
26th November 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 the Economy and Rural Growth since appointment by council on 24th September 2020.

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.

The situation continues to develop quickly and on 23rd October, the Scottish Government published its Strategic Framework – the national approach to suppression of the Covid-19 virus. This included a tier system, agreed by Parliament on 27th October and which saw each local authority area in Scotland put into a particular 'tier' based on case levels and a range of other factors. Each tier is subject to varying levels of restrictions.

Argyll and Bute was put into Tier 2 with the associated restrictions starting from Monday 2nd November. In the lead-up to this, all Scottish local authorities had an opportunity to discuss the approach at a national level through COSLA and also through telephone calls with Scottish ministers.

I spoke with Aileen Campbell MSP, Minister for Communities and Local Government, firstly on 27th October as part of a Highlands and Islands local authority Leaders group call, and then individually the following day.

At both calls I advised that local communities across the area are questioning the scope for more localised arrangements, particularly where case levels are very low or non-existent, given the impact on the economy. Ms Campbell highlighted that the decisions about local tier levels are based on a variety of matters (such as available medical services) and do not only relate to infection rates. While she would not commit to agreeing localised arrangements at this point, she did say that this would be kept under consideration.

Members will recall from previous Leadership reports earlier in the lockdown period that frequent cross-party Leadership calls were held to consider any urgent updates and issues related to the coronavirus pandemic. With the announcement of the tier system, a Leadership call was convened on 29th October, and arrangements are in hand to resume more frequent calls immediately should circumstances require it.

4. JOINT LEADERSHIP MEETING, 30th September 2020

- 4.1** One of my first engagements as Leader after appointment was to attend the quarterly (and virtual) Joint Leadership meeting on 30th September. This programme of meetings brings together the senior management and political leadership of NHS Highland, the council and the Health and Social Care Partnership.

Standing agenda items are finance, performance and workforce matters, alongside of course the Covid-19 response. This Autumn meeting gave me an opportunity to speak with the new Chief Executive of NHS Highland, Pamela Dudek, who formally took up post in early October.

We have another session in diaries for 17th November and all involved feel it is important to continue meeting together on a quarterly basis and to focus on those core issues of workforce and finance, given the high profile issues of budget challenges and the ongoing work on culture.

5. KERRERA FERRY SERVICES – ministerial engagement, September to November 2020

- 5.1** Local members in the Oban, South and the Isles ward highlighted to me the need for urgent ministerial engagement when it was confirmed that the privately operated ferry service which serves the north end of Kerrera would cease on 1st October.

Access between the north and south ends of the island is challenging and the community have been working for some time on proposals for a connection between both sides, supported by the council in the form of feasibility and design work. Islanders have been exploring funding options which would permit an upgrade of the currently impassable track.

The south end of the island continues to benefit from a ferry service operated by Calmac. I have been in correspondence with Paul Wheelhouse, Minister for Connectivity and Islands, given Transport Scotland's overarching responsibility for delivery of lifeline ferry services. There is no quick or easy solution which will meet all of the community's aspirations and which can be realistically put in place given the available infrastructure. We have asked that Transport Scotland explore expanding the south end service to include a pick-up/drop-off at the north end and have also asked for clarity on funding sources which could be made available to the island community to progress their track upgrade solution.

I spoke with Mr Wheelhouse again on 10th November about the issue and by the time of the council meeting should have a further update on progress, as more discussions will be required with the Minister as well as engagement between our officer and Scottish Government officials.

6. A83 REST AND BE THANKFUL

- 6.1** The A83 Rest and Be Thankful continues to feature heavily with the Transport Scotland consultation on corridor options concluding at the end of October.

Members had an opportunity to consider the eleven options put forward by Transport Scotland at a webinar on 5th October, followed by a report and consultation response considered by the council at its special meeting on 22nd October.

In its response, the council has indicated that its preferred route corridor is that outlined in Option 1. We have been clear that time is of the essence when it comes to identifying and, more importantly, delivery of the permanent solution and we will continue to engage with the Scottish Government on this, including pressing for representation on any

governance arrangements or body put in place to oversee implementation of this major infrastructure project.

7. PARTNERSHIP WORKING – KEY COMMUNITY PLANNING PARTNERS

- 7.1** I had an introductory call with Superintendent John Paterson of Police Scotland and Joe MacKay of Scottish Fire and Rescue, along with our Chief Executive, on 20th October. This was a useful initial discussion and all of us expressed a willingness to continue these regular, informal discussions to support our ongoing partnership working. We are working with their offices to identify a programme of discussions for the next year, to give each of us an opportunity to highlight any challenges or opportunities. I am always happy to hear from members about any strategic issues related to police or fire services in Argyll and Bute and which they feel would be helpful to raise at future discussions.

Highlands and Islands Enterprise: On 12th November I had the opportunity to speak with Alistair Dodds, Chair of the Highlands and Islands Enterprise Board, Charlotte Wright, HIE Chief Executive and Morag Goodfellow, HIE Regional Manager for Argyll and Bute. Once again this was an introductory meeting for me and one which built on the work started by Cllr Aileen Morton. We were able to talk about a number of matters including the Rural Growth Deal, further education provision, the Programme for Government, following up from the Convention of the Highlands and Islands meeting and various other issues. Again we aim to continue these regular discussions especially given the impact of Covid on the economy and the enhanced significance of working in partnership towards recovery and to build up resilience.

8. VISIT TO DUNBEG HOUSING DEVELOPMENT, 23rd October 2020

On 23rd October, joined by local members and officers, I met with Macleod Construction, West Highland Housing Association and Link Housing Association at the Dunbeg housing development site outside Oban for an external and socially distanced tour of the site.



My interest in housing is well known and I was very impressed by this development which will provide hundreds of much-needed affordable homes for the Oban area, enabling the growth potential which the area is demonstrating.

The development is designed to encourage and support a sense of community with careful use of shared spaces. There will be a mix of attractive homes and apartments available when construction is complete and many of them have outstanding views over to the neighbouring islands.



Local contractors are being used where possible and the development is therefore contributing to the local economy and employment levels at a very challenging time, as well as providing housing opportunities for the future. It is a great example of what we can achieve working in partnership and I look forward to seeing these new homes complete and being lived in in due course.

9. CONVENTION OF THE HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS, 26th October 2020

9.1 The plan for at least a year or two had been for Argyll and Bute Council to take its turn at hosting the Convention of the Highlands and Islands Autumn 2020 session, with plans to welcome ministers and officials to Kintyre. The Covid-19 pandemic dictated otherwise and COHI was therefore arranged, for the first time, on a virtual basis, bringing together Scottish ministers, local authority leaders from the region and officials from the Government and member councils.

Agenda topics were:

- Review of previous outcomes
- Covid-19 – regional impacts and economic recovery
- Building a greener economy
- Community wealth building
- Population and fragile communities
- Gaelic
- Replacement of the European Structural and Investment Funds (ESIF) post EU exist
- Update of COHI and transformational projects – spotlight on digital
- Outcomes

We are awaiting the final outcomes from the Scottish Government.

10. ISLANDS STRATEGIC GROUP, 29th October 2020

10.1 The Scottish Government's Islands Strategic Group met on 29th October.

Agenda topics were:

- Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 – Update - Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands
- Island Communities Impact Assessments (ICIAs)
- National Islands Plan and Recovery Planning
- Islands Funding
- Localised COVID measures and the impact of restrictions on Islands - Professor Jason Leitch, National Clinical Director

The session with Professor Leitch was particularly useful given the announcement at the time about local authority tier levels and afforded another opportunity to press the case at a national level for changes to levels should the evidence support it.

11. HM FIRE SERVICE INSPECTORATE DISCUSSION, 5th November 2020

- 11.1** Scottish Fire and Rescue advised in August that there would be a Local Inspection of Service Delivery in Argyll and Bute as part of a national programme of inspections.

I was invited to speak with Simon Routh-Jones, Chief Inspector and Graeme Fraser, Assistant Inspector at HM Fire Service Inspectorate on 5th November. This discussion was part of the inspection's fieldwork phase and its aim was to evaluate the scrutiny and support aspect of fire service provision locally.

Both myself and Cllr McNeilly as chair the Chair of the Community Services Committee (as the relevant scrutiny body) are of the view that both organisations engage very positively and productively with us, and I was happy to confirm that to the inspectors.

12. CLYDE FISHERMAN'S ASSOCIATION, 10th November 2020

- 12.1** Clyde Fisherman's Association asked to meet with myself and the Chief Executive on 10th November to discuss a range of issues affecting the sector, including the forthcoming exit from the European Union and the potential impact.

This was a really helpful discussion about one of Argyll and Bute's oldest traditional industries which is facing a number of challenges but which could also bring a number of opportunities back to the area.

Some of the challenges include an aging fleet and workforce, attracting young people into the industry and provision of training in the local area. Another issue is availability of processing facilities for locally caught shellfish and other products. While they were highlighting challenges, the Association is solutions-focused and keen to work in partnership where possible, and we will be holding further discussions and looking to engage with other partners who can potentially contribute to developing solutions for some of these issues. I did have an opportunity to raise this with HIE at the call on 12th November which is noted at paragraph 7.1.

13. COSLA MEETINGS, OCTOBER AND NOVEMBER 2020

13.1 I have attended a number of COSLA meetings since appointment to the Leader role in September. These are listed below:

COSLA Leaders, 30th October: COSLA Leaders met on 30th October on a virtual basis and considered the following agenda items:

- EU Exit
- Social Renewal Advisory Board Update
- Trauma Informed Workforce Elected Members Briefing
- COSLA Conference 2021
- Local Government Finance
- Independent Review of Adult Social Care
- Delay to Devolving Non Domestic Rates Empty Property Relief
- Local Government Pension Scheme – Addressing Age Discrimination Consultation
- Local Government Settlement and Distribution

COSLA Convention, 30th October:

- Public Health Scotland update and opportunities for Local Government
- COSLA Audited Financial Statements to year end 31st March 2020
- COSLA Constitution update
- Scottish Local Government – Future International Engagement
- COSLA Spokepersons' Updates
- COSLA Priorities Update

COSLA Community Wellbeing Board, 6th November:

- Sportscotland presentation
- Mental Health Transition and Recovery Plan
- Consultation responses – Short Term Lets and Local Connections
- Unsuitable Accommodation Guidance
- Armed Forces Covenant Legislation
- Scottish Welfare Fund update
- Sustaining a No-Charge Policy for Child Burials and Cremations
- Improving the Lives of Gypsy Travellers
- 16 Days of Activism against Gender Based Violence programme
- Community Safety, Protection and Policing update

14. POLICY LEAD FOR THE ECONOMY AND RURAL GROWTH

14.1 The Economy and Rural Growth: The Covid-19 pandemic continues to impact on economic and social recovery. Employment levels have stabilised although unemployment is still higher than before the implementation of the lockdown. We continue to monitor the data to inform our conversation with national government on how they can assist the economic recovery of our area.

Council officers continue to work with other public agencies, the third and private sectors to understand the impacts and ensure as much as they can business survival during this difficult time. With a significant number of workers in Argyll and Bute still being furloughed it is welcome that the UK Chancellor has extended this scheme until the end of March 21 as this could help reduce the increase of unemployment in our area. Council officers are also taking forward the agreed Economic Recovery actions approved by the BCC in August and administer Government business support schemes that are aligned to the Government's Tier system.

We are continuing to engage with the Scottish Government regarding our population challenges. The government has reconvened its population taskforce looking at the population and demographic issues facing Scotland including Argyll and Bute. A number of key themes are being looked at including better digital connectivity, job opportunity and economic function together with the availability of affordable housing and other types of key economic infrastructure such as roads, ferries and availability of healthcare. The impacts of the pandemic are also being considered as part of this initiative and it is intended that a consultation on a forthcoming population strategy will be coming forward in the next few months.

The council has made clear its view on the preferred options for the Rest and Be Thankful. As the road continues to be disrupted by the weather it is more important than ever that the Scottish Government quickly moves forward on delivery a permanent solution within the option 1 corridor. The council will continue to press for this and lobby government for further transport investment through the STPR2 process that has recommenced after a pause during the pandemic.

Work continues on our Rural Growth Deal with a recent Programme Board agreeing the key project themes that the council will present to both Governments to deliver a Heads of Terms before Christmas. The RGD will be an important part of our economic and social recovery building upon previous and current investments implemented by the council and our partners. I have also written to Alister Jack, Secretary of State for

Scotland, to indicate our ambition to sign Heads of Terms as soon as possible.

14.2 Housing:

Strategic Housing Investment Plan (SHIP): Argyll Community Housing Association took handover of five affordable housing units at Cairnbaan, Mid Argyll on Friday 2nd October. The development consists of two 2-bedroom properties, two 3-bedroom properties and one 4-bedroom property.



Home Energy Efficiency Programme Scotland (HEEPS): HEEPS:ABS has now fully resumed and is on site with the 2019/20 programme due to complete 31st October. The programme is committed for works for 2020/21 and will continue across Argyll and Bute.

ACHA Warmer Homes programme is on site at multiple locations across Oban installing external wall insulation to common blocks. This work is focussed on mixed tenure blocks with £1,009,125 of HEEPS: ABS funded works to be completed by 31st October. Argyll and Bute Council accessed additional funding from the Scottish Government for additional funds to continue the project in to the 2020/21 programme. There has been interest from wholly privately owned blocks in getting similar works done and work is ongoing to engage with private owners. These works feed into wider economic recovery at this time.



Private Sector Housing Grants works are now fully underway across all areas. Main recipients remain statutory grant applicants for disabled adaptations. Works are often undertaken by local contractors and again this work feeds into economic recovery for the area.

Local Housing Strategy: We received over 1100 responses to the initial Local Housing Strategy survey which closed on 21st August. The majority of responses came from members of the public. It was encouraging to see such a high level of interest in housing from the residents of Argyll and Bute. The headline issues are as follows:

- 82% of respondents said affordability was the top housing system characteristic.
- 45% of respondents said that the greatest challenge is the shortage of social rented housing.
- 76% of respondents stated that the biggest impact of COVID will be that incomes reduce as the economy slows down

A Stakeholder meeting has been arranged for 25th November which will be held through Microsoft Teams.

Homelessness: The Council continues to provide a 24 hour a day, 7 days a week 365 day a year response to homelessness. Housing Services are working in partnership with the Housing Associations across the local authority area to ensure that statutory homeless households are given suitable permanent housing. There have been 99 permanent lets to homeless households since lockdown in March.

14.3 Roads and Infrastructure Services: The last few months as Policy Lead for Roads and Infrastructure were dominated of course by the Covid-19 response and teams from the service were involved in a number of aspects of the response as well as keeping front line services running. This included:

- A number of staff involved in the planning and delivery of food parcels to the vulnerable
- Roadworkers helping with bin collections
- Staff training for grave digging duties to provide more resilience
- Measure shoving been put in place quickly to enable Household Waste Recycling Centre to reopen in line with Scottish Government guidelines

14.4 Islands: Following the launch of the Islands Communities Impact Assessment Guidance (ICIA) consultation the council considered and approved their response to the consultation at the Special Council meeting on Thursday 22 October. This item was also discussed at the meeting of the Islands Sounding Board on Thursday 5th November.

14.5 Gaelic: On 20th October I was invited to take part in a discussion with John Swinney, Deputy First Minister, on Gaelic in our communities. Mr Swinney has a particular interest in Gaelic and has of course attended Argyll and Bute's own Gaelic Gathering in the past. He was keen to hear about work going on to promote Gaelic and about any other projects or initiatives that could help see Gaelic more used in local communities. This was a positive and interesting discussion and, as always, I welcome and share Mr Swinney's interest and enthusiasm for the development of Gaelic.

15. CONCLUSION

15.1 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 Robin Currie - Leader, Argyll and Bute Council

12th November 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