

24th June 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 15th April 2021. This report covers the period from that date until 11th June 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 COSLA board meetings are operating according to their normal schedule but continue to take place virtually, via Teams. Below are the agenda items for the COSLA Leaders meetings I have attended during this period. Details of the COSLA strategic board meetings are noted elsewhere in this report.

COSLA Special Leaders, 16th April 2021

- Distribution of Additional Funding for Self Isolating Support Grants
- Tackling Poverty – Further Consideration of Pandemic Payments
- National Care Home Contract
- Covid-19 Strategic Framework – Local Authority Engagement

COSLA Leaders, 30th April 2021

- UK Government Levelling Up Fund
- Learning Estate Investment Programme
- Edinburgh Declaration on Biodiversity
- Heat and Energy Policy
- New Plan for Immigration
- Hong Kong British National (Overseas) Visa
- Local Government Finance
- Covid-19 Business Grants and Support Update
- Local Employability Services – Policy Direction and Resourcing Update
- Scottish Welfare Fund
- Revised Participatory Budgeting in Scotland
- Enhanced Summer Programme 2021
- Expansion of Universal Free School Meals
- Period Products (Free Provision) (Scotland) Act
- Joint Investigative Interviewing of Children in Scotland

COSLA Leaders, 28th May 2021

- EU Settlement Scheme
- Local Government Finance
- Pay Negotiations
- Early Learning and Childcare – funding from 2022/23
- Strategic Commissioning and Grant Aided Schools
- Joint Policy/Funding – Scottish Healthy Milk Snack Scheme
- Independent Review of Adult Social Care
- Financial Support for Adult Social Care
- Teachers £400 Assessment Paper
- Relocation of Afghan Nationals to the UK
- Local Government Approach to UK Immigration Policy
- Implications of Emerging Policy for Local Government
- School Clothing Grant

3.2 Meeting with HSCP/NHS Leadership: I was delighted to welcome Boyd Robertson, Chair of the NHS Highland Board, Pam Dudek, NHS Highland Chief Executive, and Fiona Davies, the interim Chief Officer of the Health and Social Care Partnership, to Islay in May. The team, along with Pippa Milne, our own Chief Executive, were visiting local health facilities to find out more about the implementation of vaccination, testing and other

Covid-19 related issues in an island setting. This meant an ideal opportunity to meet Pam and Fiona for the first time and to catch up with Boyd in person rather than online! I'm glad they had the opportunity to see island services first hand in these unusual circumstances and look forward to further engagement with Fiona through the IJB.

3.3 Housing: Key housing highlights for the period include:

- Private Sector Housing Grants - £0.421m paid out in 20/21, comprising £0.332m for disabled adaptations and £89k for common repairs.
- Homelessness applications are down by 5% (20 applications) to 416 between 1st April 2020 and 31st March 2021. There are fluctuations up and down across local areas. 35 households made applications due to domestic abuse.
- The Strategic Housing Investment Programme has delivered 48 new homes up to March 2021, despite challenges, restrictions and slippage during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- £2.207m has been paid out through the Strategic Housing Fund for development work in 2020/21.
- 29 empty homes have been brought back in to use, the majority as private rented or owner occupied accommodation, and providing permanent housing for 24 households.

Alongside my regular meetings with the service I have attended the Strategic Housing Forum on 1st June, where the agenda included the following key issues alongside partner/RSL updates:

- Community led housing projects
- Bute Strategic Housing Review
- Energy efficiency and fuel poverty
- Veterans housing
- Local Housing Strategy

I also joined the Chief Executive to meet with Ailsa Raeburn, Chair of Community Land Scotland, on 21st May. Many CLS members operate in areas of high tourist demand meaning that local housing stock is often used as second or holiday homes. Permanent loss of affordable housing has an impact on the ability of young people in particular to stay or return to their home communities. While community led projects can augment levels to some degree, these are not possible in all areas. A Scottish Government Working Group has been established to look at effective use of land and property resources as well as the emerging short term lets legislation (which will also impact on local authorities who will be responsible for administering licensing schemes).

This is an important issue for us and it was helpful to have a discussion with Ailsa who will be part of that national working group and is keen to understand the Argyll and Bute position in more detail.

3.4 Gaelic: Colleagues may recall from previous Leader's Reports that John Swinney, Depute First Minister, has convened a number of discussions in relation to Gaelic development and engagement.

Our Education service is working with Highland Council and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (Western Isles Council), which is the lead authority, in progressing this work. I was invited to an update discussion session on 6th May. Mr Swinney is keen to see collaboration between the three authorities in progressing the *Gaelic: A Faster Rate of Progress* agenda.

The 0-3 age group has been identified as key in achieving growth in Gaelic medium, and a number of resources have been developed to support children and parents with learning and using Gaelic in the home.

Officers from the three authorities will continue to progress this agenda in partnership.

There is further collaboration with other local authorities on the Colmcille 1500 project – the 1,500th anniversary of the birth of St Columba (or St Colmcille) which runs from December 2020 to December 2021. Economic Development staff are working with colleagues in the Western Isles and Northern Ireland on ways of marking the anniversary in a series of cultural activities.

Gaelic development work within the council continues and I was delighted at the success of our Gaelic survey which attracted 1,300 responses. Promotion continues through the Argyll Gaelic Forum on social media as well as through the council's communications channels and a dedicated Gaelic newsletter. Officers are making the most of opportunities to connect with other organisations who can contribute to the overall promotion of Gaelic, including through the Gaelic Tourism Strategy Implementation Group, Visit Scotland, Historic Environment Scotland and other external organisations, as well as through our Area Community Planning Groups.

A particular highlight was the introduction of live Gaelic music events held on the Forum's Facebook page. Each event features a well-known musician or singer and overall the programme provides an opportunity to develop the language, raise the profile of local traditional music and provide some much-needed light entertainment and cheer after a difficult year. I watched a number of the events myself and they really were

excellent – my thanks go to the talented musicians who gave up their time to take part and to all those involved in putting these sessions together.

The Argyll Gaelic Gathering 2022 Working Group continues to meet regularly with a range of different workstreams including the mapping of Argyll Gaelic, engaging with young people and opportunities for tourism links.

3.5 Climate change and environmental matters: I met with members of the Time for Change Argyll and Bute Campaign Group on 9th June. This provided an opportunity to outline some of the ways that the council is contributing to overall climate change challenges. Our area is already close to net zero with the lowest regional net carbon emissions in the UK – but we know we must continue to drive forward with this key agenda.

We were able to highlight some successes including a 27% reduction in emissions since recording first started in 2015/16. There are a number of factors that have contributed to this reduction such as direct interventions to make buildings more energy and heat efficient, replacing traditional lightbulbs with LED, moving to electric or hybrid vehicles and treating municipal waste in different ways. The overall national grid becoming more reliant upon renewable energy sources (over fossil fuel) has also had a material impact. This reduction over this period is in line with the national average.

We highlighted also that our council adopted its first De-Carbonisation Plan in November 2020 to recognise the importance of setting out a plan to achieve net zero by 2045. There are also ambitious interim targets of reaching a 75% reduction by 2030 which is only nine years away. It is recognised that whilst there may be some rapid progression to reduce emissions in early years some of the more stubborn and difficult sectors like waste, travel or heating will require whole systems changes and change in cultural behaviour to achieve them.

We are clear that tackling climate change requires everyone in our communities to play their part. The council is working to lead by example as well as carrying out direct engagement, this year focusing on agriculture and working with the Argyll and Bute branch of NFU Scotland on land and property use. The CPP is also progressing a climate change theme and we are carrying out a mapping exercise of community groups and activity in relation to climate change.

We will remain in contact with the group and are likely to arrange follow up discussions in the future.

On 24th May I met with representatives from Drax who operate the Cruachan hydro power station. Decarbonisation is a key focus for them and it was interesting to have an overview of the Cruachan project which makes a significant energy contribution nationally.

I was also delighted to attend a briefing on 9th June with Jonathan Hinkles, Chief Executive of Loganair, ahead of their GreenSkies launch – their carbon offset programme and commitment to being fully carbon neutral by 2040. The programme includes plans for a fund to support renewable energy projects in the communities served by the airline.

- 3.6 Islands Issues:** The Argyll Islands Sounding Board met on 25th May. This provided a useful opportunity to hear from the Scottish Government Islands team on a number of matters following the publication of the National Islands Plan in March. A new delivery group has been established and will feed into the existing Islands Strategic Group, on which I sit, and will also review the plan route map on a quarterly basis.

National spend on islands through the Islands Green Recovery Plan stands at around £2.7m – the fund was over-subscribed and was topped up, along with contributions from successful applicants. The Scottish Government is expected to publish a report on the projects and benefits in due course.

Visit to Bute, 27th May 2021: I was able to visit Bute on 27th May along with Fergus Murray, Head of Economic Growth. There is a lot going on on the island and this was a very positive visit.

We visited the Mount Stuart Trust housing development at Loch End which has attracted significant interest from applicants on and off the island. The new homes are being built to Passivhaus standards which help to keep energy costs low and there are attractive shared outdoor spaces. It goes without saying that the views are fantastic!



After a quick stop at Bute Gin to catch up on their progress, it was on to Bute Island Foods for a tour of their new distribution centre and office, supported by council investment. The company has recently been bought over and this will allow them to expand and reach new global markets – their vegan cheese products are already exported all over the world. They are aiming to employ 250 people – they already have 180 staff, a healthy increase from the 27 employed in 2017. Despite the takeover, the current management remains in place and the buyer is also a family run business.



After a look at some of the Rothesay town centre projects, it was back to another world class manufacturing business, Bute Fabrics, for a tour. They

employ a number of young people and are coping with international high demand for their quality products.

- 3.7 Other COSLA activities:** I sit on two COSLA strategic boards – Community Wellbeing and Environment and Economy. Agenda topics for the meetings which have taken place during this period are noted below:

Environment and Economy Board:

23rd April 2021:

- Just Transition Commission Report
- UN Climate Summit COP26 Glasgow
- Transport Infrastructure
- Heat and Energy Policy
- New UK Local Development Funding
- Waste Update

4th June 2021:

- NatureScot presentation on nature-based solutions
- Police Scotland presentation on fleet decarbonisation
- Building Standards
- Regeneration Funding
- Local Place Planning Consultation
- Scotland Loves Local Gift Card scheme

Community Wellbeing Board:

12th May 2021:

- Public Health Scotland presentation on The Positive Contribution of Physical Activity and Sport in Scotland
- Housing, Homelessness and Community
- Seasonal Agricultural Workers Accommodation
- Participatory Budgeting
- Employability
- Delivering Equally Safe Fund
- Supporting Hong Kong British National (Overseas) Migrants
- EU Settlement Scheme
- Policing and Community Safety

- 3.8 Strategic Transport Issues:** HITrans met on 23rd April and considered the following agenda items relevant to the Argyll and Bute area:

- Research and Strategy Development Programme
- Active Travel
- Rural Bus Service Support and Funding
- Bus Partnership Fund
- Scottish Island Passport
- Rail Policy
- Scottish Government Strategy and Consultation

- UK Government Consultation and Funding
- EU Funding Consolidation Update

Two of the area's ferry stakeholder group meetings have taken place over this period – the Argyll, Lochaber, Skye and Small Isles on 1st June and the Clyde, Kintyre and the Islands FSG on 7th June. These offer useful opportunities to engage with Calmac on key routes – the topic of ferry services is one that appears in my inbox very frequently particularly given recent capacity issues with the Loch Seaforth out of commission for a period. At the time of writing, Transport Scotland and Calmac were conducting trials of the MV Pentalina with a view to exploring scope to lease the vessel to ease capacity on key routes across the network. This included trials at some Argyll and Bute ports. I welcome the advice from Transport Scotland that consultation will be carried out with communities on timetabling prior to deployment.

On 20th April, I met with members of the Rest and Be Thankful Campaign Group led by local businesses. The group lists over 1,000 members from all Argyll and Bute business sectors and is very active in its engagement with politicians and with Transport Scotland officials in relation to the permanent solution for the Rest. Subsequently, on 17th May, we had a members seminar with Transport Scotland officials and including a presentation from Jacobs AECOM on the route options. This was helpful both in terms of direct access to the project leads and also in considering our response to the A83 consultation which, following feedback from the session, has now been submitted to Transport Scotland.

3.9 Economic Growth: At the time of writing my most recent Policy Lead catch up is due to take place within the next week, so a further update will be provided within my next report. Some highlights are provided below.

Seaweed industry: There continue to be discussions and requests for information on seaweed farming. Economic Development officers are contributing to local, national and international meetings including forthcoming discussions on scope for investment in the development of four sites in the Oban area.

Rural Growth Deal: Following signing of the Heads of Terms in February, the next key stage of the RGD is establishing a Programme Management Office (PMO) to coordinate the development of the deal including the outline business cases required for full deal signing.

Progressing budget investments: Officers are working in partnership with colleagues in Roads and Infrastructure Services to progress the Staycation and Active Travel initiatives following the budget investments agreed in February this year. Updates on the staycation activity have been

provided to EDI if more detail is required, and I retain a key interest in the progression of this given its importance to our communities and their recovery from the pandemic.

4. CONCLUSION

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

**Councillor Robin Currie
Leader, Argyll and Bute Council**

11th June 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