
15th April 2021

LEADER'S REPORT

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1** The Leader of the Council and Policy Lead Councillors provide a report outlining their strategic activities for consideration at each meeting of Argyll and Bute Council, except the budget meeting in February. The last Leader's Report and Policy Leads Report were considered at the council meeting on 26th November 2020. This report covers the period from that date until 1st April 2021.
- 1.2** The report includes an outline of the council Leader's activity during the period, and includes updates in relation to his Policy Lead portfolio.

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. COSLA LEADERS MEETINGS

- 3.1** Like the council, COSLA has been holding its meetings on a virtual basis since the start of lockdown in March 2020. This has meant it has been possible for COSLA to call a number of additional Special Leaders meetings at short notice to deal with matters of significance – including, for example, new government funding streams for business support or the national budget setting process. Meetings are listed below in date order along with agenda topics considered – if anyone wants more detail, please contact Leadership Support.

27th November 2020: Green Growth Accelerator; Scottish Government Population Strategy; Supporting People at Risk of Redundancy; Finance and Distribution; National Performance Framework; EU Exit; Covid-19 impact on delayed discharges; Exam Diet; Scottish Milk and Healthy Snacks Scheme.

11th December 2020: Replacement of EU Structural Funds; Finance and Distribution; Early Learning and Childcare, including Funding in the Deferred Year; Joint Investigative Interviewing of Children in Scotland; Recovery Special Interest Group – Lessons Learned; National Performance Framework.

20th December 2020: This special meeting was called for Sunday 20th December following the First Minister's significant announcement and changes to restrictions following the discovery of a new Covid-19 strain.

29th January 2021: National Care Home Contract; Population Strategy; Social Renewal Advisory Board; Participatory Budgeting; National Task Force on Human Rights Leadership; Suicide Prevention Guidance; Migration from Hong Kong to Scotland; UK/EU Post Transition; Finance; Business Grants; Return to In School Learning.

10th February 2021: Feeley Report, Independent Review of Adult Social Care in Scotland. There are considerable concerns amongst Scottish local authorities about the recommendations contained within the report about removing democratic accountability from local government and centralising services. I wrote to our constituency MSPs, Michael Russell and Jackie Baillie, asking them to take every opportunity to make the case for keeping local authorities at the forefront of this vital service delivery.

26th February 2021: A lengthy agenda which included a number of follow-up discussions on previous topics like National Performance Framework and other key issues like the Councillors Code of Conduct; Recycling Improvement Fund; Historical Child Abuse Inquiry Redress Scheme; Digital Strategy for Scotland, and Elections during Covid.

12th March 2021: Local Government Finance; Pay Claims; Tackling Poverty – Low Income Pandemic Payments; Elections; Funding Follows the Child; Improving Lives of Gypsy Travellers – Capital Fund for Accommodation.

26th March 2021: Local Government Finance; Pay Negotiations Update; Distribution.

3.2 Rural Growth Deal: Our Rural Growth Deal took a huge step forward when we signed Heads of Terms – virtually – on 11th February 2021.

In normal circumstances we would have welcomed ministers from both the Scottish and UK Governments to Argyll and Bute – taking the opportunity to showcase some of the opportunities and challenges that this £70million-plus investment will help to address. However, thanks to technology, we did not have to allow lockdown restrictions to hamper progress and we joined Michael Matheson, Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity at the Scottish Government, and UK Government Minister Iain Stewart MP.



Securing the Deal is the result of many years of hard work and effort, both from our officers who have developed themes, projects and business cases and have diligently forged relationships with partners, and from councillors past and present who have lobbied government relentlessly to commit to the investment that Argyll and Bute deserves. It is a privilege to be part of that team effort and to have the honour of signing the Heads of Terms which is such a massive leap forward in terms of the process.

Thanks are due also to the council officers and government officials who worked behind the scenes to install, prepare and test the technology – as a result of their efforts this high profile virtual event went very smoothly indeed.

The signing came just three days after another significant vote of confidence in Argyll and Bute: a £4.5m investment by Highlands and Islands Enterprise in developing and expanding the European Marine Science Park at Dunstaffnage. This is a major component in the Rural Growth Deal and complements other investments in the area including the significant housing development at Dunbeg and associated construction jobs.

3.3 Housing:

Housing remains part of my Policy Lead portfolio and I have attended a number of key events, again held virtually, during the period covered by this report.

On 4th December, we held a Housing Services Review Day. My interest in and commitment to housing matters is well known and so this was a particularly useful and interesting day for me, offering an opportunity to consider and discuss with partners all aspects of housing services as well as a look ahead to the future of housing in Argyll and Bute and what needs to be delivered.

In normal circumstances this council would have a strong showing at the Scottish Empty Homes Conference and annual awards – our track record in bringing empty properties back to life as affordable homes is well established and we have a lot of knowledge and experience to offer on the national stage. This year the conference still managed to go ahead – on a virtual basis, of course! I had an opportunity to record a short video welcome for the conference in advance in January– another way of making technology work for us in challenging and unusual circumstances – and managed to join in some of the sessions on conference day itself, 4th February. The awards ceremony was a must-see as one of our housing team, Aileen Semple, was shortlisted for the Inspiring Young Professional Award. Aileen has done incredibly well to be shortlisted and I am quite sure we will see her on the winners list in future – well done.

The Strategic Housing Forum took place on 4th March featuring the usual updates from Registered Social Landlord (RSL) partners and an overview of the Housing Service's performance.

3.4 Gaelic:

I was delighted to receive an invitation from Depute First Minister, John Swinney, to attend an initial Gaelic summit on 17th December. Mr Swinney wanted to open up discussions on developing Gaelic further, particularly in island communities. This was a really positive session and we had a follow-up discussion on 1st February. It was great to have an opportunity to speak with some of the cross-party MSPs from other areas in Scotland, where Gaelic thrives, and to share ideas and practice.

Plans for the next Argyll and Bute Gaelic Gathering are also underway; a working group has been established and this meets on a regular basis. The inaugural gathering was attended by Mr Swinney and his interest is welcome, I am sure that our plans to keep the gathering going will help to contribute to the ongoing national dialogue that he has started about developing and sustaining the language across Scotland.

3.5 Climate change and environmental matters:

Doing business digitally and reduced travelling time does open up new opportunities as well as helping the overall carbon footprint. Early in the year I received a number of invitations to virtual round table events focusing on environmental issues and sustainability, including a look ahead to Glasgow COP26 in November (when Glasgow hosts the United Nations Climate Change Conference).

On 25th January the SSE Round Table on COP26 took place. Discussion themes were:

- With less than a year to go until the conference, what advances in policy are required to accelerate Scotland's net zero transition and enable a green economic recovery ahead of COP26?
- What more can Scotland do to inspire positive action and change around the world as a global leader in low-carbon energy projects and initiatives?
- How do we ensure that COP26 not only delivers success on the international stage with regards to policy commitments, but leaves a lasting positive legacy for people in Scotland

This was an interesting session and helps us to think about what we need to do in Argyll and Bute to contribute to overall outcomes and goals. Closer to home was the Developing Islay's Energy Strategy Stakeholder Event on 24th February.

The session aimed to explore with members of the community and other island stakeholders why an integrated approach to the development of the island's future energy system is important and how working together we can agree a common vision. Alongside a number of local speakers from Islay Energy Trust and local distilleries was a keynote speech from Paul Wheelhouse, Minister for Islands and Connectivity.

Climate change remains a focus for us ever since it featured in the council's priorities, developed and agreed in 2017. That is why we were keen to ensure that our budget included a significant investment in climate change measures and active travel, and officers are working on progressing that investment at pace. I am aware that climate change is of significant interest to our communities and hope to be able to meet with the Argyll based Time for Change group as soon as possible.

Not directly linked to climate change but certainly focusing on sustainability was the second SSE roundtable invitation event, this time looking at sustainability of power supplies for rural and island communities and particularly in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

3.6 Islands Issues:

The pandemic's impact on island communities has featured since the start of lockdown, given the unique challenges that islands face in that context. It is no surprise therefore that I have had extensive engagement with the Scottish Government in relation to Argyll and Bute's island communities, ever since lockdown restrictions for islands were first set out differently to mainland communities last year and given that this council has the highest number of inhabited islands in Scotland.

On 26th January I was invited, along with other island authority leaders, to a meeting with the Depute First Minister who wanted an opportunity to discuss pandemic related island matters and in particular schooling.

I have taken every possible opportunity to represent to government the views that island residents and businesses are sharing with me – it's fair to say that this (along with, perhaps, queries about business support funding) has dominated my inbox for the past few months.

In the two weeks leading up to this report's publication, the islands' position in relation to easing lockdown restrictions has featured heavily. A series of Scottish Government announcements about changes to restrictions have not, at time of writing, provided any clarity for island communities who are understandably as keen as mainland communities to know what is happening and, of course, when.

Following the first announcement of forthcoming changes I wrote to Aileen Campbell MSP, then Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government, seeking an urgent meeting. We managed to arrange this in early course and I was able to relay to her the very real need for clarity on arrangements for islands, some of which have been in different levels to the mainland for some time. Despite a positive discussion and a Scottish Government-run consultation with island communities, the next announcement still did not include any update in relation to the island position.

The national Islands Strategic Group meeting on 24th March also offered an opportunity to raise this matter with ministers and officials but without any firm commitment or announcement to follow.

It is to be hoped that, by the time this report is considered by council in mid-April, the required clarity has been provided. The direct impact is of course on the islands themselves but it is also important to bear in mind considerations for adjacent mainland communities as well as Argyll and Bute's overall social and economic recovery from the pandemic.

3.7 Other COSLA activities:

I sit on two COSLA strategic boards – Community Wellbeing and Environment and Economy. Both have met on a number of occasions since November and meetings, with agenda topics, are noted below.

Environment and Economy Board:

4th December 2020: Ministerial discussions on Digital Connectivity (Paul Wheelhouse) and European Funding Replacement (Ivan McKee); Transport Act Implement, Parking Provisions and Under 19s Free Bus Travel.

12th February 2020: Climate Change Plan update; Business Support; Transport-Covid-19; Union Connectivity Review; Electric Vehicles; Planning, Place and Regeneration; Europe and International Update.

Community Wellbeing Board:

22nd January 2021: Homelessness, Evictions, Housing First, Prevention Review Group; Housing to 2040 and Affordable Housing Supply; Employability; Equally Safe; Strengthening Links between Alcohol/Drugs Partnerships and Violence Against Women partnerships; Population Strategy.

5th March 2021: Affordable Housing Supply Programme; Tackling Migrant Destitution; Gypsy Traveller Rights; Scottish Welfare Fund; Employability; Equally Safe; Community Safety and Justice.

COSLA Conference and Convention 26th March 2021:

Agenda items were:

Convention:

Local Government Blueprint; Social Renewal Advisory Board – COSLA response; COP26; European Charter of Self Government; Children and Young People Support in Recovery and Renewal; COSLA Budget; COSLA Constitution.

3.8 Strategic Transport Issues:

HITrans met on 5th February 2021 and considered the following topics of interest:

- Research and Strategy Development Programme 2020/21
- Scottish Islands Passport Project Update
- Rural Bus Service Support and Funding
- Strategic Active Travel Network
- Active Travel update

The Scottish Government's Strategic Transport Projects Review phase 2 (or STPR2) is of key interest to ourselves, HITRANS and other partners,

and additional follow up discussions on that, and partner responses to the review, have also taken place prior to the consultation deadline of 31st March.

The council submitted its formal response on 30th March and I also sent a letter to Michael Matheson, Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity, setting out some of the long-held concerns we have had about the process and the scope of the review. There are numerous elements which do not necessary afford the best opportunities for Argyll and Bute and now, more than ever, the right transport and travel connections are absolutely vital for our communities. We will continue to represent on this at every opportunity, along with another issue which has inevitably dominated workloads so far this year and last: the A83 Rest and Be Thankful.

We continue to stress to the Scottish Government the urgent need for swift, sustainable and permanent solutions in the immediate short term as well as the medium to longer term. In February Michael Russell MSP and I wrote, in a joint approach, to Michael Matheson, pressing for a replacement road (as he announced the previous year) to be agreed, planned, contracted, constructed and opened within the life of the next Parliament, that is by May 2026.

More recently Transport Scotland has confirmed the preferred corridor options and the council will be considering those at its April meeting. We have also taken part in discussions arranged by HITrans as it formulates its position in relation to the proposed options.

On 23rd March, I attended the online launch of a new discussion paper prepared by the Chair and Vice Chairs of Strathclyde Partnership for Transport.

The report, titled *Transport for Strathclyde – a new Public Transport Network* seeks to lead and stimulate debate about the transformation of Scottish public transport in the context of Covid-19, climate change and the economic environment. It focuses on five visions:

- One network, available to all
- Smart network, dynamically shaped by public need
- Green network, moving to Net Zero
- Affordable network, fair fares for all
- Network for the future, incorporating emerging technology

The report can be found online at <http://www.spt.co.uk/corporate/transportforstrathclyde/> and comments/suggestions are welcome at suggestions@spt.co.uk

3.9 Fishing sector engagement:

Argyll seafood sector businesses were in the spotlight at the beginning of this year, featuring prominently in protests arising from the challenges in reaching vital European markets with their produce.

This is a significant sector for Argyll and Bute and I wrote to Alister Jack, Secretary of State for Scotland, in January to outline the risks to the local industry and our overall economy if sustainable, reliable routes to market could not be swiftly and easily put in place.

While these particular risks seem to have abated, there remain a number of challenges for the fishing industry within Argyll and Bute, and I have continued to engage with the Clyde Fisherman's Association, meeting with representatives last December and a follow-up session in early March.

These are positive and useful discussions, offering new opportunities to work in partnership and to progress issues which will contribute to Argyll and Bute's overarching economic and population growth objectives, including growing and training a local workforce, processing and selling produce to local markets, and policy/lobbying opportunities.

3.10 Convention of the Highlands and Islands, 15th March 2021:

In normal circumstances this would have been Argyll and Bute's turn to host the Spring Convention of the Highlands and Islands (COHI) but once again it had to take place on a virtual basis.

Agenda items for the spring COHI were:

- Review of outcomes from previous sessions
- Population – National and Regional Update
- EU Exit
- Workforce and Skills
- Crofting
- Gaelic and Post Covid Recovery
- Outcomes and looking ahead
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It's always useful to have the opportunity to consider these common strategic issues with other rural and island local authority leaders and partner agencies as well as direct contact with the relevant ministerial leads; we hope that when the time comes to arrange the Autumn COHI, it may be possible to have at least part of the sessions in person and Argyll and Bute can finally take its turn at hosting again and welcoming key contacts to the area.

3.11 Cross Party Industrial Communities Committee:

I was invited to attend the most recent meeting of this group on 17th March, following an initial first attendance in January this year. The key agenda topics of interest for us at the session were the UK Community Renewal and Levelling Up funds, which had also come up during the COHI discussions covered earlier.

3.12 Community Planning Partnership Management Committee:

I joined Community Planning Partners for the CPP Management Committee meeting on 10th March. This was a useful and interesting session particularly following the council's budget where investments were made in key areas of interest for partners (including climate change, digital inclusion, and the impacts of staycation tourism).

As well as those areas, agenda topics included:

- Community wealth building
- Child poverty activity update
- Gaelic development
- Community safety
- Building back better
- Transport update

The last offered an opportunity for Community Planning Partners to consider scope for further joint action in relation to the A83 and, at the time of writing, I am due to speak with Supt John Paterson of Police Scotland and Joe MacKay, CPP Chair from Scottish Fire and Rescue, within the next few days to consider this further. We continue to keep in touch on an informal basis on issues of mutual interest outwith the formal CPP meeting structure.

4. CONCLUSION

- 4.1** This report highlights the activities of the Leader of Argyll and Bute Council for the period from November 2020 to April 2021.

Councillor Robin Currie
Leader, Argyll and Bute Council

7th April 2021

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