need for substantial capital investment in the college's estate across Argyll and Bute, to ensure equity and fairness for our residents who want to be able to live and learn in their communities. This responsibility sits with the University of the Highlands and Islands and it's likely that we will have further discussions with the college to see how this might be progressed along with scope for partnership working where possible.

16. CONCLUSION

- 16.1** This report highlights my recent activities as Leader of Argyll and Bute Council. I hope that this update is helpful for members and will be happy to provide more information wherever possible.

Councillor Aileen Morton - Leader, Argyll and Bute Council

15th September 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